


Gender-based violence as a destructive form of warfare against families: A practical theological response

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War is an appalling crisis and destructive force on human dignity and life. War was permitted in biblical times at the hand of God, with disastrous consequences for the nations of the Ancient World. The current war between Ukraine and Russia is fast becoming a global catastrophe, with the threat of World War III looming. Warfare destroys families, and families are vital units God instituted in society. The critical issue addressed in this article is the ruining effects of gender-based violence (GBV) on family life. Therefore, this article responds to GBV as a social ill and destructive form of warfare against women and aims to propose feasible, viable, and practical theological ways to curb this ruinous issue. Gender-based violence, as a form of warfare against women and children, is one of the most destructive forces regarding family life and the key reason for unstable, disrupted, and fractured families. Because this article is grounded on a practical theological response, its pastoral role is explored. Practical theology builds a theological framework for critical evaluation. It also takes a more direct role on the moral debates of society on issues such as GBV, father absence, and family violence that occurs in Church, family, and society.

Contribution: This article employed a descriptive *modus operandi* on GBV against women and endorses the journal's focus on family and society who is experiencing a violation of human rights and a life-threatening issue in the field of Practical Theology.

Keywords: war; women; children; gender-based violence; families; men; fathers; South Africa.

Introduction

A recent conference hosted by the Society for Practical Theology in South Africa (SPTSA) from 24–26 January 2023, focused on *The crisis and ethics of war! A practical theological response*. This article emanates from the presentation on gender-based violence (GBV) that the author delivered at the conference, arguing that the rise of GBV is not only at the core of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic but has damaged and fractured family life.

The article aims to address GBV from a practical, theoretical framework, and responds to it by proposing transforming ecclesial praxis.

South Africa in its 29th year of democracy, is experiencing a violation of human rights and a life-threatening health and protection issue – the destructive social ill of GBV (Mashau 2022:1). Coupled with the devastating onslaught of the COVID-19 from 2020 to 2022, and frequently linked to the spread of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (De Lange, Mitchell & Bhana 2012:499), GBV appears to escalate with detrimental consequences among the country's inhabitants. According to statistics in South Africa, the country has the highest rates of femicide in the world, where a woman is murdered on average every 4 h (Frieslaar & Masango 2021:3). One out of every four adult women has experienced GBV in South Africa, and one out of every three children had experienced sexual violence and physical abuse before they turned 18 (Mahlangu et al. 2022). One-third of women worldwide face GBV, which must be considered abnormal (Kabongo 2021:1). Moreover, one out of three women will experience sexual assault, and two out of every five women will be beaten by a partner (Mile 2020:4). Statistics, however, reflect only half the truth, because many cases of GBV are not reported to the authorities, or charges are not even laid against the perpetrators (Mile 2020:4).

With 10818 documented rape cases in the first quarter of 2022, South Africa's rape rate is among the highest in the world. The country is infamous for its high violence rate against women

(Gouws 2022). During 2019 and 2020, approximately 380 rapes were reported in educational institutions, which reflects the high prevalence of GBV (Mile 2020:4). In African churches, almost 80.0% of women experienced gender inequality besides GBV (Magezi & Manzanga 2021:1), and during 2018 and 2019, 49.8% of all assaults investigated were directed against women (Stats SA 2020).

Furthermore, more or less, 21% of all women older than 18 with a partner experienced physical violence and 6% experienced sexual violence throughout their life (Stats SA 2020; Capasso et al. 2021). Also, 40% of all divorced or separated women experienced physical or sexual violence during their marriage (Stats SA 2020). According to Banda (cited by Makou 2017), a woman is murdered by an intimate partner every 8 h giving credence to the notion that violence against women is five times greater than the average in the world.

Gender-based violence is a grave South African issue and an overwhelming global dilemma. Up to 50% of sexual assaults on girls younger than 16 occur worldwide, and data show that about 30% of women had their first sexual encounter under duress (Mavis & John 2020:41). Unexpectedly, the rate is even higher among girls younger than 15. A 2021 United Nations (UN) women's report found that 45% of women worldwide reported suffering some form of violence (De Vido 2022:1). The report furthermore states that 70% of the women indicated that verbal or physical abuse had become the norm, and 60% of the women said that sexual harassment has become worse in public spaces.

