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Reimagining Gender-Based Violence in the Eye of the COVID-19 Storm and Beyond: A Practical-Missiological Reflection on an African Family through the Lenses of the Biblical Narrative of Tamar

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Abstract: Humanity is not battling only against the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) but also against gender-based violence (GBV), which has risen to epidemic proportions globally during the COVID-19 storm. There has been a rapid increase in domestic violence and other forms of GBV as nations imposed lockdown restrictions as a way to curb the COVID-19 storm. In this article, it is my contention that some of the people who were compelled to quarantine became vulnerable to GBV. In his presidential address to the nation on 18 June 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa identified GBV in South Africa as a second pandemic. There is also a considerable outcry in our inability, both as humanity at large and government, in particular, to deal with this scourge and find lasting solutions to it. This article locates the scourge of GBV within the 'storm' of COVID-19 using an African family unit as a case study. Upon presenting a practical-missiological reflection of the biblical narrative of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13—both through missional lenses and hermeneutic analysis—this article reimagines an ecclesial praxis that is life-affirming and liberating to victims of GBV as it applies in family contexts. It proposes tangible solutions to GBV within an African family, but the results can be replicated globally where GBV remains a pandemic to be dealt with.

Keywords: gender-based violence; COVID-19 storm; practical-missiological; African family; biblical narrative; 2 Samuel 13

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1. Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 and its devastating effects took global communities by storm in many ways. Humanity experienced serious economic, political, and social disruptions from many fronts. These included issues of 'education' (Krishnamurthy 2020), 'poverty, unemployment, and inequalities' (Jamieson and Blerk 2021), 'restrictions in people's movements or migration patterns' (Mukumbang et al. 2020), 'health' (Naidu 2020), 'pain and grief over the death of their loved ones' (Khosa-Nkatini and White 2021), etc.

In the efforts to curb the spread of the COVID-19 storm, global empires imposed hard lockdown measures (Haider et al. 2020). During this time, the scourge of GBV grew to epidemic proportions. It is for this reason that GBV is considered to be a shadow pandemic (Sri et al. 2021; Parry and Gordon 2021) or the gendered pandemic (Yavorsky et al. 2021) or a twin pandemic to COVID-19 (Dlamini 2021). According to Javed and Chattu (2020, p. 32), GBV or violence against women and girls (VAWGs) 'is one of the most prevalent human rights violations in the world' today.

In light of the rise in GBV during the pandemic, it is my contention in this article that GBV is not only at the heart of the COVID-19 storm but has also disrupted and shaken African family units to the core. Writing in the context of South Africa, Odeku (2021, p. 17919) asserts, '[t]he COVID-19 pandemic has exposed in a significant way the abuses and violations being perpetrated by the so-called close family members'. It is, therefore,

the aim of this article to investigate GBV from within an African family context and to suggest a liberating and transformative ecclesial praxis. Tomlie and Venter (2021, p. 1) opine that 'As usually happens in times of crisis, millions of people all over the world turned to religion for guidance and spiritual comfort during the pandemic'. In order to achieve this, I have decided to tap into the resourcefulness of 2 Samuel 13. This text, which speaks about GBV as experienced by Tamar in ancient times, provides a Biblical example of GBV within a family context and also suggests practical examples as to how best GBV cases should be treated. It is my view that lessons drawn from a practical-missiological reflection of 2 Samuel 13 can be used to provide lasting solutions to GBV within the African family unit.

2. Setting the Tone: A Practical-Missiological Framework

From a broader missiological perspective, GBV, as experienced during this COVID-19 storm, must be connected to the idea of the church as a transforming agent, particularly concerning violence. There is a need for a church to actively participate in a protest against GBV and find liberating and transformative solutions to this scourge. Nadar (2009, p. 85) suggests that 'If indeed the *missio Dei* has always found itself in the midst of a violent world, then a fundamental challenge facing the church as it responds with God's love in the world is violence against women'.

