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Practical Theology as Public Ethics: Faith Communities, Gender-Based Violence, and the Reproduction of Patriarchal Norms in South Africa

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Abstract: This article examines the role of practical theology in responding to femicide and gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa, one of the countries with the highest rates of violence against women globally. The study aims to analyze how practical theology can function as a reflective–transformative framework to challenge religious patriarchy, to build victim-centered pastoral praxis, and to promote prevention and social transformation through the engagement of faith communities. The research employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory–descriptive design, combining thematic analysis of interviews with church leaders and local religious actors with a critical review of literature on practical theology, African feminist theology, and faith-based intervention studies. The findings reveal three main points. First, patriarchal theological language and interpretation operate as a symbolic architecture that normalizes violence through the sacralization of family unity, the privatization of suffering, and the spiritualization of women's sacrifice. Second, church pastoral praxis remains ambivalent: it can provide an initial space of protection for survivors, yet it can also prolong risk when it lacks victim-safety standards such as *do no harm*, security-based confidentiality, *informed consent*, and cross-sector referral mechanisms. Third, faith community engagement proves most transformative when practical theology operates as public ethics—through relational education on respect, consent, and non-violence; the formation of men and young men; bystander interventions; gender justice advocacy; and interdisciplinary collaboration with health, legal, and social services—supported by traceable impact indicators. This article argues that practical theology holds strategic capacity to transform churches from ambivalent normative institutions into public moral actors that contribute concretely to GBV prevention, survivor protection, and social norm change. In terms of originality, the study offers a conceptual contribution by positioning practical theology as a bridge between faith, survivors' lived experiences, and measurable social transformation within the South African context.

Keywords: Faith communities; gender-based violence; patriarchal norms; practical theology; public ethics.

Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkaji peran teologi praktis dalam merespons fenomena femisida dan kekerasan berbasis gender (*gender-based violence*/GBV) di Afrika Selatan, salah satu negara dengan tingkat kekerasan terhadap perempuan tertinggi secara global. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana teologi praktis dapat berfungsi sebagai kerangka reflektif-transformatif untuk menantang patriarki religius, membangun praksis pastoral yang berpihak pada korban, serta mendorong pencegahan dan transformasi sosial melalui keterlibatan komunitas iman. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain eksploratoris-deskriptif, memadukan analisis tematik atas wawancara dengan pemimpin gereja dan aktor religius lokal dengan kajian kritis literatur teologi praktis, teologi feminis Afrika, dan studi intervensi berbasis iman. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan tiga hal utama. Pertama, bahasa dan tafsir teologis patriarkal berfungsi sebagai *arsitektur simbolik* yang menormalisasi kekerasan melalui sakralisasi keutuhan keluarga, privatisasi penderitaan, dan spiritualisasi pengorbanan perempuan. Kedua, praksis pastoral gereja bersifat ambivalen: ia dapat menjadi ruang perlindungan awal bagi korban, tetapi juga berpotensi memperpanjang risiko ketika tidak ditopang oleh standar keselamatan korban, seperti prinsip *do no harm*, kerahasiaan berbasis keamanan, *informed consent*, dan rujukan lintas layanan. Ketiga, keterlibatan komunitas iman terbukti

paling transformatif ketika teologi praktis dioperasionalkan sebagai etika publik—melalui pendidikan relasional *(respect–consent–non-violence),* pembinaan laki-laki dan *young men*, intervensi *bystander*, advokasi keadilan gender, serta kolaborasi interdisipliner dengan layanan kesehatan, hukum, dan sosial—dengan indikator dampak yang dapat ditelusuri. Artikel ini menegaskan bahwa teologi praktis memiliki kapasitas strategis untuk mentransformasikan gereja dari institusi normatif yang ambivalen menjadi aktor moral publik yang berkontribusi nyata dalam pencegahan GBV, perlindungan korban, dan perubahan norma sosial. Dari sisi orisinalitas, penelitian ini menawarkan kontribusi konseptual dengan menempatkan teologi praktis sebagai jembatan antara iman, pengalaman korban, dan transformasi sosial yang terukur dalam konteks Afrika Selatan.

Kata kunci: Komunitas keagamaan; kekerasan berbasis gender; norma-norma patriarkal; teologi praktis; etika publik.

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide constitute one of the most acute social crises in contemporary South Africa. The country records a femicide rate nearly five times higher than the global average, placing it among the most dangerous contexts for women worldwide (Rufinaldo, 2018). In 2024 alone, official records documented more than 9,300 rape cases, while reports confirmed that 881 women were killed in the context of gender-based violence (Jacobs, 2025; Mchunu, 2025). These figures do not merely indicate an escalation of interpersonal violence; they also reveal profound structural failures within social protection, legal, and cultural systems that should safeguard vulnerable populations (Mpako & Ndoma, 2023).

