



Feminist Approach to the Theology of Sin and Forgiveness in Intimate Partner Violence Within Marriage in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.103.2026>

Abstract

Intimate partner violence is a scourge that cripples' families and society at large. The consequences of IPV are observed on emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual, social, and financial levels. Unfortunately, victimized women who are Church going may be forced to believe that their abuse is God's will. This arises in certain Christian homes where the Ephesians letter of Paul is utilized to force females to submit to their husbands as if they were submissive to the Lord. Here, only husbands' views and practices relating to spiritual, financial, social, and sexual aspects are considered genuine and inspired by God. This paper aimed to explore a feminist approach to the theology of sin and forgiveness in intimate partner violence within marriage in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. To achieve this purpose this paper looked at how a feminist approach can offer a new perspective to the Anglican Church of Southern Africa's understanding of the theology of sin and forgiveness in intimate partner violence. This paper concludes that the understanding of sin and forgiveness in Christian Churches as well as in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa leaves no option for those who find themselves as victims of intimate partner violence within marriage. Whilst forgiving is noble and is what all Christians should conform to, victims should be given a chance to combine forgiveness with ethical accountability. This paper utilized secondary data and feminist analysis as a methodology. This paper has four proposals for the Anglican Church of Southern Africa which will see intimate partner violence being mitigated among the Church's members.

Keywords: Feminist theory, intimate partner violence, theology of sin and forgiveness, marriage, Anglican Church of Southern Africa

Introduction

In modern times intimate partner violence has shown itself to be a violent act against humanity. It impinges on women's and men alike rights to liberty and personhood. In Africa, intimate partner violence is exacerbated, by the influence of African culture and social standards that fail to condemn violence against women thus contributing to the problem and making it challenging for women to exit abusive relationships including colonialism and racism. Christian communities seem to condone intimate partner violence to a certain extent, by misinterpreting scripture to inadvertently shield perpetrators.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a significant public health issue and a violation of human rights. IPV refers to any behavior or acts within an intimate relationship that harms or threatens to damage another person's physical, psychological, or sexual well-being (Memiah et al., 202). IPV includes aggression, psychological abuse, wife-beating, controlling behaviors, sexual coercion, and threats of such actions. IPV is an issue that affects people all around the globe.



On average, between 23% and 31% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 who have ever been in a relationship have been physically or sexually abused by an intimate partner (Sardinha et al., 2022). According to Sanz-Barbero et al. (2019), IPV against women results in adverse effects.

The consequences of IPV are observed on a range of emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual, social, and financial levels. Physical effects of IPV include death, pain, injuries, cardiovascular, and musculoskeletal (Patra et al., 2018). It also causes Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) (St Ivany et al., 2021). Socially, IPV makes abused women become prisoners of their houses, where they suffer the loss of family, friends, and human dignity. Additionally, on sexual levels, IPV results in traumatic gynecologic fistula, an injury that results from the severe tearing of the vaginal tissues. Román-Gálvez et al. (2021) further add that IPV results in unwanted abortion when a woman is sexually abused during pregnancy. Psychologically and emotionally, IPV results in stress-related symptoms, such as crying easily, an inability to enjoy life, suicidal thoughts, and substance abuse. It can also cause memory loss, anxiety, psychosis, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and personality and mood disorders (Yu et al., 2019). Concerning spiritual effects, victimized women may be forced to believe that their abuse is God's will. This arises in certain Christian homes where the Ephesians letter of Paul is utilized to force females to submit to their husbands as if they were submissive to the Lord. Here, only husbands' views and practices relating to spiritual, financial, social, and sexual aspects are considered genuine and inspired by God.

Despite the adverse effects of IPV faced by women, when wives are battered, they are faced with whether or not to forgive their husbands and remain in abusive marriages, even if doing so puts them and/or their children in danger (Rakovec-Felser, 2014) Usually, this decision is more difficult when these women fear that they may be offending God by quitting their marriage. This understanding is enforced by ACSA's definition of sin as the pursuit of our own will rather than God's will, therefore distorting our connection with God, other people, and all of creation APB (1989:426). Even though theologians and psychiatrists advocate for the practice of forgiveness, some offences, such as IPV, are more difficult to forgive. Also, different scholars view forgiveness and reconciliation of IPV negatively (Davidson et al., 2015; Quenstedt-Moe, 2014; Wu et al., 2021). Regardless, some IPV victims forgive their abusers due to their religious beliefs. The emphasis on marriage's permanence by ACSA could be interpreted as a message to victims of intimate partner violence to stay in an abusive relationship. The anti-divorce stance conveyed in the ACSA statutes and liturgy's interpretation of divorce as failing and falling short and may cause women to feel stuck in violent situations (APB, 1989:485 and Canon 34). Given the adverse effects of IPV, exploring the theology of sin and forgiveness in IPV is vital. This paper employs a feminist approach to study the theology of sin and forgiveness in intimate partner violence within marriage in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa.