As a practical-missiological concern, GBV in an African family context requires a holistic approach that includes religious perspectives. Nadar (2009, p. 86) concludes, 'Resolving gender violence requires not just interrogating our legal systems but our belief systems which are based to a large extent on our sacred texts and cultural systems'. This has prompted me to look at GBV in an African family through the lens of the narrative of the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. To dissect missiological lessons from this text, a missional hermeneutic was applied. A missional hermeneutic considers God's missional agenda in a particular context (Wright 2006). It propels an approach that seeks to perform exegesis of the biblical text by respecting its textual and contextual texture, in order to provide missional applications and implications to a particular challenge that it seeks to address (Van Aarde and Lygunda 2017). In addition, Knoetze (2015, p. 4) reckons, 'Missional hermeneutics must at least include the recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives, contexts, and cultures from which, and within which, people in Africa read the biblical texts'. What is critical in this approach is the liberating and transformational praxis and agenda that it seeks to achieve. Here, the following is asserted: 'Missional hermeneutics read the Bible with the intention to liberate people from oppression and exploitation, and to save them from selfishness and sin' (Knoetze 2015, p. 4).

3. Literature Review on GBV and the COVID-19 Storm

3.1. Defining Gender-Based Violence

The definition of GBV is very complex because it covers a range of issues in diverse contexts. In picking one of the critical issues that complicate the discourse around GBV, Baldasare (2012, p. 1) opines, 'The term gender-based violence is widely used as a synonym for violence against women, as women are the most obvious victims and survivors of violence'. Although women are the most vulnerable and violated, men are also victims of domestic violence (Mbandlwa 2020, p. 6754). Cases of abused men in South Africa are recorded either as unpopular narratives (Mbandlwa 2020) or muted reality (Thobejane et al. 2018). Additionally, as much as men and patriarchy account for the majority of GBV cases against women, women cannot be left out. Baldasare (2012, p. 2) reckons, 'Women may take part in enforcing gender hierarchies for various reasons, including culture, tradition, and self-preservation'. However, it should be noted that some women do so because they have been wrongly socialised to believe that men are their leaders and heroes in every respect.

Even though the broader context remains one of the women as victims of GBV, we should start to advocate for inclusive definitions that cater to violence against all genders. In the attempt to provide a much more comprehensive definition of GBV, the World Health

Organization (2009) defines it as, 'Violence that is directed against a person on the basis of 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'. When applied within the family context, GBV is also known as domestic violence in all its diverse forms and consequences. Its scope includes psychological abuse, physical violence, and sexual abuse and harassment (Sanjel 2013). It is concluded, 'Gender violence includes demonstrations of viciousness against women, girls, men, or boys, because of social standards about the roles and conduct expected of every sex or gender, and it regularly happens in connections to their gender and class' (Enaifoghe 2019, p. 15).

3.2. Gender-Based Violence in the Eye of the COVID-19 Storm Globally

Lockdown restrictions during the COVID-19 storm resulted in many people facing 'issues such as economic instability, mental health problems, and isolation' (Mittal and Singh 2020, p. 5), while others faced GBV incidents (Ekemma 2020) within the global communities. Writing in the context of rising numbers of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Portugal during the storm of COVID-19, Capinha et al. (2021) raise the concern around the vulnerability of older victims and perpetrators because of lockdown and stay-at-home measures. In addition, in their article, 'Alarming trends in US domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic', Boserup et al. (2020, p. 2753) share the same sentiments: 'Isolation may expose or worsen vulnerabilities due to a lack of established social support systems'.

Apart from lockdown restrictions imposed by various nations, there are other ways that gender-based intersectionality operates that contributed to the global rise in GBV during the pandemic. Sanjel (2013, p. 179) captures some of these dynamics as follows: 'GBVs arise from unequal power relations between men and women and continues to be reinforced by the entrenched patriarchal values system of identifying women as inferior to men which allow things such as illiteracy, poverty, and low status of women to prevail'. Thus, it is clear that GBV is a societal and human rights issue that intersects with other social constructs such as masculinity, inequality, and poverty, which play key roles in producing acceptance and acquiescence of patriarchy and the GBV it fosters among the women who are its victims in their communities.

