

Neo-Pentecostalism and gender-based violence before and during COVID-19 in South Africa



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Pentecostal Christians in Africa preach a pragmatic gospel that attempts to address social, practical and contextual concerns. Similar patterns may be seen in the emergence of neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa and other parts of the continent. Neo-Pentecostalism is commonly known for the use of God-talk that promises people solutions to their socio-economic issues such as unemployment and poverty if they obey the prescripts of the so-called 'prophets' or 'man of God'. Nonetheless, the global devastation caused by the COVID-19 left much to be desired. In South Africa, it highlighted the high extent of gender-based violence (GBV) in addition to other societal issues. Although GBV has always been a problem in South Africa, its cases increased drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic to the point where GBV was also declared a pandemic. This has compelled various social structures to start exploring solutions to stop this conundrum. The overarching question posed in this article was how neo-Pentecostal rhetoric about God contributes to GBV cases in South Africa before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, given that God-talk has been utilised to influence people's perceptions of and reactions to other societal concerns. As a result, this article aimed to investigate this subject while also outlining some potential solutions that African Pentecostals can consider as possible contributions to the struggle against GBV in contemporary South Africa. The study used a literature analysis to achieve this goal and it followed an interdisciplinary approach in the collection of the relevant data. These disciplines included theology, social sciences gender and sexuality studies. Therefore, the literature analysis focused on how neo-Pentecostalism intersect with gender and social issues that are actors in the rise of GBV in South Africa. Furthermore, the concept of God-talk was adopted as a theoretical framework guiding the discussion in this article, whilst the African ethic of *Ubuntu* [humanness] was proposed as an antidote that can be used in transforming God-talk and contributors of GBV in church and society. *Ubuntu* brings to consciousness that pastors and every member of society should treat each other as created in the image of God and with respect and humanness as we all exist because of and for others.

Contributions: This article contributes to the body of knowledge aimed at finding solutions to GBV in South Africa. Finding solutions is critical as GBV continue to be a challenge in South Africa and elsewhere.

Keywords: neo-Pentecostalism; God-talk; Gender-based violence (GBV); COVID-19; pandemic; *Ubuntu*.

Introduction

African Pentecostal Christianity preaches a pragmatic gospel that tries to address local, practical and social concerns (Anderson 1999:222; 2004:245; Kroebergen 2017:3). Neo-Pentecostalism emergence in South Africa and other parts of the continent is seen to be congruent with this tendency (Kgatle 2022b:3). While neo-Pentecostalism promises people remedies to their socio-economic problems such as unemployment and poverty by using God-talk, the conditions to the fulfilment of these promises is contingent upon the adherents' observance of the directives of the so-called 'prophets' or 'men of God' (Omenyo 2011:42). The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic caused damage on several worldwide locations and left much to be desired (Mashau 2022:1). It revealed numerous societal issues that caused harm to society both before and after the pandemic era. The pandemic and associated lockdown measures in South Africa revealed the extreme depth of gender-based violence (GBV). A substantial spike in GBV and femicide (GBVF) was linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and South Africa's lockdown restrictions (Dlamini 2021:588; Nduna & Tshona 2020:8).

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As God-talk within neo-Pentecostalism has been used to shape and reshape people's views in response to various societal issues, the immanent question asked in this article is as follows: How did neo-Pentecostalism contribute to GBV cases before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa? As a result, this study aims to investigate this subject while also outlining some solutions that African Pentecostals can consider as a potential contribution to the struggle against GBV in contemporary South Africa. This article employs an interdisciplinary approach to investigate this issue from the perspectives of theology, social sciences, gender and sexuality studies. The concept of God-talk was adopted as a theoretical framework guiding the discussion in this article. This task was completed by using the literature analysis and researching the literature on how neo-Pentecostalism intersect with gender and social issues that are actors in the rise of GBV in South Africa. Then, a call was made to African neo-Pentecostal pastors to embrace the African ethic of *Ubuntu* (loosely translated as humanness) as an antidote that might be used to curb this erroneous use of God-talk and the contributors to GBV in the church and society. This entails that these pastors should regard their congregants as fellow human beings coexisting with them.

Aims and objectives of this study

This article reflects on the contribution of neo-Pentecostalism to the rise of GBV before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. It examines how God-talk and the conduct of neo-Pentecostal pastors continued to impact the lives of society in relation to GBV during this period. This research aims at transforming the current views of Pentecostal Christianity on GBV, marriage, heteronormativity and the conduct of pastors. Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate how the ethic of *Ubuntu* can contribute toward eradicating the scourge of GBV in South Africa and elsewhere.