The high prevalence of GBV in South Africa persists despite a relatively progressive legal framework. The government has enacted the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Act (2024) and has designated violence against women as a national priority within the National Development Plan. However, slow policy implementation, weak law enforcement, and limited community-based interventions have produced a serious gap between legal norms and social realities (Rensburg, 2025). Other structural conditions further exacerbate this situation, including economic inequality, mass unemployment, xenophobia, and extreme poverty—conditions under which 62.6 percent of children live in food-insecure households—which indirectly heighten the vulnerability of women and children to violence (Media, 2025).

Beyond these structural factors, the South African context demonstrates that GBV intertwines closely with cultural and religious frameworks that shape how social relations acquire meaning and operate in everyday life (Berhanu et al., 2025; Pertek et al., 2023). Amid fragile social protection and uneven legal enforcement, religion often functions as a mediating space between formal policy and lived realities—a space in which violence can be interpreted, negotiated, or normalized. Yet the mechanisms of this mediation remain insufficiently examined. Patriarchal interpretations of religious traditions and teachings can frame violence as a private domestic matter, construe suffering as a moral virtue, and position women within subordinate ethical roles, while, under certain conditions, the same traditions can also provide moral language for resistance and protection. Within this tension, faith communities, particularly churches, occupy a position that is both problematic and strategic. They can reproduce gender inequality, yet they also possess significant moral, symbolic, and social capital to challenge it. This largely unmapped ambivalence renders the study of churches and practical theology especially urgent, because within this space theological interpretation, pastoral praxis, and communal responses intersect directly with lived experiences of violence and possibilities for social transformation.

Scholarly literature on the relationship between religious theology and GBV reveals at least three dominant tendencies. First, a substantial body of research highlights how patriarchal theological interpretations contribute to the legitimation of violence against women. Studies in Christian theology demonstrate that emphases on gender hierarchy within creation narratives and family doctrines

frequently justify male dominance and normalize domestic violence (Clarke, Wendt, & Mayer, 2025a; Makant, 2016). Within religious communities, leaders often encourage women to tolerate suffering, forgive perpetrators, and preserve family unity at the expense of their own safety (de Arruda Nunes & Souza, 2025; Westenberg, 2017).

Second, the literature examines how religious institutions and practices either reproduce or contest violence. Several studies indicate that churches and religious leaders frequently fail to provide adequate pastoral responses and may even prolong cycles of violence through advice that prioritizes obedience, patience, and forgiveness without justice (Nadar, 2005). At the same time, other research emphasizes the potential of faith-based interventions, including violence prevention programs that mobilize communities as collective moral agents (Pearce, Borkoles, & Rundle-Thiele, 2022).

Third, feminist theology and African contextual theology emphasize the centrality of women's *lived experience* as a theological source. These approaches argue that reinterpreting sacred texts through a gender justice lens can open spaces of resistance against patriarchal religious structures and strengthen women's agency (Beecheno, 2021). *African Women's Theology*, in particular, situates women's suffering within a liberative theological framework that foregrounds communal solidarity, collective healing, and critique of colonial–patriarchal legacies within the church.

Despite the richness of this literature, a significant gap remains. Most studies concentrate either on normative critiques of theological patriarchy or on discrete evaluations of faith-based programs. Relatively few investigations systematically integrate practical theology as a reflective–transformative framework that bridges theological interpretation, pastoral practice, and social change in the context of femicide and GBV, particularly in South Africa.

In response to this gap, this article aims to analyze how practical theology can function as both a conceptual and practical framework for confronting femicide and gender-based violence in South Africa. The study specifically seeks to explain how theological reflection rooted in survivors' concrete experiences, combined with pastoral praxis and faith community engagement, can challenge patriarchal norms, strengthen survivor support, and promote gender-just social transformation.

This article argues that practical theology—through contextual hermeneutics, a liberation-oriented praxis, and cross-sector collaboration—possesses strategic capacity to transform churches from ambivalent normative institutions into transformative moral actors in addressing femicide and GBV. The findings indicate that violence emerges not only from perpetrator–victim relations but also from religious ecologies of meaning that normalize domination, privatize suffering, and sacralize family unity above women's safety. In this context, practical theology becomes decisive when it shifts attention from abstract doctrinal correction toward victim-safety–oriented action protocols—such as *do no harm*, security-based confidentiality, *informed consent*, and cross-sector referrals—and when it reconfigures faith communities as accountable producers of social norms (Istratii & Ali, 2023; Magezi & Manzanga, 2019; Maine, Magezi, & Nanthambwe, 2025). By reinterpreting religious teachings through gender-sensitive lenses, deconstructing patriarchal power relations, and positioning survivors' experiences as sources of theological reflection, practical theology moves beyond individualized pastoral healing toward relational norm change, collective community responsibility, and measurable public justice advocacy. Within the South African context—where religion can operate simultaneously as obstacle and catalyst—this approach enables faith to function as active public ethics that bridge survivors' experiences, ecclesial praxis, and social transformation grounded in accountability and concrete protection of human dignity (Maponya, 2021).