3.3. GBV in the Eye of the COVID-19 Storm in South Africa

GBV is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. Meyiwa et al. (2017, p. 8607) assert that GBV is a long-standing societal, health, and human rights issue that can be traced back to its roots in the violent apartheid past. In addition, there are recent instances of high-profile GBV cases trending in social media, such as those of Anene Booysen, Karabo Mokoena, Uyinene Mrwetyana, Leighande 'Baby Lee' Jegels, and Tshegofatso Pule, etc. (Amaechi et al. 2021). However, the rise of GBV in the South African context has been exacerbated by COVID-19 and lockdown restrictions that the South African government put in place to fight the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dlamini 2021; Gutura and Nunlall 2020). As a result, some women and children found themselves trapped in their homes with family members who abused them physically, emotionally, psychologically, and with some dying in the hands of people who should be protecting them. Therefore, some of the incidents of GBV fall within the femicide category. In his presidential address to the nation on 18 June 2020, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa referred to GBV as the second pandemic after COVID-19. While the South African government should be commended for its efforts to curb violence against women through legislation, the problem continues to develop at an alarming rate. It is captured as follows:

Despite the comprehensive laws and policies, GBV remains a major problem. This has always been attributed to the lack of implementation of these policies. GBV can also be increased by the lack of resources to support the victims/survivors, including courts, police, shelters and professional workers (Gutura and Nunlall 2020, p. 114).

3.4. GBV in the Wake of the COVID-19 Storm: A Missiological Approach

As a human rights issue, dealing with GBV in the wake of the COVID-19 storm requires a missiological approach, as already demonstrated in the missiological framework above. The missiological approach provides space for humanity to stand together in solidarity during trying times of GBV in the eye of COVID-19 and beyond. According to Meylahn (2020, p. 4), the missiological approach provides space to 'imagine a new symbolic world, or an improved symbolic world, a new world order that is perhaps more just'. In our quest for justice and a just society, humanity is also called to stand together where God stands. In the efforts to describe the notion of 'standing where God stands', Mashau (2018, pp. 138–40) uncovers the following elements: 'standing for God', 'standing for the truth', 'standing beyond known borders', 'standing in solidarity with those in the margins', and 'standing for justice'. Missiologically, efforts to build solidarity and provide agency are critical in bringing about social transformation and social cohesion in communities affected by GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the church as an agent of transformation provides creative spaces to intensify the fight against GBV during COVID-19 and beyond. As the church engages those affected by GBV and the biblical texts such as 2 Samuel 13:19–23, it provides creative spaces for preventative advocacy, mitigation of justice, and healing to the wounded.

4. African Family and GBV in the Eye of the COVID-19 Storm

The concept of family in the African context is used in a much broader sense than a nuclear family. It includes an extended family such as aunts, uncles, and other relatives (Zvingowanisei and Chirongoma 2021, p. 44). Therefore, a notion of family in the African context finds meaning and significance within the broader societal framework; hence, the African proverb, 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

The concept of family in South Africa received new impetus when it was used to refer to meetings convened by President Ramaphosa to address the nation on the government's response to COVID-19. The President's notion of 'family meeting' placed an African family unit at the centre of the fight against the COVID-19 storm. Nonessential workers and citizens, in general, were expected to remain at home with their families during COVID-19 lockdowns. It is during this time that many victims of GBV found themselves trapped in the same space as their perpetrators (Campbell 2020, p. 1). It is, therefore, correctly observed that when disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes or pandemics such as the coronavirus strike, they disrupt the social and physical environment of millions of people. These disruptions increase families' vulnerability to domestic violence, and gender-based violence often escalates (Geldenhuys 2021, p. 40). In South Africa, the South African National helpline recorded more than 120,000 calls of domestic violence during the first three weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown by the government (Mbunge 2020, p. 1811). It is rather unfortunate that most of these cases happened at home and with members of families as perpetrators.

