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Uncoupling sex and heterosexual marriage: A historical-theological critique of the church's role in sexual politics and gender-based violence in Southern Africa

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the historically entrenched association between sex and heterosexual marriage, particularly through the institutional lens of the Christian Church. Contrary to dominant narratives, it argues that sex and heterosexual marriage are not inherently linked and that the traditional theological framing has led to profound sociocultural and ethical consequences. Many African societies understand heterosexual marriage as the unification of families and not a contract centred on sex or procreation. However, the Church's doctrine has often conflated sexual relations with marital duty, fostering a culture where sexual consent is obscured and gender-based violence is normalised. The study employs feminist and post-colonial theories to critically examine how the Church's teachings have shaped gendered power dynamics and the politics of the body. This study adopted a historical-philosophical methodology, drawing on theological and biblical texts, as well as cultural practices and oral traditions, to trace the evolution and impact of these ideas. Furthermore, this study argues that dignity and communality are core values among African communities[1] and that heterosexual marriage is neither contract-based nor prompted by procreation inscription. The paper calls for a decolonised and contextual rethinking of both heterosexual marriage and sexuality.

Keywords: African marriage traditions, Church doctrine, colonial legacy,decolonial theology, gender-based violence.

Introduction

The paper begins by interrogating the assumed intrinsic link between sex and heterosexual marriage, particularly within Christian traditions. Brown (1988) and Coontz (2005) are instrumental in offering a historical critique of marriage as a mutable institution, rather than a divinely fixed one. Coontz, in particular, debunks the myth of a "traditional marriage," demonstrating how marital forms and meanings have evolved over time and across various contexts. By invoking these scholars, the study signals its intention to deconstruct "naturalised" theological positions on marriage. The present study builds on Brown (1988) and Coontz (2005) by moving beyond Western historical critique to an African-centred deconstruction. They pivot from "marriage as sex" to "marriage as communal continuity," already destabilising Euro-Christian normativity. Amadiume (1987) and Oyěwùmí (1997) are pivotal in centring African epistemologies of gender and kinship. Amadiume's work on matriarchal and dual-sex systems in Igbo society challenges the gender binaries and roles imported through colonial Christianity. Oyěwùmí, similarly, argues that "woman" as a social category was not

[1] In this essay, by "Africa" or "African communities", reference is made to Southern Africa. The phrase "African communities" designates indigenous people of African origin, preferred in some instances as "Black people".

ontologically significant in precolonial Yoruba society; gender was constructed more through seniority and function than anatomy. The study draws strength from these insights to argue that Christian doctrines did not merely add theological layers to African marriage but actively erased and replaced indigenous systems of meaning. This is not just a loss of cultural diversity but an act of epistemic violence. Phiri and Nadar's (2006) work on feminist theology in Africa and Tamale's (2011) scholarship on sexual rights and bodily autonomy in African contexts sharpen the critique of the Church's role in sexual politics. Phiri and Nadar underscore the gendered impact of religious teachings, particularly how Scripture is weaponised to justify women's subordination. Tamale extends this analysis to legal and sociocultural norms that legitimise non-consensual sex within marriage. In this regard, African feminist theologians, such as Mercy Oduyoye (1995) and Isabel Phiri (2004), move beyond critique to propose hermeneutics of resistance that re-read Scripture through the lens of women's lived experiences. Their work affirms African women's capacity to reclaim theological authority and reshape religious meaning from within oppressive systems. This study aligns with the insights of the aforementioned scholars in asserting that religious narratives not only shape personal beliefs but also inform legal, ethical and affective infrastructures that sustain gender-based violence.

The feminist theological tradition, through Farley's (2006) ethics of mutuality, Ruether's (1983) critique of patriarchal religion, Daly's (1973) radical feminist theology and Books' (2000) intersectional analysis of love and domination, provides the study with an emancipatory lens. These thinkers refuse to divorce theology from power, especially the power dynamics embedded in sex, marriage and ecclesial authority. This analysis recognises that sexual regulation was one of the earliest tools of colonial missionisation. Missionary Christianity imposed European sexual norms on African societies, policing bodies and moralities in ways that disciplined both gender and desire. As Nnaemeka (1997) observes, African women often exercised "negotiated agency" within these constraints, navigating between compliance and resistance. The above scholars provide the theoretical foundation for the study's central argument, namely that the conflation of sex with marital legitimacy is not merely theological, but also political. This could raise critical issues of structural domination by sacralising male sexual access to women's bodies.

The respective perspectives of the following theorists underpin the decolonial critique of the present study: Mbembe (2001), Lugones (2010:13-33), Mudimbe (1988), and Spivak (1988:24-28). Mbembe critiques colonial governmentality and post-colonial subjectivity. Lugones introduces the concept of the "coloniality of gender", showing how colonial systems imposed rigid gender binaries and hierarchies. Mudimbe's work on the invention of Africa and Spivak's concept of the subaltern highlight how colonial epistemes silence local voices. Meanwhile, the study not only cites these theorists; it embodies their ethos as well. It shows how the coloniality of theology is not a metaphor but a material structure that continues to deform African life. This positions the Church as both a spiritual institution and an actor in the colonial matrix of power. Indeed, remnants of these colonial theological logics persist in contemporary Church doctrines on same-sex relations, celibacy and women's ordination. By tracing these continuities, the study reveals how the coloniality of theology survives as moral infrastructure, shaping present-day ecclesial and social attitudes toward sex and gender. Bujo's (1998) African Christian ethics and Murove's (2009) Ubuntu-informed philosophy offer a counter-narrative.