South Africa is one of many unequal countries in the world, with a marked history of conflict (Gouws 2022). The country also has the highest rates of violence compared to any country globally, and many authors refer to this phenomenon as commonplace as seen in the devastated statistics.

Frieslaar and Masango (2021), Banda (2020), Steward (2021), Graaff and Heinecken (2017), Thomas, Masinjila and Bere (2013), Abrahams, Jewkes and Mathews (2010), Magezi and Manzanga (2020, 2021), Meyiwa et al. (2017), to name a few, identified the adverse effects of GBV in our societies. Gender norms and patriarchal attitudes are all major reasons for acts of violence that institute GBV within families.

'What is the reason for GBV?' is a concerned question from the author. The major challenge to the lives of women and girls is GBV, a barrier to communities' social and economic growth (Mavis & John 2020:41). Communities free of GBV do not exist in South Africa or elsewhere: every cultural and social group around the globe is affected by this ongoing issue of violence against women and children (Mavis & John 2020:41).

Warfare as an appalling crisis

The Bible is arguably the most questionable book on our shelves, tables, and in libraries today. The Bible contains

instructions with the 'authority to kill' (Collins 2004:1-3). However, the Bible is not the only dangerous book of this day and age. The Quran can also be seen as questionable, especially considering the terror attacks of 11 September 2001. Devotees view their misery and grievances in religious terms. The Muslim fanatics found their inspiration in the Quran rather than the Bible. Also, the African traditional religions can be seen as questionable in numerous instances. Significantly, the Bible and the Quran draw from the same wellsprings of ancient Near Eastern religions (Collins 2004:1-2).

Furthermore, it is pivotal to understand that, according to Scripture, God is a warrior (cf. Ex 15:3). 'Is God a violent God?' Deuteronomy 20:16-17 indicates that one shall not kill. Deuteronomy 5:17 reads, 'Do not murder', and yet in Deuteronomy 20:16, the Israelites are instructed not to let any living thing survive among the cities of the people the Lord gave them as an inheritance (Dt 20:16). The command by the Lord God that the Israelites must destroy the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Dt 7:1-6) is one of many of God's violent portraits in the Bible, and displays a cruel and warlike attitude. Israel, however, was chosen by God to be a witness to the world of the true and living God. Israel was supposed to live amid the nations of the heathens in the Promised Land, and not be influenced by their religions. These nations perverted God's truth and would have infected Israel with their moral depravity. And they were aware of the God of Israel, yet they chose to reject him. The above-mentioned nations were neither innocent nor illiterate. This – apparently – condoned violence has challenged Christians to understand the role of violence in the life and mission of the church (Hawk 2019:2) – a daunting challenge. Accordingly, Hawk asks the following six key questions as markers in the context of this article:

What role does the Bible play in justifying and generating violence? How have the violent acts of the God of the Bible influenced and impacted Christian faith and practice? What impact has divine violence had on the way Christians conduct themselves in a world saturated with violence? How do the warrior God of the Old Testament and the self-giving God of the New Testament have the same divinity? How can Christians understand God and his work who calls for the death of lawbreakers in one part of the Bible yet forgives sinners in another part of the Bible – also, a God who commands his people to show no mercy to enemies in one scripture text and then to love one's neighbour in another part of scripture? If God takes up violence for certain reasons, should not those reasons be guided by the Bible do the same? (2019:2). God, however, did not condone war, but allowed it as mentioned in the case and context of Israel. Even so, He is a God of love and peace (cf. Pr 12:20; Mt 5:9; Jn 13:34-35; Rm 5:5; 12:18; 1 Cor 13:13; 2 Cor 13:11; 1 Pt 3:11; Jn 2:7-8).