Pentecostal rhetoric within God-talk

It has already been indicated in the introduction that God-talk serves as a theoretical framework for this article. Shingange (2023) posited that God-talk:

[I]s also common locally and abroad in religious and Christian spaces where Christian leaders often use religious cues in their language, sermons, announcements, and altar calls to force and reinforce certain religious beliefs. (p. 1)

Therefore, God-talk is a Pentecostal rhetoric of threats and intimidation used by pastors in the pulpit and can be best referred to as the intersectionality of '[T]he rhetoric of "thus says the Lord"' (Shingange 2020:125), of 'psychological manipulation' (Kgatle 2017:6), of 'touch not my anointed' and psychological manipulation (Zimunya & Gwara 2019:124); what Foucault (1982:783) refers to as 'pastoral power' which cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it.

In this regard, neo-Pentecostal pastors use God-talk to exert this pastoral power and to control their followers' responses to their demands. Thus, these pastors use God's cues to manipulate, intimidate and convince unsuspecting congregants to be subjected to GBV.

Gender-based violence

Without reinventing the wheel, Kgatle and Frahm-Arp (2022:2) stated that 'the figures on GBV in South Africa are terrible, over 53293 sexual offences were reported to police between 2019 and 2020'. Lamentably, 'the latest police figures show that 10818 rape cases were reported in the first quarter of 2022. According to News 24 (2022) 'the country has the highest rape incidence in the world' and this has shed some light on the state of GBV in the country. GBV is best defined by the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (UN General Assembly 1993).

Although the above-mentioned declaration primarily addresses violence against women, it should be emphasised that men and boys are also occasionally victims of GBV (Christian et al. 2011; Mbandlwa 2020:6754; Le Roux & Bowers-Du Toit 2017:3:24). This holds true for both South African society and the church, where it has been shown that GBV affects all genders and the entire society. According to research, 'Gender-based violence (GBV) does not discriminate anyone because of race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender' (South African Government 2023). Anyone can be a victim or perpetrator of GBV (South African Government 2023). This claim is supported by a variety of media outlets, including social media, which is continuously bombarded with GBV news.

Sadly, some of these stories come from neo-Pentecostal organisations in South Africa, where pastors and other church officials are essentially the perpetrators. Marupeng (2018) asserts that, at Soshanguve, north of Pretoria, a 30-year-old preacher was accused of raping adolescents and young men after persuading them that they were the 'selected ones' in his church. These young men were enrolled in his church's ministry school to become pastors after they graduated. In another instance, Meyer (2022) posited that a pastor in Ekurhuleni, East Rand region of Gauteng 'raped eight and nine-year-old girls, and further sexually assaulted and sexually groomed them when they would go to his house for choir practice and bible study'. These never-ending accounts demonstrate that GBV is a social and religious issue that affects all segments of society, regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Hence, according to Nduna and Tshona (2020:1-2), GBV should be viewed as a multidimensional issue that affects both men and women, including gay and transgender

individuals. This is reality, because people in same-sex relationships are not exempt from all experiences of social injustices and abuse perpetrated by offenders in society. It is important to note the remarks made by Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, who was then the Minister in the Presidency for Women, Youth, and People with Disabilities, at the Nasrec Showgrounds, Johannesburg Exhibition Centre on the commencement of the 16 Days of Activism on No Violence Against Women and Children. Nkoana-Mashabane asserted that:

At the centre of our response to GBVF, is to tackle the drivers of violence in our communities. This includes challenging the socio-economic status of women and other vulnerable groups including the youth, persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ persons. (South African News Agency (2022).

Against the backdrop of the citation above, Gender Based Violence and Femicide (GBVF) are also common in religious spaces and have become a serious challenge; hence, the need to address the contribution of religious bodies to this vile is urgent. Therefore, the interlink of religious movements and neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa with GBV needs to be strongly condemned. This interlink is traceable in the World Health Organization (WHO 2009) definition of GBV as any:

[V]iolence against a person based on their sex or gender, and it includes acts that inflict emotional, physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, or threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty.

In fact, adopting this wide and thorough definition of GBV can serve as a springboard for reducing this pandemic.