2. Method

This article positions the role of practical theology in responding to femicide and gender-based violence (GBV) as the unit of analysis. The study focuses on how faith communities and religious actors—particularly church leaders/pastors and local religious figures—interpret GBV, negotiate religious teachings with survivors' experiences, and develop pastoral practices and forms of community engagement oriented toward victim protection and social transformation. Within this framework, the research does not merely document religious responses to GBV; it also analyzes how

and why specific pastoral practices, discourses, and policies persist, face contestation, or undergo transformation within South Africa's socio-religious context.

The study employs a qualitative exploratory–descriptive design because GBV and femicide involve complex moral, theological, and social dimensions that often remain obscured by cultural and religious norms. An exploratory approach enables the researcher to examine meanings, rationales, and normative considerations that religious actors mobilize when responding to GBV without imposing deterministic explanatory models (Swedberg, 2020). A descriptive orientation, in turn, facilitates *thick description* of pastoral practices, religious narratives, and faith community dynamics in addressing GBV, allowing the analysis to move systematically from empirical description toward critical theological interpretation (Creswell, 2014; Mohajan, 2018).

The data sources comprise primary and secondary materials. The researcher collected primary data from key informants who hold authority, possess relevant experience, and maintain direct involvement in religious ministry and community life, particularly in pastoral accompaniment, family counseling, and responses to domestic and sexual violence. The researcher selected these informants because their positions provide access to both normative church narratives and lived pastoral praxis at the community level (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Secondary data include literature on practical theology, gender and religion studies, church documents, and policy reports and prior studies on GBV in South Africa, which enrich the analytical context and strengthen conceptual dialogue with the field findings.

The study applies purposive sampling to select informants relevant to the research focus. The researcher conducted interviews with eight participants, consisting of four church leaders/pastors and four local religious figures, each with a minimum of five years of practical experience in community ministry. This technique enables in-depth insight into how religious teachings undergo interpretation and enactment in responses to GBV. The researcher collected data through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide designed to explore theological understandings, pastoral practices, and perspectives on victim protection and the role of churches in violence prevention (Brinkmann, 2014; Cohen & Kim, 2020). The interviews took place in *Xitsonga*, were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and were transcribed into English within a maximum of 48 hours after completion to preserve accuracy and contextual meaning.

The researcher analyzed the data using thematic analysis, which involved initial coding, code clustering, theme development, and iterative refinement of thematic meanings through repeated review of transcripts and field notes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). This approach enables identification of recurring patterns related to religious patriarchy, pastoral practices, and faith community engagement in responding to GBV, while preserving the diversity of participants' voices. To ensure the quality and integrity of the findings, the study applies trustworthiness strategies that include member checking, *thick description* to enhance transferability, an audit trail and reflective diary to minimize researcher bias, and the involvement of an independent coder to test the consistency and credibility of the generated themes (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Noble & Smith, 2015).

3. Results

Reinterpreting Theology and Critiquing Religious Patriarchy as a Source of the Normalization of Violence

The crisis of femicide and gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa cannot be understood merely as a series of individual criminal acts; rather, it manifests as a social phenomenon intertwined with political–economic structures, gendered power relations, and—often insufficiently addressed with honesty—moral and religious frameworks that provide justificatory language or, at minimum, a "language of silencing." In the South African context, multiple indicators signal the severity of this crisis: the femicide rate stands at approximately 4.7 per 100,000 women, far exceeding the global average of around 2.0 per 100,000; reported rape cases surpassed 70,000 in the 2023/2024 reporting year; and several studies estimate the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) at between 50 and 60 percent. These figures indicate not only a "high level of violence" but also a normalization that operates

through social routines: people perceive violence as a "natural" relational risk, a family matter that "should not be exposed," or a shame that communities ought to resolve internally.

At this juncture, practical theology becomes crucial because it does not stop at normative assertions that violence is wrong. Practical theology works through *lived religion*—religion as practiced in everyday life—and contextual reflection that examines how faith operates, undergoes negotiation, and even becomes misused within social relations (Nanthambwe & Magezi, 2024). When violence occurs within intimate relationships, survivors often approach churches as the first space they visit—not only for assistance, but also to seek moral legitimation for difficult life decisions, such as whether to remain, leave, report, or disclose abuse. At the same time, churches can also reinforce patriarchal "order" through religious language concerning male leadership, female obedience, and the sacralization of household unity. This ambivalence does not constitute a peripheral issue; rather, it marks a concrete theological battleground.