Furthermore, these questions reflect important concerns to the author, and in answering these questions, it is paramount to comprehend that God's anger and violence do not flow from impulse as the Greek and Roman mythology believed. God is beyond anger; he can be angry without being shaken or driven to kill (Hawk 2019:3). God is not an evil or

imperfect God, as Marcion and Alexander, Gnostic teachers, believed and declared. God did not create a tragic world and manipulate a law on its inhabitants. He is not bloodthirsty and does not judge people who continuously transgress his laws and commands (Hawk 2019:3). Even so, there are 613 instances in the Bible where God commands people to kill in specified circumstances. When God commands to kill (Ex 22:18; Lv 24:16, 17; cf. also White 2009:9), they were focused, targeted campaigns, not uncontrolled rampage (Dt 20:3, 4, 5–8, 10–12, 13–15, 19–20). When God instructed Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, it was a test of Abraham's faith (Heb 11:17), not an arbitrary or sinister demand. Be that as it may, 'orders' to kill starkly contrast with the image and character of God as Father.

But today, we live in an age and era of endless war. War has become our national default position, making everyone in the world worse off for comfort (Meagher 2014:1). This discomfort means the transgression – the violation of what is right – of a core belief or moral code and, consequently, hurting the soul, psyche, and one's humanity.

The value and significance of women in society

According to Genesis 2:18–22, Adam was created first and then Eve to be his helper; however, she was not less valuable and less significant than him. Adam needed help because it was not good for him to be alone. On his own, Adam was missing an integral part of living out God's instructions, precepts, and commandments. Without women, there would be no valuable, good work, and no nurturing to secure and sustain future generations. Hence, Eve complements her image-bearer with equal value and significance, the same as Adam did, but as a woman, she represents God in various ways (Jansen & Wifler 2019:33–34). The concept of womanhood is found in Genesis 3:20 when Adam called his wife 'Eve' because she was the mother of all life. The word *mother* has multitudinous levels of meaning. Eve could be a biological mother and represent a spiritual purpose. All women can relate to this particular purpose: to invest in and mature towards the family of God as life-givers (Jansen & Wifler 2019:34).

Moreover, womanhood is described as a kind of spiritual ordeal or labour rooted in love (Wolfteich 2017:155), and it involves the role of women who care (Miller-McLemore 1994:215). The mother is a spiritual leader to her children and just as responsible as the father for the upbringing of the children (Wolfteich 2017:157). Womanhood is transformed by the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the design of womanhood is universal and unchanging (Jansen & Wifler 2019:16–19).

In current terms, womanhood is about women who love their homes and are drawn into motherhood by the instinct to be mothers who ensure their children's development within their family, married or unmarried (Leskosek 2011:1–2). Mothers also ensure that their children receive a

good education, live in healthy and hygienic surroundings, and have quality time with both parents (Frahm-Arp 2016:151). Children require adequate care, love, and security, to form part of a stable family and a nurturing home environment. Every act of war aimed at children not only humiliates them but also creates in them a sense of loss and confusion (Richter 2010:360).

In conclusion, and from a practical theological viewpoint, women are the pillars of their homes and societies. They are mothers of their own and other children, rendering them vulnerable targets for violence and abuse. Consequently, women and children suffer immensely because of war in the literal sense and the destructive form of GBV. Women generally suffer a great loss of self-worth, human dignity, humiliation, and loss of character when warfare, in the form of GBV, is waged against them.

Gender-based violence as a destructive form of warfare against women in South Africa

What is gender-based violence?

Mashau (2022:2) claims that the concept of GBV is quite complicated because it encompasses a variety of concerns in various circumstances. Mashau also states that GBV is an ancient sin that dates back to biblical times. The UN defines GBV as the physical, sexual, or mental injury or suffering of women, including threats of such actions, coercion, or arbitrarily denying them their freedom, whether in public or private life (Mashau 2022:2–3). Nevertheless, the phrase also refers to violence directed at males and boys.