They present African ethics as deeply communal, rooted in relational responsibility rather than legalistic obligation. These ethics affirm the dignity and sacredness of the body and relationships, contrary to the sexualised, individualised morality imported by the West. Thus, the study utilises Bujo and Murove as a nostalgic recovery, as well as epistemological resources for reimagining a non-patriarchal sexual ethic that is both African and liberatory. This enables the proposal of a theological reconstruction in this paper, not just a critique. Hastings (1994) is a key voice on the intersection of African history, theology and mission

studies. His work acknowledges the transformative and often disruptive impact of Christianity on African social life. Referencing Hastings grounds the study in a historically rigorous and theologically informed methodology. The use of Hastings demonstrates that this is not merely a speculative theological critique, but a historically grounded analysis of how doctrines travel, mutate, and institutionalise power.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on feminist and post-colonial theories to critically interrogate Christian doctrines of marriage, sex and power within colonial and patriarchal systems. Fiorenza (1983) critiques the patriarchal foundations of Christian theology and ecclesiology, urging a recovery of silenced female voices through her hermeneutics of suspicion. In contrast, Trible (1978) offers a literary-rhetorical feminist reading of Scripture, uncovering subversive narratives that challenge male-dominated interpretations. Together, their work enables this study to question the theological naturalisation of sexual obligation and male dominance. Building on these foundations, African feminist theologians Oduyoye (2001) and Kanyoro (2002) offer critical frameworks, such as theology in the mother tongue and cultural hermeneutics, to reveal how colonialism and Christianity jointly suppressed African women's agency and ethical systems. Oduyoye advocates for a return to indigenous communal ethics, while Kanyoro emphasises the need to disentangle theology from both cultural and patriarchal distortions. These scholars position African women not as theological subjects, but as epistemic agents resisting layered oppressions. Their contributions also foreground the methodological importance of reading theology through lived experience, reclaiming narrative and oral traditions as legitimate theological sources, subsequently decentring Western textual authority.

Dube (2000:280-291) extends this critique through her concept of "moral imperialism", describing how missionary Christianity imposed colonial discipline by regulating African sexuality and gender roles under the guise of divine law. Dube's analysis is sharpened by Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism, framing missionary discourse as an imperial project that constructs non-Western identities through moralised domination. Dube's and Said's individual works expose Christian marital doctrine as a mechanism of colonial control rather than a universal theological truth. Furthermore, Mohanty (1988) critiques Western feminist portrayals of Third World women as passive victims, calling for a historically grounded analysis of gender and colonialism. Mohanty's emphasis on early intersectionality resonates with this study's approach to African women's lived experiences under both patriarchal and colonial pressures. This intersectional lens also highlights the internal negotiations African women make between spiritual belonging, cultural loyalty and resistance, underscoring that agency often emerges within, not outside, structures of domination. In addition, Bhabha's (1994) concepts of mimicry and hybridity inform the study's view that Victorian Christian norms were not merely adopted in African contexts, but re-inscribed and internalised, often by the very women they subjugated. Together, these theorists resist binary thinking and underscore the complex, negotiated realities African women face within religious structures shaped by both indigenous traditions and colonial impositions. This theoretical lens supports the study's goal of theological decolonisation and ethical reconstruction grounded in justice, mutuality and bodily autonomy.

Methodology

This study employs a historical-philosophical methodology to critically examine Christian doctrines on marriage and sexuality within African contexts. It traces the genealogy of theological ideas, interrogating how these concepts have evolved and been reshaped through colonial and missionary influences (Mudimbe, 1988; Dube, 2000:280-291). This genealogical approach aligns with Foucault's theory of discourse, which views power as operating through the construction and regulation of knowledge, particularly in the domains of sexuality, morality, and religious identity (Foucault, 1978). By applying this method, the study aims to recover

indigenous African epistemologies and relational ethics that have been marginalised by Western Christian frameworks (Oduyoye, 2001; Kanyoro, 2002). In doing so, it recognises that oral traditions, storytelling, proverbs, and ritual practices are more than mere cultural artefacts. They are repositories of philosophical reasoning and ethical vision. Such sources preserve moral wisdom in embodied and communal forms that challenge the textual and hierarchical modes of Western theological production (Wiredu, 1998; Gyekye, 1997). It considers both Christian theological texts and African oral traditions as legitimate and interrelated sources of philosophical reflection and ethical reasoning (Wiredu, 1998:17-46). Thus, biblical and doctrinal writings are approached not as immutable divine revelation, but as historically situated ideological artefacts, shaped by cultural, political and theological agendas (Sugirtharajah, 2001). The study also draws on decolonial theory to interrogate the assumptions embedded in Western Christian sexual ethics, particularly the centrality of heterosexual, monogamous and procreative marriage as normative (Mignolo, 2011; Lugones, 2010:13-33).

Practices such as bridewealth (lobola) and kinship-based marriage systems are re-evaluated as dynamic African ethical systems, often misrepresented or rejected by missionary Christianity as “pagan” or “immoral” (Mbiti, 1990; Amadiume, 1987). Furthermore, the methodology is reflexive, acknowledging that any process of decolonising theology must also interrogate the researcher’s own epistemic location and inherited interpretive frameworks. This reflexivity guards against reproducing the same hierarchies of knowledge that the study seeks to dismantle (Chilisa, 2012; Smith, 2012). Methodologically, the study is both critical in that it deconstructs the theological justifications for sexual control and gender subordination and reconstructive, aiming to retrieve suppressed African voices and theological perspectives. It aligns with contextual theology in its commitment to grounding ethics in lived African realities (West, 1999) and with African philosophy in its embrace of plural, community-based epistemologies (Ramose, 2002).

The biblical view of heterosexual relationships

The biblical view of matrimonial relationships has historically been grounded in the concepts of covenant, complementarity, mutual obligation, and, in later Christian interpretations, sacramentality. In both the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament, marriage is often portrayed as a divinely instituted relationship that reflects broader theological and communal values. However, this portrayal is not monolithic and has been interpreted differently across time, cultures and theological traditions. In the Old Testament, marriage is primarily viewed as a covenantal union with strong communal and legal implications. It is rooted in the creation narratives of Genesis 1-2, where the union of man and woman is depicted as part of God’s original design for humanity. In the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 2:24 reads: עַל־כֵּן יַעֲזָב אִישׁ אֶת־אָבִיו וְאֶת־אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד׃ [“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and they shall become one flesh”]. This verse is frequently cited as the theological foundation for marriage. Scholars (e.g., Wenham 1994) interpret this as emphasising unity, permanence and the complementarity of male and female roles. However, Old Testament marriage was also deeply embedded in patriarchal structures. Wives were often treated as part of a man’s household and property, with polygamy and concubinage not uncommon among prominent biblical figures such as Abraham, Jacob and David.