The findings indicate that religious patriarchy operates primarily not through overt physical violence, but through repeated and institutionalized patterns of interpretation and teaching. In many Christian traditions, hierarchical interpretations of male–female relations frequently attach to narratives of "headship," "creation order," or "husbandly authority" as moral mandates. These structures do not always explicitly instruct violence, yet they provide a "symbolic architecture" that renders domination—and, by extension, violence—intelligible as expressions of authority. Several studies demonstrate that particular scriptural priorities within church communities can construct theological frameworks that position women in vulnerable roles: when obedience, patience, and sacrifice appear as women's primary virtues, acts of resistance to violence—such as reporting abuse, leaving perpetrators, or demanding justice—appear as moral deviations (Clarke et al., 2025a).

This pattern of religious patriarchy also operates through the sacralization of household unity. Communities treat family cohesion as a sacred value that must persist "at all costs," while they frequently negotiate women's safety as a secondary variable. In such contexts, theology functions not as a liberating force, but as a restraining mechanism: leaders encourage women to endure suffering "for the sake of the children," "for the testimony of faith," or "for the family's reputation." Studies of domestic violence within Christian families illustrate how religious language can bind survivors to unsafe relationships: communities often perceive decisions to leave as failures of faith or violations of family ideals (Barnes & Aune, 2024; Westenberg, 2017). In some cases, religious families even "interpret" femicide as a tragedy resolved through rapid forgiveness—treating violence as an individual moral anomaly addressed by confession, rather than as an expression of power relations requiring accountability (de Arruda Nunes & Souza, 2025).

Field data reflect these dynamics as lived experiences. Church leaders in economically marginalized urban areas—such as townships in Cape Town—described, through interview narratives, how women often experience entrapment: they fear physical threats, yet they also fear social and religious stigma when they "expose family shame." Women frequently confront a double dilemma: remaining in abusive relationships exposes them to ongoing risk, while leaving labels them as defiant, home-destroying, or "insufficiently patient." These narratives matter not because of their dramatic tone, but because they reveal that GBV concerns not only acts of violence, but also an ecology of meaning that shapes survivors' life choices.

> In many cases that come to us, women do not begin by speaking about physical injuries, but about layered fears. They say they fear being beaten if they return home, but they also fear reporting—fear humiliation before the congregation, fear being accused of exposing family shame, and even fear being judged as resisting God's will. Some cry and say, 'Pastor, I have prayed and endured, but the violence has not stopped.' In such moments, I realize that violence does not occur only on their bodies, but also within the language of faith taught to them—language about patience, forgiveness, and family unity that leaves them feeling as though they have no choice but to endure (P1–Pastor, Personal Communication, June 21, 2024).

The findings further identify theological mechanisms that normalize GBV through at least three recurring patterns. First, communities frame violence as a test of faith or a cross that women must bear.

Language of suffering, initially intended to express spiritual solidarity, transforms into a moral technology that confines survivors within dangerous situations—as if spiritual safety requires postponing physical safety. Second, communities privatize violence as a "domestic matter." This privatization often gains support from church norms that prioritize harmony and institutional reputation, shifting violence from the realm of public justice into internal mediation that does not consistently protect survivors (Barnes & Aune, 2024; Nadar, 2005). Third, communities position violence as "family shame," rendering reporting more shameful than the violence itself. This pattern reveals distorted moral priorities: communities protect family and church images rather than survivors' dignity (P6–Traditional Healer, Personal Communication, June 23, 2024).

Within a practical theological framework, the central problem with these mechanisms lies in reducing theology to a morality of obedience rather than an ethics of liberation. At this stage, practical theology contributes not primarily by designing programs, but by dismantling processes of religious legitimation through contextual hermeneutics—reading texts, doctrines, and traditions while accounting for power relations, survivors' situations, and the social consequences of interpretation (Magezi & Manzanga, 2019; Nanthambwe & Magezi, 2024). In this approach, survivors' *lived experience* does not function as supplementary data; instead, it operates as a theological source that compels churches to reexamine which teachings—intentionally or unintentionally—perpetuate violence.

Theological reinterpretation then advances through the repositioning of key concepts. First, the concept of human dignity (*imago Dei*): if every person bears God's image, then women's bodies and lives cannot serve as "social costs" for household stability or church reputation. *Imago Dei* affirms non-negotiable dignity; therefore, violence constitutes not merely a relational violation, but a theological affront to divine dignity embodied in survivors (Moder, 2019). Second, the concept of justice: churches cannot replace justice with verbal reconciliation or ritualized forgiveness alone. Justice requires survivor protection, restriction of perpetrators' access to victims, and support for legal processes when necessary. Third, the concept of structural sin: practical theology emphasizes that sin does not attach solely to individual perpetrators, but also to structures that benefit them—including cultures of silence, hierarchical theology, and pastoral practices that ignore risk (Barnes & Aune, 2024; Ogden, 2021). Fourth, the concept of salvation/reconciliation: authentic reconciliation does not eliminate accountability. Reconciliation does not restore a lethal "normal," but transforms power relations toward safety and justice.