Research method

This paper made use of secondary data and a feminist analysis as a methodology which is unpacked lower down.

Secondary Data analysis

Secondary data analysis is defined as the utilization of pre-existing data by researchers who were not engaged in the initial data collection. Data can be examined to confirm or expand on previously noted findings or to respond to fresh research concerns that were not covered in the data's initial published analyses (Greenhoot and Dowsett 2012). There are a variety of factors that could influence a researcher's decision to do secondary analyses on an existing data set as opposed to creating a brand-new study to gather fresh data. The most



straightforward explanation is that the data have already been gathered, allowing the researcher to focus their time and energy on other phases of the scientific method. The other advantage is that many shared data sets, especially those for public access, feature very large samples, measurements of numerous characteristics, and longitudinal designs that allow researchers to answer issues that they might not have had the time or resources to explore otherwise (Greenhoot and Dowsett 2012). The researcher in this regard opted for secondary data analysis because the secondary data available made it possible for the researcher to explore categorical data sets that are qualitative in nature, which describes an event using words rather than numbers (Hancock & Khoshgoftaar, 2020) that assisted in answering the issue at hand.

Secondary data analysis has some limitations although it has many benefits, because the researcher may find that not all researchers or research questions are appropriate for it. Since the data have already been gathered, the researcher had no say in who was sampled, what was measured, or how it was measured. Therefore, the researcher must determine whether this strategy offers a strong match to an investigator's study questions (Greenhoot & Dowsett 2012). The researcher in this regard made sure that the topic in question was able to be investigated with relevant and contemporary information.

Feminist Analysis

This paper also adopted a feminist analysis as a methodology. The goal of feminist analysis is to reform society and the church (Grahams, 2012). It suggests accepting the patriarchal nature of society as well as a desire to change it, according to Moore (2002). It supports the creation of fresh approaches to ministry that reflect how women live out their religion and their daily experiences in society (Graham, 2012). According to Mshweshwe (2020), it is amongst the postcolonial theories that provide black people with insights into realities that are not fully reflected in Western feminist discourses. According to feminist theory, domestic violence is mainly due to gender inequality and power imbalances in opposite-sex relationships (Thobejane et al., 2019). The theory emphasizes the societal norms that consent to the utilization of violence and aggressiveness by men and the gender norms that define how women and men should act in their relations. The feminist theory sees the primary cause of IPV as the consequence of living in a society that accepts the aggressive behaviors of men while teaching women to be tolerant of abuse. In contrast to violence against women, feminists admit that women can have violent behaviors in their relationships with men. However, they fail to consider this issue a severe societal challenge and therefore do not deserve similar levels of attention as does the issue of violence perpetrated against women (Thobejane et al., 2019).

The influence of African cultural practices and poverty on intimate partner violence

In many African regions, cultural practices and beliefs foster a societal environment that tolerates violence against women, making it challenging to categorize IPV as a problem (Maseno & Kilonzo, 2011). Social standards that fail to condemn violence against women, which are determined by societal patriarchal values, that institutionalize restrictive standards of behavior, gender segregation, and the ideology that connects family honor to female virtue, including the damaging, immoral, and unnatural customs that preserve the enslavement of women are upheld as cultural traditions and given religious undertones (Hadi, 2017) contribute to the problem and make it challenging for women to exit abusive relationships (Jewkes, 2002). Family secrecy, social stigma, and the community's reluctance to meddle in private matters all contribute to the preservation of IPV (Gillum, Doucette, Mwanza, & Munala, 2018; Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006). Some African groups consider violence as an inherent part of their culture that will never change (Hatcher et al., 2013). This perception of IPV as a "natural" component of culture raises obstacles for women seeking aid (Gillum, Doucette, Mwanza, & Munala, 2018; Odero et al., 2014). There are several additional



characteristics that have been found to raise the risk of physical and sexual abuse against women in the African context. Poverty, being a Christian, being in a polygamous marriage, alcohol use by a partner, a large age gap between partners, working in agriculture or other "unskilled" labour, having more children, illiteracy, a lack of autonomy for women, and media exposure are a few of these (Kimuna & Djamba, 2008; Lawoko, Dalal, Jiayou, & Jansson, 2007; Simister, 2010).