Meyers (2014:8-27) argues that while biblical texts reflect a male-dominated culture, they also contain glimpses of female agency, particularly in narratives involving women such as Ruth, Abigail, and Deborah. Moreover, Frymer-Kensky (2002) notes that although women in the Bible operated within constrained roles, they were often central to God’s covenantal plans, complicating simplistic readings of biblical patriarchy. In the New Testament, Jesus and Paul both reaffirm and transform the biblical understanding of marriage. In the Gospels, Jesus invokes Genesis to assert the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage (Mark 10:6-9),

challenging the permissive divorce practices of his time. He frames marriage as a divinely ordained, lifelong union, while also upholding celibacy as a valid spiritual vocation (Matt. 19:10-12). Hays (1996) notes that Jesus' teachings on marriage should be understood not just as moral regulation but as part of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, calling followers to a radical ethic of faithfulness and mutual love. Paul's letters further develop a theological vision of marriage, particularly in Ephesians 5:21-33, where he presents the relationship between husband and wife as a reflection of Christ's relationship to the Church. This passage has been interpreted both as affirming hierarchical roles, with the husband as "head" and the wife as "submissive", and as revolutionary in its mutuality, particularly in Paul's call for mutual submission (Eph. 5:21). MacDonald (1996) argues that Paul's household codes were a strategic adaptation to Greco-Roman norms, aimed at stabilising Christian communities, rather than a permanent theological blueprint. Similarly, Fiorenza (1983) critiques traditional readings of Pauline texts that reinforce patriarchy, calling instead for a liberative, egalitarian hermeneutic grounded in the gospel's inclusive ethos.

Theological traditions have also influenced the interpretation of the Bible's teachings on marriage. In Roman Catholic theology, marriage is considered one of the seven sacraments, a visible sign of divine grace. The concept of marriage as a sacrament is heavily influenced by Augustine's writings, particularly his views on procreation, fidelity, and the indissolubility of the marital bond (see Augustine, De bono coniugali). However, Augustine also viewed sexuality with suspicion, associating it with original sin and the need for control, a stance later institutionalised in Christian teaching. Brown (1988) critiques this Augustinian legacy, arguing that it contributed to a restrictive and morally burdened view of sexual expression within marriage. Protestant reformers, particularly Martin Luther and John Calvin, rejected the sacramental nature of marriage, viewing it instead as a social and covenantal institution ordained by God for companionship, procreation and moral order. Luther emphasised the earthly, practical dimensions of marriage, seeing it as a vocation in which spouses serve one another and the broader community (Hendrix, 2015). However, even within Protestant traditions, gender hierarchy was often preserved, with the husband cast as spiritual and familial head. In modern theology, feminist, liberationist, and post-colonial scholars, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Kwok Pui-lan, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, among others, have challenged both the biblical texts and their traditional interpretations.

Fiorenza (1983) argues that traditional interpretations of marriage in the Bible often reflect patriarchal assumptions that must be deconstructed and reinterpreted in light of gender equality and relational justice. Pui-lan (2005) and Gutiérrez (1988) emphasise the necessity of reading biblical texts within their socio-historical contexts, challenging dominant interpretations that ignore power dynamics and contemporary ethical values such as consent and mutuality. Both scholars argue that biblical views of marriage must be contextualised within their historical settings and reinterpreted in light of contemporary values such as gender equality, consent and relational justice. In addition, Trible (1978) advocates for a re-reading of biblical texts that highlights overlooked narratives of mutuality and partnership, such as in the creation story where man and woman are created together in God's image (Gen. 1:27). Dube (2000:280-291), working from a post-colonial perspective, critiques the missionary imposition of rigid biblical models of marriage on African communities, calling instead for contextual theological approaches that affirm indigenous relational ethics. It is evident that the biblical view of matrimonial relationships is rich and complex, shaped by evolving historical contexts, theological priorities, and cultural assumptions.

Historical foundations of Christian marriage doctrine

Christian theological traditions, beginning with Augustine, have profoundly shaped the moral and doctrinal framing of sex and marriage. Augustine viewed sexual desire (concupiscence) as a consequence of original sin, tolerating sex only within heterosexual marriage and for procreation (Brown, 1988). This laid the groundwork for a sexual ethic that deemed pleasure

suspect and bound sex to reproductive obligation. By the medieval period, these views crystallised into Church doctrine, with marriage elevated to a sacrament and theologians like Thomas Aquinas reinforcing procreative sex as "natural" while condemning non-procreative acts as sinful (Witte, 2012; Brundage, 1987). The doctrine of *debitum conjugale,* or marital debt (Perisanidi, 2017:510-528), emerged within this logic, legally obligating spouses to sexual access, a principle that in practice often privileged male entitlement and sidelined consent, especially in patriarchal societies.

The Protestant Reformers, including Luther and Calvin, while challenging celibacy, maintained the tight link between sex, marriage and moral order, positioning women as obedient wives (Ephesians 5:22-23) and moral stewards (Ozment, 1980). Thus, even reformist theology preserved the hierarchical sexual norms of earlier traditions. These ideas, far from remaining European, were exported globally through colonial missionary expansion, where Christian norms displaced diverse indigenous systems. In Africa, precolonial marriage practices, often communal, matrilineal, or polygynous, were reframed as primitive or immoral by missionaries and replaced with Euro-Christian ideals of monogamy, sexual restraint and heteronormativity (Obiechina, 1992; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997). This imposition disrupted African systems of kinship, consent and relational ethics. Scholars such as Mbiti (1969) and Fortes (1969) highlight how African marriages traditionally functioned not as private sexual contracts, but as communal institutions rooted in lineage, reciprocity, and social cohesion. Marriage ceremonies were collective, gradual processes involving family negotiations, spiritual rituals and bridewealth exchanges (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde, 1950). Tishkoff (2000) and Gyekye (1996) add that while sex was present, it was not central, as marriage served broader social and ethical purposes.