A crucial boundary emerges from these findings: communities must distinguish forgiveness from impunity, and reconciliation from returning survivors to dangerous situations. In many faith communities, leaders frame forgiveness as a survivor's obligation, while they treat perpetrators' repentance as sufficient when expressed verbally in religious terms. Practical theology corrects this distortion by affirming that forgiveness—if and when it occurs—constitutes a moral–spiritual process that does not erase consequences, negate protection needs, or nullify responsibility. In other words, communities must not deploy forgiveness as a tool to release perpetrators from accountability or to pressure survivors back into life-threatening relationships. Studies of church responses to violence demonstrate that when religious leadership prioritizes "peace" without safety, churches indirectly prolong violence (Barnes & Aune, 2024; Westenberg, 2017).

In African contexts, *African Women's Theology* strengthens this reinterpretive trajectory by centering women's experiences within hermeneutics and liberative praxis. This approach functions not only as a critique of patriarchy, but also as a theological strategy for constructing healing communities that reject colonial–patriarchal legacies within church and culture (Phiri & Nadar, 2011). Through this lens, textual interpretation no longer begins with doctrinal abstraction, but with concrete questions: which interpretations make women safe? which church practices restore women's dignity? and which structures require challenge to prevent violence from becoming "normal"? This approach also emphasizes communal healing: survivor safety constitutes not an individual concern, but a collective moral responsibility of faith communities.

The contribution of practical theology thus appears across three layers. First, the layer of theological critique exposes patterns of religious patriarchy embedded in teaching, preaching, pastoral

counseling, and church organizational culture. Second, the layer of epistemic reorientation positions survivors' experiences as sources of theological knowledge—rather than objects of pity—enabling churches to recognize violence as a social–theological reality demanding paradigm change. Third, the layer of praxis critique interrogates practices of concealment that protect reputation at the expense of safety, and it rejects internal mediation that ignores risk and survivor protection. At this final layer, practical theology reveals its public character: it demands that churches act as moral agents aligned with survivors, rather than institutions preserving illusory stability (Magezi & Manzanga, 2019; Nanthambwe & Magezi, 2024).

In sum, within the crises of femicide and GBV, theological questions concern not only "what Scripture says," but also "how communities use Scripture" within power relations. Practical theology enables a shift from ecclesial ambivalence toward transformative engagement by dismantling religious legitimation of male domination, rejecting the privatization of violence, and establishing a clear boundary that forgiveness does not equal impunity. Through this framework, faith ceases to function as an instrument of silencing and instead emerges as a source of public ethics that protects human dignity and demands restorative justice.

Accordingly, based on the full body of empirical data, pastoral interviews, and dialogue with theological literature, at least four consistent patterns emerge. First, everyday religious language normalizes GBV by framing violence as a test of faith, a cross, or suffering endured for piety and family unity; this pattern prevents communities from recognizing violence as injustice and recasts it as misunderstood Christian morality. Second, communities strongly privatize violence by relocating GBV from public justice into "household matters" or internal church mediation, structurally weakening survivors' positions and reducing access to legal protection. Third, institutional sacralization of family unity and church reputation repeatedly negotiates women's safety for symbolic stability, disproportionately burdening survivors with moral responsibility rather than perpetrators. Fourth, a persistent gap separates normative theological discourse from concrete pastoral praxis, as teachings on love, justice, and human dignity do not consistently translate into protective, survivor-centered action. Collectively, these data indicate that GBV in South Africa's religious contexts persists not only through socio-economic factors, but also through an ambiguous theological ecology of meaning; without theological reinterpretation and corrective church praxis, faith risks continuing to function as a mechanism of silencing rather than as a force for liberation and protection for women.

Victim-Centered Pastoral Praxis: Accompaniment, Protection, and Cross-Sector Referrals

If the first sub-finding demonstrates how theological language can operate as a "symbolic architecture" that normalizes violence, this second sub-finding presents practical theology as a framework for action. Here, practical theology does not merely correct interpretation; it guides faith institutions to act concretely amid crisis—receiving survivor disclosures, assessing risk, safeguarding safety, and connecting survivors to the service networks they require. In the context of femicide and GBV in South Africa, this point proves critical because, as field narratives consistently show, churches often constitute the first space survivors approach, prior to the police, clinics, or social service agencies. Yet this "institutional proximity" remains ambivalent: it can function as a mechanism of protection, but it can also become a mechanism of delay and silencing. Recent practical theology scholarship identifies this ambivalence as an unresolved shift between churches acting as sanctuaries and churches trapped in a condition often described as "holy hush"—silence maintained for the sake of reputation, harmony, or the sacralization of family unity. Consequently, practical theology cannot stop at moral exhortations to "help"; it must articulate minimum standards of pastoral care that bind churches ethically and operationally, so that they do not become part of a lethal chain of risk (Magezi & Manzanga, 2019; Maine et al., 2025).