The effects of poverty and Black people's disproportionately high rates of poverty are one enduring issue that exists across all continents (Gillum, 2019). There are significant levels of persistent poverty in several African nations (Beegle, Christiaensen, Dabalen & Gaddis, 2016; Chen & Ravillion, 2004). In fact, the number of poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa nearly doubled between the years 1981 and 2001, and the percentage of the world's poor who live in Africa increased from 11% to 29% during those years, making this region's level of poverty noticeably worse than that of other developing countries. According to a World Bank assessment from 2012, 43% of Africans were classified as being poor (Beegle, Christiaensen, Dabalen, & Gaddis, 2016; Chen & Ravillion, 2004). Galal (2022) estimates that as of 2022, 18.2 million South Africans lived in extreme poverty, with the daily poverty line being \$1.90 USD. In addition, compared to 2021, more than 123,000 people were forced into poverty. In the upcoming years, an increase in personnel was anticipated. Around 18.5 million South Africans are anticipated to be subsisting on a daily income of little more than \$1.90 by 2025. High unemployment, family disarray/disruption, sub-par living conditions, overcrowding, inadequate educational standards/opportunities, a lack of social amenities, limited residential mobility, and high crime and violence rates are all characteristics of poverty-stricken communities (Benson, Wooldredge, Thistlethwaite, & Fox, 2004; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014). People who live in poverty are predisposed to vulnerability because they lack the necessary fundamental competencies to fully exercise their agency (including inadequate material assets, limited education, poor health, etc.). Poverty and unemployment create situations of extreme vulnerability that have long-term effects on people, families, and communities (UNDP, 2014). Though IPV affects people of all ethnicities, cultures, socioeconomic groups, and sexual orientations, it is more prevalent in poor communities. Poverty has been identified as a major risk factor for violence against women (WHO, 2010). IPV is prevalent in the majority of disadvantaged communities (Benson, Wooldredge, Thistlethwaite, & Fox, 2004).

The prevalence of IPV within South African Churches.

Intimate partner violence in the context of South Africa has been a key issue in society, given that most women are killed by their partners. Existing literature indicates that in South Africa, 50% of women have been murdered at the hands of their intimate partner, and approximately 24% of other women are more likely to experience physical violence from their current or ex-husbands or their boyfriends in their lifetime (Joyner, Rees, and Honikman, 2015; Le Roux, 2017). Research has shown that victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) are also known to experience depression (Salcioglu et al., 2017) suicidal thoughts (Wolford-Clevenger et al, 2015), the emergence of chronic pain injuries (Campbell, 2002), severe reproductive health outcomes (Campbell, 2002), and are more susceptible to HIV infection (Campbell, 2002). Furthermore, studies have found that intimate partner violence is rife in South African Church communities, especially those that profess the Christian faith. It is exacerbated by the fact that biblical writings are frequently interpreted in a way that strengthens and encourages patriarchal and sexist attitudes. Ephesians 5:28–31, for instance, is frequently misconstrued because it is seen through a lens that supports male dominance and the continued subjection of women at the expense of harmonious coexistence. Furthermore, Ephesians 5:21–22 have allegedly been utilized to coerce women into unconditional subordination (Baloyi, 2008:2), which raises doubts when married women are subjected to risky and violent unions (Dill & Thill, 2007: 852-853; Aineah, 2020).



It has been found that victims of intimate partner violence find themselves trapped in abusive marriages according to Scarsella and Krehbiel (2019), because when they seek assistance from their religious communities, they are frequently advised to stay with their abusers and to view any physical or psychological harm as a holy sacrifice made for the abuser to eventually repent and be saved. The refusal of abused victims to put the Christian ideals of reconciliation and forgiveness above their own safety and wellness, and when they try to break off relationships with abusers or hold abusers responsible for the harm they have caused, is attacked as being unchristian (Scarsella & Krehbiel 2019). Women subsequently end up agreeing to carry the abuse by persevering and continue praying for their abusive husbands as if they were carrying "wounds and cross of Jesus Christ," which makes them typical "sacrificial lambs" (Maupa, 2015: 35).