Fertility was communal and spiritual, not narrowly biological, with dignity, not dominance, framing relational roles. The African philosophy of Ubuntu, articulated by Ramose (1999), encapsulates this ethic: personhood arises through relationality. Marriage was thus embedded in mutual care, not individual entitlement. While patriarchy existed, it was often mediated by matrilineal or dual-sex systems, where women held significant authority (Amadiume, 1987). Colonial and missionary interventions, however, dismantled these frameworks, replacing them with contractual, hierarchical and often coercive models of marriage grounded in Western theology and legalism (Moore & Vaughan, 1994). Ultimately, the supposed theological universality of sex within heterosexual marriage is revealed to be a historically contingent, patriarchal and colonial construction. Recognising this trajectory is essential to dismantling the theological myths that continue to obscure African relational ethics rooted in consensus, communal dignity and negotiated intimacy.

Gendered power dynamics and sexual ethics

Christian doctrine has historically framed sexual roles within marriage through the lens of male headship and female submission, producing a theological framework that reinforces patriarchal control and often undermines women's autonomy (Thatcher, 2024:271-292). This dynamic is not merely theoretical; it is deeply embedded in the lived religious experiences of people across global contexts. A recent qualitative study among Ghanaian Christian women reveals how religious and cultural traditions converge to construct marital hierarchies, where women employ strategies such as sexual negotiation, emotional labour and persuasive communication to navigate male dominance. These tactics, while demonstrating agency, also underscore how male sexual entitlement is normalised and women are implicitly tasked with preserving marital harmony, often at the expense of their own consent and well-being. This gendered imbalance is especially pronounced in contexts where scriptural interpretation is rigidly patriarchal. In Zimbabwe's Johanne Marange Apostolic Church, texts such as 1 Peter 3:1-7 are weaponised to legitimise female silence and submission, framing dissent as a spiritual failure (see Dudzai, Zvokuomba, & Mboko, 2023:376-388; Chabata, 2023). As a result, women and girls face systemic disempowerment, where gender-based violence (GBV)

is not only tolerated but sacralised as part of a divinely ordained marital order. Such dynamics reflect what African feminist theologians (e.g., Oduyoye, 2001) have long critiqued, namely, the use of Christian texts to uphold patriarchal norms under the guise of religious fidelity. A scoping review of Christian communities across sub-Saharan Africa found that churches often fail to confront GBV, with patriarchal institutional cultures contributing to discriminatory practices and obstructing meaningful engagement with prevention efforts. Even when theology offers alternative visions, such as African women's theologies that centre dignity, relational ethics and justice, institutional inertia and male-dominated leadership frequently stall transformative possibilities. These findings echo the call by scholars like Nadar (2009:551-561) and Chitando (2012) to deconstruct the theological complicity in gendered harm. The entrenchment of patriarchal theology is not limited to African contexts.

A study of Australian Anglican clergy shows that strong adherence to doctrines like "male headship" correlates with a reduced prioritisation of victim safety and hesitancy to collaborate with secular DV services. This highlights the transnational impact of hierarchical theology, where the sanctity of marriage is elevated above the imperative to protect vulnerable partners. This concern is shared by Farley (2006) and Ruether (1983) in their theological ethics. At the psychological and social level, faith can simultaneously offer resilience and reproduce harm. While many South African women find strength in church-based communities, these spaces also perpetuate ideals of female submission, shaping how women interpret suffering as spiritually meaningful or divinely ordained. As Gaitskell (2000:28-91) notes, this duality is particularly acute in urban South African contexts, where faith-based life intertwines with political and social consciousness, compelling a renegotiation of female religious identity. Taken together, these studies and theological critiques expose how Christian doctrine, when uncritically aligned with patriarchal norms, can erode the ethical foundations of consent, dignity and justice in marriage. They also affirm the urgent need for contextual, liberative theological frameworks that centre women's voices, resist coercive structures and reimagine relational ethics grounded in mutuality and autonomy.

The Church's complicity and silence in the face of gender-based violence

Patriarchal interpretations of Scripture and "male headship" are deeply embedded in many church doctrines, resulting in theological justifications for gender power imbalances, which silence victims. For instance, theological anthropology in some Christian circles continues to portray women as subordinate or defined primarily in relation to men, making it difficult for church teachings to challenge male perpetrators (Naicker 2025). In one study of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Chisale (2020) shows that gender equality often remains a theoretical ideal rather than a lived reality. Leadership structures, liturgical language and pastoral practices often reinforce male dominance, creating an environment where women's voices are not given equal weight. Hermeneutical practices sometimes selectively interpret biblical passages to blame women or excuse male wrongdoing. For example, Chabata's (2023) work on John 8:3-11 in the Johane Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe highlights how the narrative of the adulterous woman is used in church teachings to shame women, while men who are equally implicated are not held to the same standards. Churches often privilege institutional reputation, stability and "saving the marriage" over the welfare of survivors. This pressure can cause church leaders to discourage disclosure of abuse or to push forgiveness prematurely without ensuring accountability (Anglican Church of Southern Africa confession).

In their study on "Gender-Based Violence in Some Pentecostal Churches: A South African Study", Ndlovu, Mavhandu-Mudzusi, and Baloyi (2024:679) found that survivors often face institutional barriers when reporting abuse within Pentecostal congregations (lack of mechanisms, fear of stigma and possible ostracisation). Church institutions sometimes respond inadequately or defensively rather than with compassionate, justice-oriented accountability. During COVID-19 lockdowns, studies (e.g., Msipa & Masango, 2024) show that

migrant women victims of GBV found it challenging to access pastoral care; often this is not only due to logistical constraints but also because pastoral care structures are ill-prepared to respond sensitively to disclosures of violence, especially sexual violence, in contexts where silence is the norm. Many church teachings, sermons and communal norms reinforce cultural expectations of women enduring suffering, remaining silent about abuse or preserving family unity at all costs. For example, a study has established that the "good wife" ideal within the Kore-Kore ethnic group in Zimbabwe functions not only socially but also theologically. Mwapfaa and Van Wyk (2025) maintain that "the 'good wife' is expected to maintain marriage, preserve peace, even when subject to emotional, physical or sexual abuse". Silence is reinforced by fear of social shame, community ostracism or spiritual condemnation. For many, disclosing abuse might result in being judged as disobedient, unfaithful or "lacking faith", potentially leading to further marginalisation. Studies of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches in South Africa (e.g., Shingange, 2023) demonstrate how the discourse of spiritual faithfulness and deliverance can inadvertently suppress the disclosure of abuse. There is often a disjunction between theological affirmation of love, justice and care and pastoral practices. Churches may offer only spiritual platitudes instead of concrete support, legal advice, or safe spaces. Survivors report that their suffering is minimised or downplayed.