Considering this, Mashau (2022:2) stated that 'even while the larger context remains one of the women as victims of GBV, we should start to argue for inclusive definitions that cater to violence against all genders'. By following this path, justice can be served to all victims, regardless of sexuality or gender identity, and this can also help to reveal GBV's covert manifestations and its various components. Because the restricted definition of GBV frequently obscures these aspects to an extent that they often receive less attention in society. In fact, Nduna and Tshona (2020:2) asserted that this sin is not always committed by men alone; on occasion, women also commit this vice. This contradicts the idea that GBV is exclusively perpetrated by men. Although men are not the sole perpetrators of GBV, research indicates that they are frequently the most offenders of GBV, which typically affects women and children the most (Baloyi 2021:105; Le Roux & Bowers-Du Toit 2017:23; Vengeyi 2013).

As a result, it is important to adopt a comprehensive understanding of GBV, as it offers an inclusive viewpoint that can help ensure that efforts to combat this vice are not only partially addressing the issue. Once more, the comprehensive definition is workable, because it places the focus on the individual affected by GBV rather than the gender of that person. Then, GBV should be handled as a whole, defined as 'any violence committed against an individual's will that stems from power imbalances that are based on gender roles'

(Mapulanga-Hulston & Chikoya 2020:101). This violence has led various social institutions to begin exploring solutions to this pandemic (Sande 2019:2). Against this backdrop, motivated by the need to implement the National Strategic Plan (NSP) on GBVF, for instance, various governmental bodies, religious and faith-based organisations, the commercial sector, trade unions and members of civil society have begun working together in partnerships (Yesufu 2022:97). Neo-Pentecostalism unquestionably has been lagging in contributing to ways that can reduce the escalating of this vice. However, there are some positive contributions made by neo-Pentecostalism that are worth noting.

The positive aspects of neo-Pentecostalism

Religion is a factor that affects people's behaviour, attitudes towards different social concerns and personal values (Kroesbergen 2017:vii; Williams 1994). Likewise, Le Roux and Bowers-Du Toit (2017:23) opined that 'religion socialises an individual, creating a framework for what is considered moral values and behaviours within society, which in turn regulates social connections'. Hence, it is impossible to overstate the importance of religion, particularly in the context of Africa. According to Mbiti (1990:1), 'Africans are notoriously religious in that religion permeates all facets of life to the point where it is impossible or extremely difficult to isolate it'. Therefore, it is important to recognise the broader impact of Christianity in Africa to get to the depth of GBV (Mapulanga-Hulston & Chikoya 2020:101).

South Africa is reported to be 'one of the most religious countries in the world, with 85% of people reporting religious affiliation, of which almost 80% were Christian' (Landman & Mudimeli 2022:2). In addition, neo-Pentecostalism is expanding at the highest rate and is the most prominent and significant religious movement working to alter social forces that unite the political, cultural and economic realms (Kaunda 2020:221). Therefore, neo-Pentecostal movements appear to be most influential in society, as they give both Christians and non-Christians alike hope for survival.

However, as this occurs, neo-Pentecostalism profoundly alters the beliefs, practises, values and morality of its adherents (Kaunda 2020:221). Neo-Pentecostal pastors sometimes use God-talk to encourage both positive and harmful behaviours in people's lives. Similarly, the rise of GBV cases during the COVID-19 pandemic has proved this statement to be accurate. Positively, some of the beliefs held by the general African Pentecostal Christians have been incorporated into neo-Pentecostalism. These lessons have helped the fight against GBV in one way or another. As an illustration, Lindhardt (2015:254) noted that men who attend Pentecostal churches are taught to love their wives and are discouraged from indulging in behaviours like alcohol abuse, which frequently causes GBV. Attanasi (2013) found that in each of the two South African congregations that she examined, more than three-quarters of the members were women and that these women were more likely to:

frequently associated (non-Christian) South African masculinity with drug and alcohol abuse, marital infidelity, unsafe sex, domestic abuse, and authoritarian decision-making. The women added that most men reject Pentecostalism because of its behavioural norms that restrict alcohol use and sex outside of marriage. (p. 108)