Finchilescu and Dugard (2018:3) define GBV as violence against women and children that results in psychological harm. Gender-based violence is a term that broadly incorporates many behaviours that manifest as physical, sexual, or psychological damage to any woman or girl (Wilson 2012:4). The term has been described as acts that uphold female subordination that occur on multiple levels and includes sexual violence, economic violence, intimate partner violence, childhood sexual abuse, emotional abuse, forced prostitution, female genital mutilation, malnourishment of female children, dowry-related murder, and marital rape (Meyiwa et al. 2017:8608). It is also behaviour such as sexual harassment, assault, rape, and crime that occurs mainly in private spaces like the home and implicates aspects of justice, safety, and security (Banda 2020:1). Gender-based violence is an assertion of dominance and control through physical and verbal behaviours and violence directed against a person based on gender, that has inundated South Africa (Banda 2020:2).

In addition, GBV is committed by the intimate partners of the victim (Magezi & Manzanga 2020:1). Husbands, fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and male siblings and family members are the perpetrators of abuse and violence against women and children. Banda (cited by Makou 2017) confirms that

men are the key culprits of most killings and abuse against women. Hence, male dominion is not just one among many factors contributing to the problem of violence. It is a primary characteristic of violence.

It is shocking that in South African society, the fathers of these families abuse and murder their wives and children (Freeks 2022:2). South Africa has the highest rate of senseless and widespread violence against women worldwide (Graaff & Heinecken 2017:622).

In South Africa, young black women from underprivileged neighbourhoods are the most at risk and frequently experience GBV (Vallabh 2022). Some abusive men, mainly fathers, use their relationship with their children to dominate, control, and intimidate their wives (Silverstein 1996:9). Hence, it is a disgrace that fathers who abuse their female partners and children are forsaking their fatherly role in the socialisation process, both in the family and society (Freeks 2022:2). Regardless of this reality, many good, fine, and proud fathers will not acknowledge the fact that GBV corrodes the image of manhood and fatherhood in society.

The role and function of the South African government in gender-based violence

In the past 10 years, the South African government has attempted to reduce GBV with little success (Yesufu 2022:97). Although the South African government has taken significant steps to provide answers to the dilemma of GBV, they have not come up with practical solutions to end this destructive form of warfare. The South African government, specifically the police force, falls short in protecting all women and children from the blazing sun of GBV (Vallabh 2022). There is currently no support system to help women who are ostracised and discriminated against by their community and family members (Vallabh 2022). Even young girls are compelled to leave school and become child wives, ruining their future and careers because of their parents' selfishness and perverse beliefs (Mavis & John 2020:42). The government would rather give priority to the national political agenda than deal with this pervasive and destructive form of abuse (Meyiwa et al. 2017:8607).

Although the South African government acknowledges the high levels of GBV, including femicide, during and before the COVID-19 pandemic, it failed to provide the necessary services, shelter, and funding they promised in their National Strategic Plan (NSP) to alleviate the current state of affairs (Steward 2021:1).

In addition, Mashau (2022) claims that GBV is a real scourge, further exacerbated by the enforced lockdown in 2020, when the worse GBV occurred in homes throughout South Africa. He also states that governments must develop new strategies to stop domestic violence, and GBV should be viewed as a sin against humanity and God.

The annual event known as 16 Days of Women's Activism, followed by Women's Day and Women's Month, which serve to remind people of the harms of GBV, is held in South Africa to raise awareness of this issue (Yesufu 2022:97). These occasions are noteworthy, but statistics show that women continue to die at the hands of men, a finding of great concern (Yesufu 2022:97).

Yesufu (2022:97) proposes that South Africa establish a state of emergency, giving police more authority to detain or arrest GBV offenders. However, this idea might encourage more vigilante movements and activities that result in innocent people's death so that the status quo will be maintained. It would rather be in the interest of South Africa for the government to adopt new laws regarding GBV and for the GBV legislation to change. The public and church must be the driving force behind this initiative and strongly demand it.