Understanding of marriage in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa

The Anglican Church of Southern Africa holds that marriage by the divine institution is an eternal and exclusive union between one man and one woman. This understanding according to the Church is firmly rooted in the principle found in Genesis 2:24 which Jesus emphasized and reflects in his teaching in Mark 10:7 which is "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother to cleave to his wife, and they become one flesh" (APB 1989:547 and Canon 34). This eternal and exclusive union is borne out of vows made before God and God's Church and by receiving the grace and blessing of God which will assist them to live and fulfil their vows (APB 1989:441). According to the APB (1989:457-458), the unity of Christ and his Church is symbolized in the Christian marriage, thus the unbreakable link between a man and his wife parallels that of Jesus Christ and his bride the Church. Marriage is also seen as both a spiritual union and a civil contract which should not be broken and those who break this civil contract fall short of what God has put before humanity in the scriptures (APB 1989:484-485). The Anglican Church believes that marriage is a sacrament, meaning that it is visible external evidence of an inner spiritual grace that is offered by Jesus Christ as a sure and certain way for humans to receive that grace (APB 1989:438). The external evidence being the joining of hands and the giving and receiving of rings (APB 1989:458-459).

The mission of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa and its theology of sin and forgiveness

The mission of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa is that the church is anchored in the love of Christ, committed to the mission of God, and transformed by the Holy Spirit. With such a statement, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa prioritizes transformative worship and liturgical renewal, through it, the Church shows its rootedness in Christ's love. The priority symbolizes their ultimate mission, which is to worship God in all that they are and do, including attending church services (Anglican Church of Southern Africa, 2022b). ACSA also prioritizes prophetic ministry, and discipleship in which they believe that the Church ought to speak boldly the words of God's encouragement, challenge, and, when necessary, reprimand if they are to be transformed by the Holy Spirit and see their culture transformed as well. The Anglican Church of Southern Africa, rightly so, particularly thinks that God is calling her to advocate for, and get involved in issues related to education, youth development, women's and gender issues, the environment, and health (Anglican Church of Southern Africa, 2022b). Lastly, the Church prioritizes discipleship which she believes is the making of disciples and becoming a part of God's purpose which are both necessary to carry out the continuous commission that Jesus gave to the Church (Matthew 28:18-20). The Anglican Church of Southern Africa participates in the Anglican Communion's season of deliberate discipleship and disciple-making as well. Their discipleship includes birth to death, Christian development, instruction, and growth. When they pursue theological study, the Church trains individuals for service and fosters leadership, by giving student ministers the tools they need to support religious communities, contribute to societal development and social solidarity, and make it possible for



humankind to undergo a genuine transformation. With this the Anglican Church of Southern Africa believes forms and guides disciples of Jesus (Anglican Church of Southern Africa, 2022b).

With regards to the theology of sin and forgiveness, The Anglican Church of Southern Africa believes that sins are only forgiven by God in the legal sense. This church focuses on the conscience of sin and the teaching of the church in relation to forgiveness (Anglican Church of Southern Africa, 2022b). To the extent that the Church believes sin to be the distortion of our relationship with God, other people, and the rest of creation because it is the pursuit of our own will rather than God's plan. The Church correctly believes that humanity loses freedom when its relationship with God is perverted, which gives sin power over humans (APB 1989:426). In relation to forgiveness the Church believes that by forgiving humans, God releases them from the grip of sin, wickedness, and death. God accomplishes this by sending prophets such as Jeremiah, Amos and others, and of course Our Lord Jesus Christ, to remind humanity of his existence and to demonstrate the need for atonement (APB 1989:427). In relation to marriages, the church believes that one partner should acknowledge a share in the sin that resulted in the breakdown of the former marriage and should repent for failing to keep the vows made in their former marriage and understands the forgiveness of God (Anglican Church of Southern Africa, 2022a). This, therefore, indicates that the partner should show good conscience in life and learn to forgive any sin perpetrated against them.

A feminist approach to sin in intimate partner violence

The theory of sin was established within a male-centred environment of power and authority, which is a basic criticism of feminist theologians considering patriarchal Christian views of atonement as perpetuating the mistreatment of women (Moder, 2019). While Brock and Parker (2015) categorically reject the idea of original sin, and Daly (1992) sees it as an androcentric weapon of misogyny, the majority of liberal feminists attempt to save the concept of sin by reading it from the bottom of self by acknowledging the lack of power most women have. When it comes to women's nature being made bad by the Fall, feminist theologians such as Trelstad (2006), Schüssler Fiorenza (1994), Ruether (1998), Terrell (2005), and Kyung (1990), work to reframe sin beyond its conventional individualistic approach and describe it as pride or love of power (Moder, 2019). The above theologians' understanding of women's liberation supports a feminist representation of sin as being social in character, symbolized by estrangement and warped and coercive relationships, particularly when male-perpetrated maltreatment of women is involved (Moder, 2019).