Churches often employ theological language (forgiveness, submission, reconciliation) in ways that can pressure victims to forgive before they have had a chance to heal or before perpetrators have taken responsibility. The risk is that forgiveness becomes a tool for silence rather than a catalyst for transformation. Mavengano (2024), in her feminist reading of *Unigwe's The Middle Daughter,* demonstrates how notions such as forgiveness and obedience are mobilised to silence victims' pain and agency. Some church bodies have begun to acknowledge complicity and take steps towards structural change. For example, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa passed resolutions urging repentance for silence and complicity, calling for church-wide programmes to combat GBV. Theological teachings are often not only religious but deeply interwoven with African cultural patriarchy. Colonial history and missionary influence have sometimes imported or reified European patriarchal norms, which overlay existing cultural gender power imbalances. These overlapping systems make transformation difficult.

Sexuality and cultural marriage practices in Southern Africa

Marriage in Southern Africa is more than a personal commitment between individuals; it is a deeply communal, cultural and spiritual institution. Rooted in indigenous African worldviews, marriage functions as a nexus for kinship, moral responsibility, social reproduction and identity formation. Cultural marriage practices reflect broader philosophies of life, where relationships are embedded in networks of interdependence and sexuality is viewed not merely as private or biological, but as socially and spiritually meaningful. Far from being outdated, these practices retain enduring value in their structure of communal life, affirmation of African identity, and provision of ethical frameworks for understanding both marriage and sexuality (Cameron, 1999: 442-458). In African cosmologies, sexuality is not treated as a taboo subject, but as a natural and sacred aspect of life.

Within marriage, sexuality is understood as part of the divine order of creation, tied to procreation, pleasure and social continuity. Traditional cultural teachings emphasise that sex is not simply for individual gratification but is rooted in relational ethics and communal well-being. Mbiti (1969:24) states, "human life has a rhythm of nature." In my view, as Mbiti postulates, this rhythm includes key life stages (i.e., birth, puberty, marriage, and procreation). Mbiti (1969:130) adds that "marriage is a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate". Thus, marriage becomes the socially sanctioned context for sexual relations, not as a form of control, but as a way to ensure that sexuality contributes positively to the family and society. The act of *lobola* (bridewealth), for instance, not only acknowledges the value of the woman but also signifies the recognition of the potential for childbearing, nurturing and sexual union

within a respectful, culturally sanctioned framework (Potgieter, 2003:66-71; Goody, 1973). The sexual relationship is honoured as part of a broader web of life and not reduced to mere biological function or moralistic policing as seen in many colonial-Christian models. Traditional Southern African cultures emphasise sexual discipline, consent and mutual respect, particularly during the stages of marriage preparation. Among many ethnic groups, initiation schools serve as vital spaces for teaching young people about sexuality, gender roles and marital responsibilities. These rites of passage, such as umhlanga (Swaziland), bogwera and bojale (Botswana), include teachings on sexual integrity, bodily autonomy and relational ethics. Far from promoting sexual repression, these rites affirm sexuality as a vital and life-affirming force, while ensuring it is channelled in ways that honour communal values. According to Hannah Kinoti (1999), African sexual ethics are not based on shame or guilt but on social responsibility, dignity and respect for the sacredness of the body. Such teachings counter the Eurocentric Christian model that often demonises sex as sinful unless strictly procreative. As Oduyoye (2001) explains, colonial and missionary teachings introduced a negative view of female sexuality, casting women's bodies as dangerous or impure.

In contrast, African traditions often saw sexuality as sacred and women's reproductive power as spiritually significant. Procreation is a central aspect of marriage in Southern African cultures, not merely as a biological imperative, but as a spiritual obligation to ancestors and future generations. The union of two people is seen as a continuation of lineage, and sexual intimacy within marriage is celebrated as fulfilling this sacred duty. Children are regarded as a blessing to both the couple and the extended family, as well as the entire community. However, sexuality is not reduced solely to reproduction. Many African traditions recognise the emotional, spiritual and relational aspects of sexual intimacy. Folktales, proverbs and rituals reflect the understanding that a healthy sexual relationship fosters unity, mutual satisfaction and relational harmony. For example, in many communities, sexual incompatibility is considered a legitimate concern in marital counselling, and elders may intervene to offer guidance; thus, not to shame but to restore harmony. In contrast to Western frameworks that have historically treated sexual pleasure, especially for women, as suspect or sinful, Southern African cultural systems often accept it as a normal and meaningful part of human life, though regulated by cultural norms.

While cultural systems have traditionally maintained gender roles, they also offer avenues for negotiation, fluidity and agency, particularly regarding sexual roles and responsibilities. For example, the institution of female husbands among the Igbo, or woman-to-woman marriages among the Nandi and Zulu, demonstrate that African cultures had non-heteronormative marital structures long before the influence of colonialism (Amadiume, 1987). These practices challenge Western binaries and show that African marriage and sexuality have historically been more diverse and dynamic than colonial discourse allowed. Furthermore, in some matrilineal societies such as the Chewa or Tsonga, women retained considerable influence over sexual and reproductive decisions, often supported by elder women or maternal uncles. This relational balance contrasts sharply with patriarchal Christian marital doctrines that emphasised female submission and male sexual entitlement. As Oyěwùmí (1997) argues, colonialism and Christianity imposed rigid gender and sexual hierarchies that were alien to many African cultures. Cultural marriage practices continue to evolve in response to modern realities, such as HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence and changing legal frameworks.