Field findings show that church responses to survivors range across a spectrum, from active support to passive denial that appears "neutral" yet proves harmful. At one end of the spectrum, some faith communities adopt clear positions: they provide safe spaces for disclosure, assist survivors in planning next steps, and act as bridges to medical, psychological, and legal services. At the other end,

churches display response patterns that masquerade as spiritual counsel: leaders advise survivors to "be patient," "pray more earnestly," or "forgive for the sake of peace," without conducting risk assessments or developing safety plans. Interviews reveal cases in which women arrive in states of acute distress—sometimes after repeated abuse—and seek assistance not only to be "rescued," but also to obtain moral legitimacy to leave life-threatening relationships. At the same time, several respondents observe that some community members—and even certain leaders—express greater anxiety about "family reputation" and "congregational scandal" than about survivor safety (P2, P3, P4–Pastors, Personal Communication, June 23, 2024). This pattern aligns with research on IPV disclosure within church settings: survivors often approach churches because they perceive them as safe and trustworthy, yet their outcomes depend heavily on whether church responses prioritize survivor safety or institutional stability (Goertzen, Yancey, & Rogers, 2024; Pepper & Powell, 2022).

At this point, practical theology clarifies that pastoral care in GBV contexts does not constitute mere "spiritual counseling," but rather an ethical praxis that demands safety standards. The findings articulate four minimum principles. First, the principle of *do no harm*: pastoral actions must undergo evaluation not by their good intentions, but by their risk consequences. For example, advice to "return home and reconcile" without danger assessment can retraumatize survivors and even escalate femicide risk. This principle requires churches to abandon simplistic logics of "rapid reconciliation" and adopt risk-based protection frameworks. Second, confidentiality and security: GBV disclosures always occur within fields of threat—from perpetrators and from community stigma alike. Accordingly, information management, meeting security, and communication protocols (who knows what, when, and how) do not represent administrative details; they form integral components of pastoral ethics. Third, *informed consent*: survivors must retain control over decisions, including when to report, to whom, and what forms of support they seek; pastoral actions that coerce survivors to "report now" or "reconcile now" reproduce power asymmetries rather than resolve them. Fourth, cross-sector referral: victim-centered pastoral care must recognize the limits of internal church capacity and normalize referrals to professional services—clinics or hospitals for examination and post-exposure prophylaxis when relevant, psychologists or psychiatrists for trauma support, and legal aid and state protection mechanisms. Integrated service literature emphasizes that effective violence response requires service coordination; churches can function as frontline listeners and bridges, not as institutions attempting to manage every dimension alone (Fernández Alonso, Salvador Sánchez, González Bustillo, & Escribá-Agüir, 2024; Leimgruber, 2024). These four minimum victim-safety principles, together with their ethical implications and associated risks, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Minimum Victim-Safety Principles for Pastoral Care in GBV Contexts

Pastoral Care Principle	Core Meaning	Risk if Ignored	Practical Theology Implications
Do no harm	Pastoral actions are evaluated by their impacts and risk consequences, not merely by good intentions	Survivor retraumatization; increased risk of further violence or femicide due to "rapid reconciliation" advice	Shifts pastoral care from moralistic logic to a risk-assessment and survivor-protection approach
Confidentiality and security	Information management and meetings must protect survivors from perpetrator threats and community stigma	Information leakage; intimidation; silencing of survivors; physical danger	Treats confidentiality as theological ethics rather than an administrative procedure
Informed consent	Survivors retain control over decisions, pace, and forms of support	Reproduction of power asymmetries; religious	Pastoral care respects survivors' moral

		pressure; loss of survivor agency	autonomy as theological subjects
Cross-sector referrals	Acknowledges churches' limited capacity and integrates medical, psychological, and legal services	Partial response; failed recovery; excessive dependence on the church	Positions churches as frontline listeners and bridges rather than substitutes for professional services

However, the translation of these minimum principles into practice encounters distinct religion-based barriers that operate subtly yet systemically. The pressure to "endure for the sake of the family" emerges as the most dominant constraint: communities frame survivors as moral guardians of the household, so they interpret decisions to leave as failures of faith or as social sin (P8–Traditional Healer, Personal Communication, June 22, 2024). In some settings, divorce stigma leads women to anticipate the loss of community, religious identity, and even access to economic and social support sustained through church networks. In addition, victim-blaming often appears through questions that sound pastoral but remain accusatory, such as "What did you do to make your husband angry?" or "Have you been sufficiently obedient and respectful?" These questions shift responsibility away from perpetrators and toward survivors' morality. Another barrier involves the spiritualization of suffering: communities treat violence as a "test of faith," a "cross," or a "path of purification," which encourages survivors to interpret trauma as a religious obligation to endure (P7–Traditional Healer, Personal Communication, June 23, 2024). Pastoral literature identifies this pattern as not only theologically distorted but also clinically dangerous because it intensifies guilt and disrupts survivors' access to rational protective action (Makhanya, 2022; Mukuka, 2023; Stephens & Walker, 2015).