There are various reasons that account for the increase in GBV within a family unit during the COVID-19 storm—namely, the pre-existing linkage between the African family and patriarchy (Ademiluka 2018; Zungu 2016). It is within this context that GBV is linked to dominance, power, and abuse of authority. This will further exacerbate pre-existing gendered structural inequalities and power hierarchies. As protective mechanisms fail, it leaves women and girls more vulnerable, fuelling impunity for the perpetrators (Javed and Chattu 2020, p. 32). The sad reality is that victims are discouraged from reporting such matters to the police or are silenced in the name of protecting the family. Consequently, creative, disruptive, and destructive tensions exist in African family units.

Linkages between an African family, masculinity, and gender inequalities further account for the increase of GBV within the African family unit. In Africa, both female and male children are socialised to believe that they are not equal. Males are socialised to assume the position of authority within the family and community at large. Women are

socialised to believe that they are inferior to men; therefore, they should subject themselves under the authority of men as subordinates (Zungu 2016, p. 288).

What exacerbated the increase in domestic violence during COVID-19 were lockdown restrictions that limited people's movements, leaving victims of GBV relying heavily on the use of online and telephone services to alert law enforcement agencies of their abuse. Further, 'Informal sources of help for victims of abuse were limited due to closed economic activities, and community-based helping services for domestic violence were not permitted to open' (Nduna and Tshona 2021, p. 347).

5. GBV in the African Family through the Lenses of the Biblical Narrative of Tamar

GBV is an ancient sin, and perhaps there is no other biblical text that pulls together various dimensions of GBV than 2 Samuel 13:19–23. It gives the reader many angles as to how best to define GBV and its manifestation within a family unit. It opens one to see the kind of devastation experienced when GBV occurs within a family unit; hence, I chose to use the lenses of Tamar's story in reimagining GBV in the African family. The storyline runs as follows:

- Tamar, a daughter to King David and a sister to Absalom, was tricked and raped by Amnon, King David's firstborn son. According to Ademiluka (2019, p. 4), 'The trick worked, and Amnon raped Tamar against all her entreaties'. This becomes a rape and GBV case in the family context because Tamar was raped by her half-brother.
- She was sexually and physically abused by Amnon even when she protested and begged him not to violate her in respect of the laws of Israel. Amnon used his physical strength to force himself on her (2 Samuel 13:12–14; Joubert and Woodbridge 2018).
- Amnon mistreated Tamar after raping her and demanded that she be removed from his presence. Amnon shamed his half-sister by raping her and also sending her away. He took away her virginity and, at the same time, refused to keep her as a wife. Her statement is suggestive of this truth: 'No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me' (2 Samuel 13:16).
- Amnon's friend, Jonadab, and servants in Amnon's house are all accomplices and bystanders in the violation of Tamar. Amnon's friend, Jonadab, actively participated in the plot to allow Tamar to be raped with the help of King David (Van der Walt 2012).
- King David heard that his firstborn had committed an abomination, and he became angry but could not punish Amnon (2 Samuel 13:21). As a father, David failed in his duties to defend his daughter and to administer justice against his son Amnon. As a result, he is not only silent but becomes complacent as well. Peters (2021, p. 317) concurs, 'His complicity is further revealed when he discovers that consequently, David's failure to bring justice brought dysfunctionality and disharmony in his family in the long run'.
- Tamar's brother, Absalom, heard about the violation that occurred to his sister but encouraged her to be silent (2 Samuel 13:22). Examining the Hebrew text, we will find that the Hebrew word *ha·ḥă·rî·šî,* הַחֲרִישִׁי derives from the root *charash*, חָרַשׁ, to mean cut in, engrave, plough, devise. *Ha·ḥă·rî·šî*, in *Hiphil* form could mean 'be silent', but it also means 'do not let it upset you' or 'hold your peace'. The latter meaning is preferred (Propp 1993, p. 45; Adelman 2021, p. 95). Out of his love for his sister, Absalom encouraged Tamar to remain silent about her rape while planning to avenge her violation (2 Samuel 13:23–33). Absalom remained calm to set the stage for future revenge. He did not disown Tamar as many families tend to repudiate their raped daughters, but he took her to live with him. He took care of her during hard times in her life.
- The aftermath of GBV is dire, life-sapping, and devastating, as demonstrated in the life of Tamar, who lived as a desolate woman (2 Samuel 13:20). It is asserted, 'Tamar publicly displays her grief by putting ash on her head and tearing her beautiful dress; a dress fit for a princess' (Van der Walt 2012, p. 183). Tamar was deserted and shamed by Amnon, but her state of desolation demonstrates that she also lacked proper support