To this effect, new legislation aimed at strengthening efforts to end GBV, with a victim-centred focus on combating GBV, was introduced (Republic of South Africa 2023). It means that the South African government has implemented its protection plan for women and children, and that its survivors have a better chance of receiving justice. In 2020, three GBV bills were introduced in Parliament to combat this dehumanising pandemic. The GBV bills consequently enacted are the *Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 13 of 2021*, the *Criminal and Related Matters Amendment Act 12 of 2021*, and the *Domestic Violence Amendment Act 14 of 2021*. The legislation mandates that all sexual offences be recorded on a national registry. The regulations have made it simpler to obtain protection orders, whereby survivors can apply online rather than in court.

Gender-based violence has become a detrimental norm in South Africa (Graaff & Heinecken 2017:622). This social ill exists in all societies and tends to continue and intensify pre-existing violence (Thomas et al. 2013:521). Gender-based violence is a consequential and destructive form of warfare against women and children, and to this effect, South Africa has experienced extreme degrees of violence in recent years (Graaff & Heinecken 2017:624).

The role and function of the church in society in gender-based violence in South Africa

The most recent census, including religious data, indicates that South Africa is one of the most religious nations in the world, with 85% of respondents indicating religious affiliation, of which 80% were Christians (Landman & Mudimeli 2022:2). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people worldwide turned to religion and the Bible for direction and spiritual solace, as is customary in times of adversity (Mashau 2022:3). Given that GBV is a spiritual fight, and that God can intervene and transform lives, faith and religion have the power to influence the resilience of women who are subjected to it (Pertek 2022:1). Yet, Landman and Mudimeli (2022:1) argue that religion is the root cause of

GBV. If so, religion can play a key role in the perpetuation of GBV against women and children. Nonetheless, women have historically been treated differently by religion. Since the dawn of humanity, men have used the biblical account of Adam and Eve's creation to portray and perpetuate the idea of women as weak and inferior. She was only created to assist men (Yesufu 2022:90).

Most churches today offer a covert sanctuary for GBV and support it by misinterpreting Scripture (Mavis & John 2020:43). The church today utilises the text of 1 Peter 3:1–7 as a single-phase argument to oppress women and to determine their position in society, even though 1 Peter 3:1–7 states that a woman is to submit to her husband and that the husband is to love his wife. In reality, biblical submissiveness exhorts women to be obedient, humble, willing, loyal, respectful, loving, and compassionate towards their husbands (Mavis & John 2020:43). Nothing is improper or inappropriate about the spouse or male reciprocating the exhortation.

The Church has been urged to tackle this destructive social issue by utilising a framework of pastoral care and healing mechanisms to assist women and children. The rise in GBV is of great concern in South Africa (Frieslaar & Masango 2021:1). Mashau (2022:2) asserts that to combat this plague, the Church must actively participate in a protest against GBV and look for liberating and revolutionary solutions by reporting GBV offenders to the police. The Church, among other stakeholders, must actively participate in the fight against GBV and combat such misdeeds (Kabongo 2021:1).

Mostly, though, the Church and theology are mute on GBV. Though the Church must be aware of GBV, without resources and support on various levels, it can only watch on helplessly as women endure the humiliating effects of abuse (Banda 2020:2). Notwithstanding, through the social embodiment of faith that is promoted by the practical theological paradigm, as Cilliers (2009:634) explains (*fides quarens societatem*), the focus of the Church relates to assistance (Lotter 2007:3).

In contrast to developing preventative initiatives, Banda (2020:2) states that the Church's only engagement has been in burying women who were victims of GBV. Churches in communities need to address GBV, educating and empowering women to speak out because church, religion, and the Bible are places where God speaks to humans through his revelations (Nel 2019:7).

The essence and value of family according to practical theological principles in South Africa

God is concerned about families because families are the most important structure and building blocks in society (Mokone & Pali 2022:3). God instituted the family as a unit in society, and this societal unit is grounded in the very Being of the triune God (Knoetze 2015:4–5). The family is God's design for society's fundamental unit, foundation, and building

block. It is essential to the health of the state and the church (Mokone & Pali 2022:1). Because the family is the primary unit, constitution, and building block of the society that God created, a robust family is also necessary for a functioning state and church (Mokone & Pali 2022:1).