The citation above paints a picture of how Pentecostal teachings aid in creating wholesome family bonds. Given this context, Masiko and Xinwa's claim (2017) that substance addiction has detrimental effects on users, their families and society is correct. However, Phorano et al. (2005:198) issued a warning that alcohol itself may not be the primary cause of GBV; rather, it may be a substantial contributing component that works in conjunction with other important elements such as social and economic challenges. On the other hand, Burchardt (2018:119) made claims that Pentecostals frequently use the term *transformed man* to refer to a 'saved man'. The use of this term is also common in what has come to be known as The Mighty Men Conference (MMC) which started in the early 2000s and came to a head in 2010 when it dispersed its previous large-scale rallies throughout several South African cities. It was started as a movement by Angus Buchan, a South African farmer of Scottish heritage who later became a Christian missionary at Greytown in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands (Owino 2012:71). In the same vein, Reverend Siphwe Chris Mathebula, a South African and a Senior Pastor at Hope Restoration Ministries who co-host the annual Men of Hope Conference is among Pentecostal pastors who are known for hosting annual men's gatherings (SA Notify 2023). Accordingly, the phrase *changed men*, who are seen to be those who have embraced Jesus Christ as their saviour and have experienced the new birth, are part of these gatherings. Hence, the born-again experience as promoted by Pentecostalism plays a part in these movements' appeal to the public. Accordingly, Frahm-Arp (2010) argued:

[T]hat women are attracted to new Pentecostal churches because they offer clear gender roles, networks of support and they encourage husbands to be more responsible and to assist with housework and childcare. (p. 15)

These teachings are offered in these men's conferences and special church services often organised for men. Yet, it is the predominance of harmful behaviours within neo-Pentecostalism that raises alarm because they help to exacerbate GBV. These acts are frequently carried out in the name of God, and the victims are coerced and persuaded by utilising religious rhetoric.

God-talk and gender-based violence in South Africa

Neo-Pentecostal pastors find it simple to manipulate their flocks by using religious rhetoric. Kobo discovered that neo-Pentecostal leaders who are also commonly referred to as 'Men of God,' are notorious for controlling the crowd, and that both their words and behaviour cannot be questioned (Kgatlé & Frahm-Arp 2022:8). A well-known neo-Pentecostal

pastor, by the name of Timothy Omotoso made use of God-talk to threaten a woman named Zondi. This woman was threatened because she refused to satiate Omotoso's sexual urges (Kgatlé & Frahm-Arp 2022:5). This serves as one illustration among several that exemplified the use of God-talk for wrong reasons. Omotoso's threats can be linked to the misuse of God-talk, because Zondi was warned that she would go insane and become a defenceless woman who would wander the streets if she did not comply with the pastor's demands. The foundation of Zondi's argument is the assertion that Omotoso constantly threatened to punish her and render her insane as a means of psychologically controlling her (Kgatlé & Frahm-Arp 2022:5). In other words, God was going to punish her if she refused to comply with his requests. Furthermore, such warning can be regarded by Africans as a lack of *Ubuntu* from the pastor's side. This story exemplifies the extent to which neo-Pentecostal pastors utilise God-talk to support GBV and psychologically control their victims.

Another instance of the usage of God-talk for wrong reasons comes from Angus Buchan who developed hetero-normative guidelines for marriage but claimed that these guidelines were God's initiative rather than his (Nadar 2009:557). This assertion implies that one can reason with Angus Buchan but not with God and it represents how power is misused using religious language (Nadar 2009:557). Like Buchan, some neo-Pentecostal pastors utilise God-talk in knowing that their flock will not dare to question God.

According to Muganiwa (2017:71), no one is permitted to disagree with the man of God in many contemporary African Pentecostal congregations. One is left to ask who the source of power is behind the use of 'God-talk' in these movements. Banda (2021a:4) argues that 'prophets exhibit their power and not the power of God when they utilise their prophetic stature and authority to demand sex from women and money from worshippers'. Considering these practices, it might be said that God-talk frequently reveals the desires of the prophets rather than necessarily God's will. Most neo-Pentecostal teachings that support GBV may also be traced back to this kind of God-talk narrative.

Contributors to gender-based violence

The church (neo-Pentecostal movements) contributes to GBV by distorting theology to fit cultural norms and values (Brokaw 2020:2). The chairperson of the South African chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Nontando Hadebe, asserted that: 'Religion plays a role in the continuation of GBV through traditional teachings about women in the Bible, leaving them feeling like they are subordinate to men' (Khumalo 2020). Hadebe further claimed that some of these religious narratives that have been imposed on women are the root cause of them staying in abusive relationships, as they believe they are obeying God by doing so (Kumalo 2020). Therefore, there is an

interlink between cultural and religious narratives regarding women's subordination and GBV.