Accordingly, the next set of findings underscores the need for faith-based intervention models that move beyond a rhetoric of concern and instead build operational pastoral instruments. The first model involves trauma-informed pastoral care as a working framework. In this approach, churches treat survivors not as "objects of compassion," but as subjects living with trauma who require consistent safe spaces: pastors listen without interrogation, validate experiences without blaming, avoid coercive counsel, and restore survivors' control over their life narratives. The concept of "wounded healing" positions the church as a site of social healing: communities do not trade suffering as a heroic narrative of endurance, but transform it into solidarity and recovery that respect survivor agency (Maine et al., 2025). The literature also emphasizes sensitivity to "vulnerance"—vulnerability produced by power asymmetries and social systems—so pastoral care cannot remain naive; it must recognize that spiritual spaces can become unsafe when communities lack professional standards and protection protocols (Leimgruber, 2024). In practice, this trauma-informed framework encourages churches to develop simple safety planning: emergency contacts, safe routes, temporary shelter options, and assessments of violence escalation—measures that communities often dismiss as "too worldly," even though they save lives.

The second model involves establishing support groups and survivor accompaniment communities. The findings indicate that survivors' recovery does not occur only through one-to-one relationships with pastors, but through social networks capable of absorbing stigma. Support groups enable survivors to share experiences, reduce isolation, and transform shame into collective awareness that violence does not constitute the survivor's fault. Several studies emphasize creative methods—storytelling, art, and contextual Bible study—as means of offering new language for traumatic experiences, particularly when older moral vocabularies provide only the categories of "patience" and "forgiveness" (Dlamini, 2025). In South African faith communities, this mechanism matters because church culture often operates communally; when communities reorganize themselves into safe spaces, they can become powerful resources for recovery rather than arenas of social judgment.

The third model entails a clear and trusted safe reporting mechanism. The findings show that disclosure often fails not because survivors "refuse," but because communities do not provide safe channels: survivors fear information leakage, moral judgment, or church leaders siding with

perpetrators, especially when perpetrators hold respected status or church office. Churches therefore need simple yet firm reporting procedures: designated recipients of reports, secure data management, protocols that prevent survivors from facing perpetrators directly, referral pathways, and mechanisms for handling conflicts of interest when perpetrators belong to the church's inner circle. Research on church responses to IPV shows that the absence of such procedures pushes leaders toward ad hoc decision-making; outcomes then depend on theological preferences and personal biases rather than ethical standards (Drumm et al., 2018; Houston-Kolnik, Todd, & Greeson, 2019). In a high-risk South African context, "ad hoc" effectively means "dangerous."

The fourth model, which connects all the models above, focuses on training church leaders and lay ministers as risk-aware gatekeepers. The findings indicate that church leadership can function either as an entry point to justice or as a locked gate that confines survivors within violence. As gatekeepers, church leaders determine whether survivors receive attentive listening, whether reports are taken seriously, whether referrals are facilitated, or whether survivors are sent back home with counsel that delays action. Research on clergy practices in IPV cases shows that many religious leaders recognize the significance of their roles but feel unprepared, lack knowledge of violence dynamics, and lack referral maps; training strengthens response capacity in both the short and long term (Drumm et al., 2018; Tedder & Smith, 2018; Zust, Housley, & Klatke, 2017). Within a practical theological framework, such training does not merely constitute technical capacity-building; it forms a moral habitus by shifting orientation away from protecting institutional symbolic stability toward protecting the concrete safety of human bodies. These four faith-based intervention models, together with their core focus and operational elements, are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Faith-Based Intervention Models in Victim-Centered Pastoral Praxis for GBV

Intervention Model	Focus	Key Practical Elements
Trauma-informed pastoral care	Survivor recovery grounded in safety and agency	Listening without interrogation; experience validation; non-blaming responses; restoration of survivor control; safety planning (emergency contacts, safe routes, temporary shelter, escalation assessment)
Support groups and accompaniment communities	Reduction of stigma and social isolation	Survivor support groups; shared experiences; collective solidarity; creative methods (storytelling, art, contextual Bible study)
Safe reporting mechanisms	Safe access to disclosure and referral	Clear reporting procedures; trained report recipients; data protection; conflict-of-interest prevention; structured referrals
Training church leaders as gatekeepers	Direction of institutional responses to survivors	Training on GBV dynamics; referral service mapping; risk awareness; ethical decision-making

Accordingly, these findings affirm that practical theology operates most decisively at the level of "moral protocols translated into action." It reads the church as an institution that produces consequences: when churches emphasize the sacralization of family unity without safety mechanisms, they become spaces of risk; when they prioritize confidentiality without security, they become spaces of leakage; when they promote forgiveness without accountability and referral, they become spaces that prolong violence. Conversely, when churches practice minimum victim-safety standards of pastoral care—*do no harm*, confidentiality and security, *informed consent*, and professional referral—they can transform from ambivalent institutions into agents of protection. In the context of South Africa's femicide and GBV crisis, this transformation does not constitute an optional ethical addition, but a theological requirement: faith that claims to defend human dignity must prove itself in the most

concrete domain, namely whether it can keep survivors alive, safe, and supported toward recovery and justice.