from her family and community that witnessed her violation. As a result, she was isolated and left to despair. My assumption is that Tamar is also joined by the many female voices that are excluded from the narrative.

This is the long and short of the Tamar narrative, but the lessons drawn resemble untold and told storylines in African families, as discussed below. Firstly, in terms of defining GBV, it is violence committed against humanity from a gender bias perspective. There are various elements that we cannot ignore in defining and attempting to contextualise GBV in the biblical narrative of Tamar and how it applies to an African family. We can only address GBV when we start dealing with subtle activities that are committed as influenced by gender bias—namely, the following aspects:

- Marginalisation or exclusions based on class, beauty, and other external features;
- Demeaning, disrespecting, abuse—be it verbal, physical, emotional, or psychological;
- Bullying, assaulting—be it physical or psychological;
- Silencing—be it spiritually or physically (to the point of killing) and or emotionally.

These elements are located in Tamar's story and are also traceable when discussing GBV in today's African family unit. Secondly, the Tamar story speaks to the heart of GBV, as it is also experienced in the African family where and when GBV occurs, which is a tripartite unholy and troublesome alliance of patriarchy, masculinity and power dynamics, and cultural undertones that underpin perpetual GBV as it applies to both genders. Here, there is a particular bias regarding African women because of masculinity, power dynamics, and patriarchy. Writing in the context of the use and abuse of power and authority in the rape of Tamar, Joubert and Woodbridge (2018, p. 110) opine, 'People in positions of power and authority often think they have rights that they can exercise without considering the rights of others'.

Thirdly, the Tamar story speaks to the heart of GBV since it is a tale of deception. Tactics that lead to GBV in a family context include plotting, coercive power, deception, and force. It is asserted, 'Contrary to popular opinion, rape is not always a spontaneous act; most rapes are planned and premeditated' (Joubert and Woodbridge 2018, p. 111). These actions are evil and dehumanising when executed, which is the case in the story of Tamar.

Fourthly, when GBV is committed, family members and society seek to dehumanise, shame, and demonise the one violated. Tamar was deceived, raped, rejected, and dehumanised by Amnon. Fifthly, victims are silenced. Victims are told to go home and find a way to remain silent about what had happened to them. Their real pain is denied; therefore, no one is ready to listen to their stories—be it at home or our law enforcement agencies. Victims are encouraged to remain silent because of the fear of stigmatisation. While Absalom encouraged his sister Tamar not to be discouraged by the Amnon incident, David, as Tamar's father, chose to remain silent when he heard of what his son Amnon had inflicted upon her (Brouer 2014). Shockingly, David mourned the death of the perpetrator, Amnon, instead (2 Samuel 13:37).

Sixthly, GBV opens a wound to the victims and, in some instances, their families. It cuts so deep that it leaves emotional, physical, mental, and psychological scars. People end up with depression, heart attack, strokes, and even death. The reality is that some develop suicidal thoughts and sometimes mental illnesses. Victims indeed cannot breathe, and sometimes, family members experience the same as in the case of Absalom—who ended up pretending as if he was not hurting, as a means of coping, but ended up killing the perpetrator (mob justice within the context of an African family unit).