Le Roux and Bowers-Du Toit (2017:32) made the claim that religious teachings can encourage attitudes that support GBV's justification and prevent survivors from seeking help to flee from abusive relationships. Therefore, neo-Pentecostal Christian beliefs about patriarchy and gender roles can have an impact on family dynamics and finally result in violence (Muyambo 2018). This sometimes occurs because of Pentecostal churches' literal interpretations of the Bible and their fundamentalist teachings, which frequently encourage women to submit to the point that they fail to objectively see instances of gender-based violence around them (Mapulanga-Hulston & Chikoya 2020:106). Nadar (2009:556) concluded that the idea that women should submit to their husbands causes violence when women choose to act in a way that is against the grain. According to Nadar, this is made worse by the belief that males are inherently heads of families, which encourages violence to go unchecked and keeps women in abusive situations (Nadar 2009:556). Thus, it is important to examine neo-Pentecostal spirituality and its views on women's subordination which causes them to unconsciously ritualise their bodies and sexualities (Kaunda 2020:226).

God-talk regarding marriage

African Pentecostal Christian's high value of marriage is primarily shaped by traditional and patriarchal discourses that subtly support GBV (Sande 2019:1). These discourses are ingrained in traditional and patriarchal views that see married women as properties of their husbands. This means that women must fulfil their husbands' wishes, meet their sexual requirements, and take care of their houses (Maisiri 2015:7). Thus, the needs of husbands come first while women must ignore their own. According to churches' teachings, contravening this standard is portrayed as the same as disobeying the husband as well as God who established marriage. Therefore, women struggle to leave their violent relationships, because they were taught that doing so is to sin against God.

According to Le Roux and Bowers-Du Toit (2017:32), the church's doctrine on marriage and divorce emphasises the sanctity of marriage and families as the most crucial components of life. Consequently, women who attend church could give their lives to save their marriages (Nason-Clark 2000). According to Attanasi (2013:112), despite trying conditions, most women in South Africa preserved the ideal of wifely submission, avoiding divorce, and trusting in prayer.

When women in Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCC) and the Zionist Christian Church in the South African context spoke about abuse they had endured at the hands of husbands, their fathers, other men and some women frequently advised them to pray for the evil spirit to depart from their husbands (Kgatle & Frahm-Arp 2022:3). Because of this, women are taught to put their faith in God to

handle their abusive situations. Again, prayer is often overemphasised as the only way out of this situation. Another contributing aspect that needs serious consideration is the heteronormative constructions of marriage.

The African neo-Pentecostal heteronormative God-talk

African Pentecostalism's heteronormative discourses exacerbate GBV and other violations of people's rights based on their sexual orientation and gender. Several well-known Pentecostal preachers and pastors in South Africa have made comments that encourage homophobia and GBV against people who identify with non-normative sexualities and gender identities. For instance, Angus Buchan declared that he will not avoid controversy in his interview with Carte Blanche podcast and television channel. Buchan continued to say that homosexuality is a transgression against God's word, and he said so because God had commanded him to (Nadar 2009:556). Another instance is the homophobic statement made by Bishop Heward-Mills during his sermon at Grace Bible Church (GBC) in Soweto. Heward-Mills claimed that homosexuality was unnatural, because two male elephants or dogs don't have intimate ties with each other (Sewapa 2020:282). In the same vein, Bishop Musa Sono, the founder of GBC, said in a statement in response to criticism from various societal structures and media outlets that 'marriage is an institution designed by God in which one man and one woman join in an exclusive union for life' (Sewapa 2020:295).

According to Sono, under God's planned order, same-sex marriages were not permitted. These remarks left room for discrimination and marginalisation of same-sex marriages and behaviours. His words could really encourage violence against people who identify with same-sex sexualities just because they were uttered by a 'man of God'. On the other hand, Sono's emphasis on marriage as meant for life can encourage married partners to stay in their marriages even when there is abuse involved. In the same vein, neo-Pentecostalism contributes in more ways than just sermons and God-talk; it also shows up in how neo-Pentecostal pastors behave.

The appalling conduct of neo-Pentecostal pastors in the context of God-talk

Both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, neo-Pentecostal pastors continued to perpetrate GBV in a variety of ways. According to Banda (2021b:2), among the neo-Pentecostal prophets and their contentious activities in South Africa are deviant behaviours that involve grave crimes such as rape and sexual abuse of young girls and women. These pastors have also abused women by touching them or even stepping on them while pretending to be driving out demons (Banda 2020:3). Maluleke (2015:35) also noted that women have a great deal of trust in these men of God – to the extent that they feel comfortable stripping in their presence and letting them touch them indecently while pretending to be praying for them.