According to Dahill (2009) feminists emphasize the pain and experiences of women, but they also understand that because male-dominated Christian writings associate women with evil and define sin as disobedience and willfulness, they must be interpreted oppositely, making women's sin distinct from that of men. This is accomplished through interpreting sin from the perspective of women's personhood, which is primarily repressed; as a result, sin is defined by the dehumanization and breaking of women's selves, as well as by everything that violates their agency to become fully human. Feminists advocate for the social view of sin. Their belief draws from what Kyung (1990), believes is that sin in humans which extends beyond one's behaviour. It possesses "collective" and "systemic" characteristics: colonialism, neocolonialism, capitalism, racism, classism, castism, and sexism.

A feminist approach to forgiveness in intimate partner violence

According to Anderson (2016) women who experience intimate abuse in misogynistic environments should not be quick to forgive. This is particularly true if the woman wants to mend their relationship in an ethical way after she has been brutally harmed. Cheon and Regehr (2006) argue for the notion of restorative justice practices that have gained popularity in modern times and aims at ethically repairing interpersonal relationships and emotions. They



claim that these practices increasingly give victims the option of forgiving the perpetrator of one or more acts of intimate violence that seriously wounded them emotionally, physically, and/or spiritually. Anderson (2016) however, vehemently contests Cheon and Regehr's (2006) notion and states that forgiving someone is always the kindest and moral thing to do, especially in family relationships; but argues that doing so won't inevitably bring about the restoration of ethical accountability or justice. She goes on to state that by ignoring both ethical vulnerability and intimate violence, humanity runs a higher risk of undermining ethical accountability. She further argues, that upholding the obligation of unwavering pardon is not a simple good. Extreme caution ought to be taken when it comes to forgiving for the sake of justice, for the benefit of women and marginalized or devalued people who experience intimate violence and are all too willing to forgive (without calling for ethical accountability). Anderson (2016) feels that the victims of intimate violence ought to be allowed to digest whether (their) forgiveness does not separate the perpetrator from facing justice. Justice would entail, at the very least, treating others and oneself out of respect for its worth and the integrity of every human life. Forgiveness, according to feminists, is both challenging and hazardous because it takes advantage of the forgiving character of those women (and men) who are prone to unfair treatment specifically because of being too kind (McNulty, 2014). This vulnerability extends to having unwavering forgiveness and love that bears the burden of not only current injustice but also absorbing the human history of violence against women (Anderson, 2016). Feminist theologians' critique conventional atonement theories as patriarchal misinterpretations that have justified violence and oppression of women by distorting ideas like a sacrifice, obedience, submission, forgiveness, and the meaning of suffering (Moder, 2019).

Conclusion

Intimate partner violence has shown itself to be a violent act against humanity. It impinges on women's and men rights alike when relating to liberty and personhood. In Africa, recent intimate partner violence is exacerbated by poverty, the influence of African culture and social standards that fail to condemn violence against women, thus contributing to the problem and making it challenging for women to exit abusive relationships. Christian communities seem to condone intimate partner violence to a certain extent, by misinterpreting scripture to inadvertently shield perpetrators. The understanding of sin and forgiveness in Christian Churches as well as in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, leaves no option for those who find themselves as victims of intimate partner violence within marriages. It is proposed therefore, that whilst forgiving is noble and is what all Christians should conform to, victims should be given a chance to combine forgiveness with ethical accountability. As important as it is to forgive the perpetrator, victims of intimate partner violence within marriages should not be simply told that leaving the partner is a sin, and that the abused partner wanting to leave the abusive marriage is then just as bad as the perpetrator.

It is proposed that the Anglican Church of Southern Africa looks at sin and forgiveness in intimate partner violence within marriage through the lenses of the victim rather than sticking to the literal interpretation of the two notions of sin and forgiveness. It is further proposed that the Anglican Church of Southern Africa revise the liturgy on the marriage of divorced people so that those who find themselves victims of abuse will find it easy to leave such marriages without feeling guilty about breaking the civil contract as it is narrowly and vehemently expressed in (APB 1989:484-485). As much as sins cannot be categorized, it is high time that the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, explore new ways of understanding sin in intimate partner violence within marriage. The Anglican Church of Southern Africa is committed to women's and gender issues and evidence of such a commitment should be visible in terms of how they deal with the decisions taken or not taken, by those who have suffered or continue to suffer at the hands of Church going men and women.



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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.



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