The family determines a child's future and wellness, ensuring the child's early emotional, social, spiritual, and material wellbeing, and is the best environment for this nurturing, ideally with both parents present (Yesufu 2022:92). Generally, 'family' as the foundational institution of society ordained by God has mostly favoured men over women. Contrary to what is generally depicted in literature and the media, families can be oppressive institutions with a dark side, and not all family activities are joyful and joyous (Yesufu 2022:92). Family members, and particularly females, are subjected to a variety of damaging behaviours, including verbal abuse, domestic violence, physical altercations, divorces, rape, murder, and suicide, all of which are concealed from the public (Yesufu 2022:92).

God is the centre of the family, in which fathers and mothers are the key role players of this family that is part of the greater family of God (Freeks 2022:2). God created the family in the very beginning as the prime envoy of socialisation (Yi 2019:149). He is glorified within families who worship, obey, love, honour and follow his laws, commandments, and precepts according to the Bible. Instead, the world sees families as abused, broken, divorced, and fractured units where violence occurs (Freeks 2022:2) when they are meant to be the world's primaevial and most fundamental form of relationship (Freeks 2018:154).

Some practical theological ways to address and curb gender-based violence as a destructive form of warfare against women

Criminal sanction is insufficient to stop men from committing acts of violence because the number of women killed by men in South Africa has increased significantly (Yesufu 2022:90). Women and children should have adequate access to police where they can report and lay charges against the culprits of GBV (Vallabh 2022). Institutions such as schools must establish safe spaces and care standards so that teaching and learning can proceed unthreatened by men who commit GBV (Mayeza & Bhana 2021). As survivors of GBV, women and children should be supported in various ways, for example, medical help, shelter, and psychological support. Advocacy should be a high priority; individuals must learn to speak out against GBV. Workshops, training sessions, and equipping events must be held to educate families, churches, and households. Society needs to eradicate GBV (Mavis & John 2020:49). Males should be included and involved in efforts to prevent men from abusing women rather than being judged, written off, or harshly reprimanded. Working with men is essential to end violence and GBV against women and children. Even so, 'what is God (Bible) saying?'

According to the Bible, all forms of violence, including GBV, are an offence against both God and humanity (cf. Ps 11; Pr 3 & 10). Violence against women is particularly condemned (cf. Dt 22:25–29). The Bible has numerous accounts of horrifying sexual assault of women. For instance, rape is considered to be an outrage (*nebalah*), a Hebrew word which means a disgraceful thing, for example, Genesis 34:7. Also, a concept that appears 13 times in the Old Testament and is only used for extreme acts or transgressions against God and human beings. Furthermore, the Bible does not use the word ‘abuse’, but it frequently uses the term ‘oppression’ which means ‘crushing or burdening’ someone by abuse of power or authority (cf. Ps 10; 56; Pr 14:31; Mt 9:13; Mk 3:4–5; Lk 4:18:21), to name a few.

The author’s assertion on the issue of gender-based violence

It was significant, yet contradictory, when the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, indicated in his State of the Nation Address (SONA) on 10 February 2022 at Cape Town Hall that South Africa has the best constitution in the world. The paradox lies in the fact that the country has one of the most progressive constitutions, and yet issues such as GBV, high crime rate, high divorce rate, family problems, and immorality run rampant (Freeks 2022:4). Gender-based violence is a grim reality in South Africa, leaving its families traumatised and powerless in the face of the destruction it causes.

Conclusion

There is currently no easy and simple solution or way to reduce GBV. Though the South African government has launched several political and contextual measures that require a diverse approach, I offer the following concluding thoughts from a practical theological perspective.

South Africa is in desperate need of God. No country where democracy is at stake can excel and prosper without the Church’s guidance and God’s intervention. The Church has always played a defining role in government and society, and must regain this role within families, schools, institutions, government, and society in modern-day South Africa. The country does not require a better or amended constitution, new political leaders, or newly-formed political parties. South Africa needs God and his Word to guide, restore, and heal the country, and to address social ills such as GBV that destroy society.

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F.E.F. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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