Moreover, Kgatle (2023:148) noted with alarm that some spiritual fathers in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, particularly in the setting of South Africa, occasionally engage in GBV and other forms of abuse such as rape and sexual harassment against women. He regretted that 'these spiritual fathers have a tendency to touch women without regard for their femininity or privacy' (Kgatle 2023:148). Furthermore, Kaunda (2020:217) also noted that, in some of these activities, pastors suck single women's breasts while pretending to be casting out demons, and others engage in sexual activities with married women and their daughters while claiming to be guided by the Holy Spirit to do so.

These actions are harsh and brutal in addition to objectifying the victims and their bodies. Furthermore, the actions of these pastors constitute a lack of *Ubuntu*. In these communities, pastors who carry out these heinous crimes frequently go unchallenged because of the respect they enjoy and the 'touch not my servants' rhetoric. Sadly, their behaviour gives Christianity a bad reputation. This was the same with Omotoso and his two accused female accomplices who were charged with 97 cases of rape, human trafficking and racketeering with 47 witnesses testifying against them. Their case is a classic illustration of the horrifying acts and crimes committed by neo-Pentecostal pastors in South Africa (Banda 2021b:4; Kgatle & Frahm-Arp 2022). Pastoral actions of this nature can function as a catalyst for men who are tempted to engage in similar behaviours. On the other side, some churchgoers may emulate these pastors in the mistaken belief that God endorses hegemonic masculinities and GBV.

Neo-Pentecostal pastors are seen as holy figures who are distinct from other people, which serves as another motivation for these actions. These pastors see themselves as mystical beings, sacred vessels of God, and visible linkages between the spiritual realm and the natural world (Kaunda 2018). Moreover, neo-Pentecostal pastors instil this idea in their followers by demanding to be called 'Spiritual father,' 'Daddy,' 'Papa,' 'Man of God,' 'Woman of God,' et cetera (Kgatle 2019:3; 2023:149). Sadly, these titles are wrongfully utilised to cover up abuses that occur in these churches and prevent these pastors' behaviour from being called into question. Furthermore, these actions encourage GBV in the name of God and were more responsible for the rise in GBV cases in South Africa during the COVID-19 lockdown.

God-talk, gender-based violence and the COVID-19 pandemic

Violence against women, children and other vulnerable groups such as the LGBTIQ+ has been widespread in South Africa for some time. Baloyi (2021:103) bemoaned the strange rise in cases of GBV during the COVID-19 outbreak. However, this does not suggest that GBV was not a problem prior and after COVID-19. Considering this, Dlamini (2021:585) asserted that 'pre-existing poisonous societal norms and gender inequalities were made worse by the social and economic stress brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic'. This shows that GBV has been a problem for the

South African society for a long time, but that COVID-19's lockdown restrictions, which prohibited mobility and caused revenue losses as well as other concerns about the pandemic, led to the vice's escalation. Even during the pandemic, neo-Pentecostal pastor's behaviour and doctrines continued to have an impact on society. Women, children and other vulnerable groups were trapped in their houses with their abusers when this occurred (Leburu-Masigo & Kgadima 2020:16619; Mashau 2022:3). Most of these women were unable to leave their relationships, because doing so, would have been seen as acting against God's plan for marriage.

The lockdown regulations made sure that public areas such as schools, churches, companies and recreation centres were closed (Ndhuna & Tshona 2021:4). Churches cancelled their gatherings to comply with lockdown rules such as social distancing and other scientific guidance meant to slow the spread of the virus (Mhandu & Ojong 2021:10). As a result, Christians were also forced to switch to innovative virtual platforms of worship (Mhandu & Ojong 2021:10). Shockingly, it was claimed that South Africa reported 87 000 incidences of gender-based assault within the first seven days of the lockdown (Baloyi 2021:107; Joska et al 2020; Yesufu 2022:96).

Nonetheless, one would wonder how neo-Pentecostalism continued to have an impact on the rising number of GBV cases if churches were also shut down due to lockdown regulations. According to Pillay (2020:266), 'Christian churches were been forced to "do" church differently because of the shutdown of churches during the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown.' In other words, church services were still held despite the limits imposed by the lockdown. Although some churches lost the loyalty of their members, most of the followers did not leave their faith; thus, forcing their churches to be creative and find new ways to continue having an impact on their lives (Mhandu & Ojong 2021; White 2022:152).