Sexual health and consent education are increasingly integrated into traditional marriage counselling and rites of passage. Organisations like The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (founded by Oduyoye) are working to retrieve empowering indigenous teachings while also critiquing harmful patriarchal interpretations that have crept into cultural practices. In addition, sexuality is being reclaimed as a site of resistance and healing. African feminist scholars, such as Sylvia Tamale (2011), argue for an African sexual ethics that embraces bodily autonomy, pleasure, and consent within frameworks of cultural dignity and community. Such approaches aim to decolonise sexuality, moving beyond both colonial moralism and

neoliberal hypersexualisation. Cultural marriage practices in Southern Africa are deeply ingrained in the social, ethical, and spiritual fabric of life. They provide not only structures for union and kinship but also frameworks for understanding and honouring sexuality. Rooted in relationality, dignity and communal ethics, these practices affirm the sacredness of the body, the joy and responsibility of sexual intimacy and the importance of collective well-being. In a time when Western models of marriage and sexuality dominate global discourse, reclaiming and valuing African cultural traditions offers a powerful pathway toward decolonisation, gender justice and relational healing grounded in indigenous wisdom.

Queering theological narratives: Rethinking sexuality beyond heteronormativity

Shingange (2023) examines how God-talk in Pentecostal churches performs heteronormative functions, as it enforces both gender binaries and sexual morality, and marginalises non-normative sexualities. Shingange argues that prophecy and teachings are often used to espouse heteronormative ideologies and that these are deeply entangled with colonial and post-colonial power structures. Furthermore, in "A decolonial analysis of religious medicalisation of same-sex practices in South African Pentecostalism", Shingange and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2023) show how same-sex desire is often not just condemned but medicalised (i.e., treated as illness, aberration), which entrenches moral and spiritual stigma and erases the agency and humanity of those whose sexualities fall outside normative frames. Megan Robertson's *Queer Studies and Religion in Southern Africa: The Production of Queer Christian Subjects* (2020) examines how queer identities are lived out in Christian contexts, exploring how queer Christians negotiate their identities in environments that often view their sexualities as incompatible with religious fidelity. Robertson demonstrates that queer Christian subjectivity cannot be understood solely through official doctrines, but must be viewed through everyday practices, communities, resistance, silence, and negotiation.

Robertson (2017:125-144) further examines how scholarship is moving beyond depicting Christianity and queer sexuality as permanently antagonistic, towards recognising spaces of negotiation, refuge and transformation in faith practice. This includes acknowledging ambivalence, contradiction and hybrid identities. Palm and Gaum (2021:205-230) report on interventions in church settings, including workshops and dialogues that bring together LGBTQIA+ people and straight Christians to foster understanding, reduce stigma, and build unity. The approach here includes using continuum models of gender/sexuality (rather than fixed categories) and deploying intersectional tools.

These safe spaces are important because they disrupt silence, allow queer persons to narrate their experiences and begin to reconfigure theological discourse in congregational contexts. Sibisi and Van der Walt (2021:67-91) discuss how queer Christian communities in KwaZulu-Natal have created alternative or transformed spaces of worship and belonging. Even these communities, however, must contend with internalised heteronormativity and patriarchy (e.g., insistence on masculine kinds of leadership, privileging certain relationship forms).

Sibisi and Van der Walt's study argues for making these queer spaces more than just refuges, but as prophetic communities that challenge the norms of mainstream church and society. Duncan (2020) argues that Black Theology of Liberation must include the experiences of LGBTQIA+ peoples if it is truly to speak to oppressed and marginalised bodies. For Duncan, liberation theology's focus on the oppressed has often omitted sexual oppression, which is central for many. Including queer perspectives challenges what counts as "oppression" and extends the theological imagination. Modise (2023:148-166) makes theological arguments that LGBTQIA+ persons, too, are made in the Imago Dei (image of God) and thus should be treated with equal dignity in faith communities. This theological grounding is crucial to rethinking sexuality not simply as a moral issue but as part of what it means to be human and to belong in the body of Christ.

Toward a decolonised understanding of marriage and sexuality

Contemporary theological and ethical debates around marriage and sexuality in African contexts are undergoing a significant shift toward decolonisation. This epistemic and spiritual reorientation critiques the Eurocentric foundations of Christian doctrine and advocates for the revival of indigenous African ethical frameworks. This movement is not merely reactive but generative, offering fresh resources for theological reconstruction rooted in African cosmologies, communal ethics and lived experience. Shingange (2025) highlights the deep structural transformation inflicted on African marriage systems by missionary-colonial interventions. He argues that precolonial African models, often characterised by communal responsibility, spiritual interconnectedness and relational mutuality, were supplanted by rigid, individualistic, hetero-monogamous models presented as theologically non-negotiable. These imposed frameworks pathologised African relational forms like polygyny and extended kinship marriages, labelling them "uncivilised" and outside the bounds of Christian morality. Shingange's critique is not only historical but also theological, calling for an intentional delinking from Eurocentric moral systems and a reclaiming of African relational ethics as both an act of resistance and a spiritual imperative. This imperative is echoed by Mujinga (2024), who advocates for the "provincialisation of the Western context" in theological discourse. Mujinga's approach centres on epistemic justice, challenging the false universalism of Western Christian norms by affirming the validity of African epistemologies in theological education, pastoral praxis and ecclesial identity. His emphasis on contextual theology destabilises the authority of imported doctrinal systems, arguing instead for the indigenisation of Christian thought where theology emerges organically from African social, historical and spiritual landscapes. By provincialising the West, Mujinga effectively repositions African knowledge systems as primary sources of theological insight, rather than as marginal or supplementary.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a foundational voice in African feminist theology, laid the groundwork for such a shift by establishing the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Oduyoye's theological vision insists that African cultures contain rich ethical resources for rethinking marriage and sexuality, which are often ignored or distorted by patriarchal and colonial readings of Christianity (Oduyoye, 1997). Her emphasis on relationality, communal solidarity and bodily autonomy reframes theological ethics away from legalistic or punitive logics and toward practices of mutual care and justice. Importantly, Oduyoye's work models a dual critique: she resists both Western theological imperialism and indigenous patriarchal cultures that have colluded with it. Her decolonial feminist lens insists that theology must be accountable to the lived realities and suffering of African women (Pemberton, 2003).