6. GBV in the African Family Reimagined

In order to reimagine and seek lasting solutions to GBV within an African family unit during the storm of COVID-19 and beyond, this article suggests the following:

GBV is a real scourge, both as a reality within an African family unit and as a phenomenon growing to epidemic proportions during the storm of COVID-19. This was caused by imposed lockdown, which restricted people's movements and ensured that both victims and perpetrators found themselves locked in the same space for longer peri-

ods. Therefore, governments must find alternative ways to curb domestic violence when imposing lockdown restrictions during storms such as COVID-19.

Drawing lessons from the biblical narrative of Tamar, we should also treat GBV within the African family as a sin against God and humanity. It violates the very image of God and the respect that we should have for human life (Joubert and Woodbridge 2018). Such violations bring disruption, disharmony, and destruction to the communities where it occurs. Ramantswana concurs, 'The unjust treatment of women in society, whether at the margins (or) at the centre, destroys society' (Ramantswana 2019, p. 7). It is asserted, in Tamar's case, 'The insidious presence of rape, understood as the sexual assault of another person, has nothing less than a corrosive effect on the psychological, moral, spiritual and social lives of all people' (Joubert and Woodbridge 2018, p. 107).

GBV within an African family unit is a human rights issue and violence against humanity that must not be tolerated. Joubert and Woodbridge (2018, p. 107) assert, 'Violence in whatever form, including rape, should never be tolerated by any nation of the world'. However, Absalom's vengeful acts of killing Amnon in his efforts to seek justice for her should not be commended, especially in the African context where communities prefer to exercise mob justice by killing perpetrators of GBV.

Learning from the biblical story of Tamar, we must learn to embrace and journey with victims of GBV within an African family unit by providing shelter and counsel to them. The fact that Absalom was able to take Tamar in and provide her with shelter should serve as a perfect example to African families.

As part of seeking justice for the victims of GBV such as Tamar, we should learn to echo and amplify their voices within African family units and the public square. Capturing the importance of advocacy in the case of Tamar, it is remarked: 'But her story does not end here. Tamar has a voice, and her community has made sure that her voice is not silenced. This community, represented by the biblical writers, stands with Tamar, validates her voice, and acknowledges her suffering. Through the biblical writers, we hear Tamar's voice of wisdom and outrage' (Brouer 2014, p. 10). This should be the same approach that must be embraced within an African family unit. Individuals and churches must learn to speak against GBV.

As part of advocacy, there is a need to educate African homes, churches, and the public. James (2007, p. 313) contends that as part of the campaign to end GBV, there is a need to 'include the story of the rape of Tamar in children's Bibles as an awareness tool about issues concerning gender violence and rape'. Javed and Chattu (2020, p. 32) assert, 'There is a need to engage men and boys by tailoring messages to challenge gender stereotypes and unequal gender roles to overcome patriarchy'. We need to empower our families and communities to detect GBV activities and act against such activities when they occur.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, this research confirmed that GBV is an act of violence directed at all genders. However, it should be highlighted that it is more prevalent among women. GBV during the COVID-19 storm increased rapidly both in South Africa and the global communities to epidemic proportions; hence, it is considered another pandemic that the global community should address. Lawmakers and enforcers should find alternative ways of curbing domestic violence when lockdown restrictions are imposed during storms such as COVID-19. They should also be joined by churches and African family units, serving as agents of transformation and social cohesion, by journeying with victims of GBV. As a way forward, lessons are drawn from a missional reading of 2 Samuel 13, which includes efforts to say no to GBV and reverse violence and no to shaming and dehumanising victims and survivors of GBV in the family context. Efforts to provide education and advocacy are critical. At the same time, practical-missiological support to victims and survivors of GBV remains one of the fundamental liberational tools towards solutions to GBV, particularly in the African family unit.

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