The use of virtual platforms

All gatherings, including church meetings and services, were subject to the applicable restrictions that were set by the various lockdown levels. For instance, during stages four and five of the lockdown, religious gatherings were prohibited, and churches that had access to the internet moved their services online (Mpofu 2020:2). When churches were closed, religious organisations continued to interact with and supported their people through various virtual platforms. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit harder and people were being quarantined in places such as hospitals, most pastors used online platforms and social media including Facebook, Twitter, Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Skype to offer social support to families and patients (Vorvornator & Mdiniso 2021; Pillay 2020). Yet, according to Mothoagae and Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2021:8), most nurses who tested positive for the disease turned to their spirituality and God for help.

Additionally, 'despite the lockdown and quarantine regulations that prevented them from attending church, they continued to see spirituality as the primary source of their

strength. Nurses demonstrated their reliance on God by praying on their own, receiving prayers from their pastors or praying with others (Mothoagae & Mavhandu-Mudzusi 2021:8). But it was not exclusively nurses who relied on their Christian faith during the pandemic; people in society also kept their ties to pastors and practises of Christianity. According to Mhandu and Ojong (2021:2), people commonly resort to Pentecostalism as a source of strength during emergencies such as the COVID-19 outbreak. This reliance of Christian faith maintained neo-Pentecostalism's impact even on GBV in society.

It should be remembered that religious gatherings were permitted with a specific restriction on the number of persons who could congregate at some lockdown levels. Nyika et al. (2022) stated the following:

A lockdown alert system was used to manage the easing of lockdown regulations in South Africa from total lockdown - Level 5 (from 26 March 2020) to Level 1 (from 21 September 2020). Level 3 meant there were still many restrictions included at workplaces and socially, to address the high risk of transmission. (p. 111)

As a result, places of worship were occasionally allowed to operate during specific hours if they complied with established rules such as keeping services to a maximum of 50 people, sanitising the area before and after services, and upholding standards of social distancing (Mpofu 2020:2). Therefore, this is how neo-Pentecostal movements were able to continue having an impact on their followers' lives. They were aided by the lockdown levels that permitted churches to meet with numbers not surpassing 50. Admittedly, other church leaders disregarded the restrictions on how many people could congregate as some pastors even disobeyed the harsh lockdown limitations when no sort of assembly was permitted.

Defiance on lockdown restrictions

In fact, some pastors and congregations disobeyed the limits of the lockdown and held meetings, nevertheless. Marumo (2021) reported that:

As the South African Police Service (SAPS) and other law enforcement agencies continued to enforce and monitor adherence to the lockdown regulations, the members responded to reports of an illegal gathering at a church in Sebokeng Zone 7. On arrival, (they) ordered the group of about 250 congregants to disperse," Peters said. The worshippers however defied police orders to disperse and the situation turned violent when the congregants started throwing chairs at the police officers. (n.p.)

Considering this, Kgatle (2022a:2) claimed that this is common among Pentecostals that, when facing common issues in society, they develop some type of exceptionalism and assuring their members that nothing will happen to them. Mhandu and Ojong (2021:16) asserted that most Pentecostal lay leaders and pastors who took part in their study disagreed with the ban on gatherings as a containment strategy for the spread of COVID-19. One Pentecostal pastor

circulated communications to his congregation members urging them to physically attend their cell groups meetings, demonstrating his vehement opposition to the closing of churches in the same sentence (Mhandu & Ojong 2021:16). Some pastors also persisted to visit their congregants despite the lockdown limitations, saying that they too were essential workers (Mhandu & Ojong 2021:16-17).

This disobedience was influenced by neo-Pentecostal pastors who saw COVID-19 as a severe danger to their financial stability (Nyika et al 2022:117). Because of this, Mpofu (2020:4) referred to these pastors as corrupt and dishonest religious figures who were driven by avarice to open places of worship due to their dwindling financial resources. Therefore, by virtue of these pastors having access to their members, it can be concluded that neo-Pentecostalism had an influence to the rise of GBV cases during COVID-19. This happened, because they still maintained contact and had access to their followers, thus extending their abusive acts even during the lockdowns. The pandemic, according to these pastors, was a satanic assault on their lives and finances (Kgatle 2022a:3; White 2022). Among others:

Archbishop Nicolas Duncan-Williams of Action Chapel International, one of the foremost Neo-Pentecostal figures in Africa, branded the spread of the virus 'a diabolical attack from Satan' (p. 149).