In conversation with Oduyoye, Hannah Wangeci Kinoti (1999:73-82) advances a communitarian feminist ethic rooted in indigenous African oral traditions, proverbs and cosmologies. Kinoti critiques the "moral colonialism" of missionary Christianity, which replaced African ethical systems with patriarchal, legalistic and individualised norms. Her ethical framework foregrounds relational integrity and collective accountability over contractual obligation or gendered submission. Marriage, in Kinoti's view, is not a private transaction but a social-spiritual institution embedded in a network of mutual obligations, spiritual reciprocity and communal flourishing. Kinoti's insistence on re-indigenising moral discourse challenges both secular and religious models that reduce marriage to sexual roles or legal entitlements. Recent African queer theologians such as Adriaan van Klinken (2019) and Elias Bongmba (2020) extend this liberative impulse by reading African traditions and Scripture through inclusive, decolonial hermeneutics. Their work complicates heteronormative assumptions within both African culture and Christian theology, demonstrating that African communal ethics, when decolonised, can affirm sexual diversity as part of the divine image rather than its distortion. Tying these threads together is the Ubuntu theological ethic, popularised by Desmond Tutu and critically engaged by de Gruchy (1999:375-376). Ubuntu, encapsulated in

the Zulu maxim “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (“a person is a person through other persons”), offers a powerful theological counterpoint to Western individualism and heteronormative constructions of marriage. Ubuntu theology, rooted in African humanism, insists that identity, dignity and morality are relational rather than self-contained. In this framework, marital and sexual ethics are not governed by hierarchical roles or reproductive expectations, but by interdependence, mutual recognition and spiritual equity. Mbiti (1969) noted that “sex is part of the rhythm of life” and not merely a biological or contractual act, but one situated within a broader cosmology of life, community and sacred continuity. Importantly, Ubuntu resists the theological domestication of love into gendered duty. As expressed in 1 John 3:16, true love is sacrificial and mutual: “Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters”. This ethic reframes Christian marriage away from dominance and towards kenotic love, which is a self-giving rooted in communal well-being rather than coercive obligation. Curle (2015:2-42) rightly observes that such a reorientation compels the Church to move beyond doctrines that legitimise control and instead cultivate spaces where dignity, consent and care are the basis of all relationships.

Together, the voices of Shingange, Mujinga, Oduyoye, Kinoti, Tutu and others converge to call for a theological paradigm shift: one that dismantles the enduring legacies of colonial and patriarchal theologies and constructs an alternative grounded in African values of dignity, reciprocity, interdependence and communal justice. Such transformation, however, also demands pedagogical renewal, which entails revising seminary curricula, liturgical practices, and pastoral training to reflect African epistemologies and liberative hermeneutics (Chitando, 2020; Maluleke, 2023). Without this institutional shift, decolonial theology risks remaining theoretical rather than transformative. This shift is not merely theoretical, but demands concrete changes in how theology is taught, how marriage is preached, how gender roles are constructed, and how communities of faith engage with questions of sexuality, power, and justice. At its core, this critical dialogue affirms that the path toward theological liberation lies not only in critique but in creative reconstruction. A decolonised, African-centred theology of marriage and sexuality must emerge from the ground up; thus, from the lived experiences of African people, from indigenous ethical wisdom and from the liberative possibilities of a gospel that speaks not in the voice of empire, but in the rhythms of community, freedom and relational integrity.

Key strategies towards combating GBV in Southern Africa

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive and deeply rooted issue across Southern Africa, with intimate partner violence (IPV) and non-partner violence disproportionately affecting women. Muluneh et al. (2020:903) provide a comprehensive analysis of the scope of the problem, estimating that approximately 44% of women in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced IPV in their lifetime, with about 35.5% experiencing such violence in the past year. These alarming figures underscore the urgency of addressing the multiple and intersecting risk factors contributing to GBV in the region. At the individual and familial levels, the literature identifies a confluence of contributing factors. These include low levels of education, alcohol and substance abuse, exposure to childhood or familial violence, diminished decision-making power within households, and mental health issues such as depression and youthfulness (Muluneh et al., 2021:4407). These factors do not operate in isolation but are embedded within broader social, cultural and economic structures that reinforce vulnerability. Furthermore, GBV in Southern Africa cannot be disentangled from post-colonial socio-economic inequalities and the lingering effects of racialised labour systems that continue to marginalise women economically and socially (Ratele, 2019:52-63). These structural injustices sustain dependency and diminish women’s negotiating power within intimate relationships, thereby perpetuating cycles of violence. In response, a growing body of scholarship emphasises the importance of gender-transformative interventions, particularly those that engage men and boys. Graaff and Heinecken (2017:622-634) document the effectiveness of programmes such as *One Man Can* in South Africa, which facilitate voluntary

workshops where men critically reflect on their socialisation into dominant masculinities and power relations. These interventions have been associated with attitudinal and, to some extent, behavioural changes, suggesting that challenging hegemonic gender norms is a viable strategy for GBV prevention. Similarly, Morrell and Jewkes (2011:19-30) contend that transforming masculinities requires not only individual reflection but also institutional change, particularly within schools, religious bodies, and the media, which often normalise male dominance. Thus, interventions must engage these cultural sites to ensure that supportive social structures reinforce transformed attitudes. Parallel to this, scholars emphasise the importance of women's social empowerment as a key pillar in reducing GBV. Peer support groups, educational initiatives and public awareness campaigns have been effective in shifting societal norms and equipping women with tools to navigate and resist violent environments (Keith, Hyslop & Richmond, 2023:1443-1464).

Psychological support services also play a crucial role in addressing the trauma-related impacts of violence. Beyene et al. (2019) further advocate for school-based interventions, particularly for adolescents, noting that early education around rights, healthy relationships and gender equality can serve as a preventive mechanism. The evidence surrounding economic empowerment as a standalone strategy is more nuanced. While microfinance programmes have at times been heralded as pathways to reduce women's economic dependency and thus their exposure to violence, findings suggest that such interventions yield limited impact when unaccompanied by social norm transformation efforts. Keith, Hyslop and Richmond (2023:1443-1464) argue that economic interventions are most effective when coupled with community-based education and dialogue initiatives. Community-level strategies have been extensively explored in the literature. Tools such as mass media campaigns, community dialogues and participatory theatre have been instrumental in exposing and challenging patriarchal norms, male dominance and victim-blaming attitudes. Naicker (2025) notes that such social and cultural norms continue to perpetuate cycles of violence, indicating that their disruption is a necessary condition for long-term change. Religious institutions, particularly the Church, also play a significant role in preventing and responding to GBV. Given their moral authority, community reach and influence over social values, churches can either reinforce harmful gender norms or actively work to transform them.