As a result, neo-Pentecostal pastors kept having meetings with their followers to try to fend off the devil's attacks. Hence, even during the lockdowns, GBV in society continued to be influenced by these pastors' way of life and teachings.

Recommendations

African Pentecostalism can positively use God-talk and its influence in society to combat GBV by eradicating gender inequality, gender stereotypes, heteronormativity and disregard of *Ubuntu* exemplified by neo-Pentecostal pastors and some of their followers as observed by Mapulanga-Hulston and Chikoya (2020:113). This act can bring about a new narrative that advocates for gender equality and *Ubuntu* within the entire African Pentecostal Christian movement. Therefore, the adage 'I am because you are', rooted in the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, can influence gender relation in these spaces (Idoniboye-Obu & Whetho 2008). This suggests that neo-Pentecostal pastors should treat women, children and other vulnerable groups the way they want to be treated. Succinctly put, addressing GBV in society and neo-Pentecostalism requires a deep grasp of *Ubuntu* displayed in positive use of God-talk, which the late former archbishop Desmond Tutu possessed.

Tutu (2000) opined:

[a] person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 3)

Likewise, heeding Tutu's advice can help foster respect and consideration in society, regardless of gender, social standing or sexual orientation. African Pentecostal Churches can aid in the fight against GBV by using *Ubuntu* as a motivation. This suggests that neither men nor women should perceive the other as a threat. On the contrary, they should gladly accept and assist each other and embrace their diversities. Additionally, this will mean opposing and looking for ways to eradicate toxic masculinities that are found in neo-Pentecostal doctrine and practice. This is accurate, according to Pondani (2019), who said that 'under the name of religion or in honour of the "man of God," certain neo-Pentecostal African church leaders have embraced similar patterns of toxic masculinity.'

Once more, Pondani (2019) asserted that:

[T]he effect is a culture of silence among people who have been mistreated, molested, or otherwise deceived because they dread the 'curses' that will follow by speaking against the so-called 'prophet' (p. 107).

Yes, this 'untouchable man of God' mentality as well as their "thus says the Lord" threats that cause victims to be silenced should be contested. Reviewing the Pentecostal doctrines on marriage is also necessary. Notwithstanding the claim that God created marriage, it is now necessary to reject some of the presumptions that encourage GBV in marriage and relationships.

There is also a need to re-evaluate the idea that women should be subservient in marriage and refrain from divorcing their partners even when there are signs of violence. The abused spouse should be free to file for divorce without worrying about being branded as an atheist or lacking in faith. On the other side, it is important to destroy the heteronormative perception of Christian unions and partnerships. This can be accomplished by portraying God as a loving being who made everyone in God's likeness. Lastly, all African Pentecostal Christians need to come together to denounce the despicable behaviour of neo-Pentecostal pastors that worsens GBV in society and neo-Pentecostal congregations.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Pentecostal Christianity in Africa preaches a pragmatic gospel that tries to address practical, social and historical concerns. As a result, it was argued that the emergence of neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa and other parts of the continent was compatible with this tendency. Neo-Pentecostalism does address societal difficulties, but it does so on the condition that followers will find answers by paying attention to the prophets' references to God. The advent of COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdown measures, however, have brought to light several social issues, including gender-based violence that existed and continued to exist after the pandemic. It was argued that LGBTIQ+ should be included in the broad definition of GBV. It was also stated that using a broader definition could be an inclusive gesture in eradicate

the problem. This article expressed concern about how neo-Pentecostalism contributed to GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some benefits such as encouraging Christian men to love and care for their families were noted as positive aspects of neo-Pentecostalism. However, several drawbacks that contribute to the rise in GBV cases, particularly during the pandemic, were noted and attributed to teachings on women's subordination, the African Pentecostal perspective of marriage, African heteronormative discourses, and the despicable behaviour of neo-Pentecostal pastors. Therefore, African Pentecostalism was called to use its God-talk and influence in society to advance *Ubuntu* to combat this social sin. Finally, the entire body of African Pentecostal Christians must unite to condemn the deplorable behaviour of neo-Pentecostal pastors that worsens GBV in society and neo-Pentecostal congregations.

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Authors' contributions

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