In recent years, there has been a shift toward greater church engagement in GBV advocacy, pastoral counselling for survivors and norm-changing dialogue within congregations. Naicker (2025) identifies the dual role of religion as both a risk and protective factor, noting that interpretations of sacred texts often shape community attitudes towards marriage, submission, forgiveness and female autonomy. Faith leaders, when equipped with gender-sensitive theological training, can thus become powerful allies in combating GBV, challenging harmful doctrines, promoting survivor support and legitimising gender equality as a moral imperative. Moreover, faith-based organisations have increasingly partnered with civil society and government structures to deliver psychosocial services, shelter, and legal support to survivors. Some denominations have begun to integrate GBV awareness into premarital counselling, men's ministries and church-based youth programmes. This approach aligns with broader gender-transformative frameworks, but it also adds a moral and spiritual dimension that resonates deeply within local communities.

Incorporating indigenous frameworks such as Ubuntu has also gained traction as a culturally resonant means of combating GBV. Masutha et al. (2025) explore the application of Ubuntu principles, emphasising community interdependence and mutual responsibility in shaping collective responses to violence. Their findings suggest that Ubuntu-based approaches can foster intersectoral collaboration among community structures, law enforcement, healthcare, religious institutions and social services. In this sense, Ubuntu becomes both an ethical and practical framework for GBV prevention, restoring communal accountability and emphasising that harm to one member is harm to the collective (Gathogo, 2008:46-58). Such an approach resonates deeply within African cosmologies, which value harmony, solidarity, and restorative

rather than retributive justice. Churches, especially in rural areas, can serve as vital access points for such interventions, particularly where state resources are limited. Educational institutions, as both formative and regulatory spaces, are identified as strategic sites for intervention. Beyene et al. (2019:59) recommend institutional strategies that include clear policies on GBV, reporting and support mechanisms, staff and student education and the development of safer physical and emotional environments on campuses.

At the policy and legal level, criminalising acts such as domestic and sexual violence is essential but insufficient. Mtotywa et al. (2023:315-330) and Bowman and Schneider (1998:249-271) caution that while legal frameworks exist, enforcement remains inconsistent. Underreporting is widespread, driven by stigma, a lack of trust in authorities and the slow pace of judicial processes. Without effective implementation, legal reforms risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Moreover, there is consensus on the need for rigorous monitoring and evaluation. Keith, Hyslop, and Richmond (2023:1443-1464) call for the adoption of robust research methodologies, such as control group designs and context-sensitive assessments, to evaluate the impact of interventions. They note that what proves effective in one locality may not be transferable without adaptation, emphasising the need for context-specific programming. Despite the promising strategies outlined, several critical challenges persist. Chief among these are entrenched cultural norms and stigma, which serve to legitimise male authority, naturalise gender inequality and stigmatise survivors (Naicker, 2025). These dynamics hinder the disclosure of abuse and reduce engagement with available interventions.

The Church's potential for advocacy and awareness-raising remains underutilised in some contexts, especially where patriarchal interpretations of Scripture remain unchallenged. Nonetheless, when religious spaces are reimagined as sites of justice and healing, they hold tremendous capacity to reshape gender relations. Sustainability also emerges as a key concern. As Mkwananzi and Nathane-Taulela (2024) observe, many GBV programmes are project-based, with limited timeframes and funding, which undermines their long-term impact. Grassroots and community-led initiatives, although vital, often struggle to maintain momentum once donor funding ceases. Lastly, economic constraints continue to be a pervasive driver of vulnerability. Poverty, unemployment and lack of financial autonomy constrain women's ability to exit abusive relationships or access support services. As Muluneh et al. (2021:4407) suggest, effective GBV interventions must address these structural conditions, offering both immediate relief and long-term pathways to independence.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex and often oppressive entanglement of Christian theological doctrines with colonial and patriarchal power structures, particularly in their regulation of sex, marriage and gender roles within African contexts. By critically tracing how Western Christian frameworks conflated sex with heterosexual marriage and imposed this model onto diverse African societies, the paper challenges the assumption that such configurations are universal or divinely ordained. Instead, it demonstrates that they are historically contingent constructs, which are deeply rooted in Eurocentric, androcentric and colonial ideologies. Through a juxtaposition with indigenous African marital systems, which emphasise communal responsibility, relational dignity and negotiated reciprocity, the paper reveals alternative ethical visions that resist the reduction of marriage to sexual access or procreative duty. It further exposes how theological discourses that frame sex as a marital debt obscure the necessity of consent and contribute to the perpetuation of gender-based violence, particularly within Christianised African communities. Importantly, this paper does not call for a wholesale abandonment of Christian theology, but rather for its decolonisation and transformation through African ethical perspectives and feminist critique. The future of African theology must prioritise relational justice, bodily autonomy and mutual dignity, moving away from hierarchical, legalistic paradigms toward ones grounded in care, consent and liberation. To this end, the conclusion affirms that the work of reimagining marriage and

sexuality in African theological thought must be both an intellectual and communal undertaking. It requires sustained engagement with African feminist theologians, deeper ecumenical and intercultural dialogue and the reclaiming of indigenous knowledges as sources of ethical and spiritual authority. Only through such reorientation can theology become a force for healing, justice and freedom, especially for those whose voices and bodies have long been marginalised within its doctrines.

Further and future research should seek to explore lived experiences of congregants across diverse denominational traditions to validate how much teachings shape sexual norms. In addition, comparative studies with other regions could clarify whether Southern Africa's patterns reflect broader global theological trends. The study has its own limitations. The study relied heavily on historical-textual sources, limiting insights into contemporary community practices. In addition, the study appears to have been informed primarily by a theological focus which tended to underrepresent socioeconomic and legal factors that intersect with sexual politics and gender-based violence.

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