Therefore, this article identifies at least four principal patterns in church pastoral praxis when confronting femicide and GBV. First, a systemic institutional ambivalence emerges: churches operate simultaneously as potential safe spaces and as sites of real risk. On the one hand, churches serve as initial disclosure points and function as frontline listeners; on the other hand, orientations toward symbolic stability—family reputation, congregational harmony, and institutional image—frequently displace survivor safety as the primary concern, transforming pastoral responses into mechanisms of delay or silencing. Second, a sharp gap appears between pastoral intention and safety standards. Many responses arise from genuine religious empathy, yet without *do no harm*, security-based confidentiality, and *informed consent*, such empathy risks retraumatizing survivors and escalating danger. Third, the data reveal normatively operating religious barriers, particularly pressures to "endure for the sake of the family," the spiritualization of suffering, and divorce stigma, which effectively shift responsibility from perpetrators to survivors through subtle mechanisms of victim-blaming. Fourth, leadership capacity varies significantly in gatekeeping roles, as church leaders determine survivors' trajectories: they either facilitate access to medical, psychological, and legal services, or confine survivors within ad hoc responses shaped by personal theological preferences. In conclusion, the effectiveness of practical theology in responding to GBV depends not on the intensity of moral concern, but on the presence of operational, trauma-informed, and cross-sector pastoral protocols; without them, churches tend to become part of a chain of risk, while with them they can transform into concrete and justice-oriented agents of protection.

Faith Community Engagement for Prevention and Social Transformation: Relational Education, Advocacy, and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

This article identifies a decisive stage for practical theology as a social project: the movement of churches beyond normative–internal functions toward transformative–public roles. In South Africa's femicide and GBV crisis, this transformation does not represent a discretionary ethical option; it constitutes a structural necessity. Violence does not end with perpetrator–survivor relations; it persists within masculinity norms, social networks, cultures of silence, and economic–spatial inequalities that enable violence to recur and become increasingly lethal (P3–Pastor, Personal Communication, June 25, 2024). Consequently, practical theology at the community level cannot limit itself to producing "anti-violence sermons." It must guide preventive action, collective-responsibility–based social intervention, policy advocacy, and cross-sector collaboration, with traceable indicators of impact. At this point, faith appears as public ethics: a bridge between survivors' experiences, moral readings of reality, and measurable social change (Istratii & Ali, 2023).

Field findings converge on a central pattern: faith communities function as "social spaces that produce norms," and therefore they can operate either as sources of risk or as sources of protection. In interviews, several church leaders in economically marginalized urban areas described how violence often grows from everyday relations perceived as ordinary—ways men assert control, ways communities discipline women deemed "too vocal," and ways families and neighbors choose silence to avoid "shaming" households. Yet the same leaders also acknowledged that because churches constitute the most proximate spaces of encounter for residents—especially women and children—they possess social capital to intervene in norms before violence escalates into crisis. Here, practical theology demands repositioning: churches must not only judge behavior after harm occurs, but must reorder the ecology of meaning that renders violence acceptable, while cultivating new standards of safe relationships, consent, and non-violence as social virtues rather than private ethics.

> Violence often does not arrive as something immediately recognized as violence. It grows slowly from things considered normal: men who always decide, women told to remain silent to preserve households, and communities that avoid intervention for fear of embarrassing families. In many cases, people say, 'This is a private family matter,' even though violence takes root precisely there. Because congregations gather weekly, churches actually have opportunities to shape how people

> think before violence occurs. If churches speak early about mutual respect, consent, and non-negotiable boundaries, then they do not merely react after harm appears; they participate in preventing violence itself (P2–Pastor, Personal Communication, June 22, 2024).

At the level of community-based prevention, the data point to the need for explicit relational education centered on respect, consent, and non-violence. Many prevention programs fail not because their moral messages err, but because they do not transform the "social curriculum" that shapes relationships. Studies on the role of faith-based organizations in addressing relational violence emphasize that churches can become critical arenas for healthy relationship education—engaging religious leaders, parents, and young people—while confronting a persistent tension: communities often hesitate to discuss sexuality, privacy, and consent openly, even though these domains constitute primary sites where abusive dynamics emerge (Li, Freedman, Fernandez y Garcia, & Miller, 2016). Effective practical theology therefore does not stop at injunctions such as "do not hit" or "love your spouse," but builds relational literacy: distinguishing care from control, leadership from domination, and reconciliation from coerced returns to dangerous relationships. Such relational education functions as primary prevention by addressing root causes, including the normalization of toxic masculinity, social legitimation of possessive jealousy, and romanticization of women's sacrifice.

The next dominant need emerging from the data involves engaging men and young men as loci of normative change. GBV prevention cannot succeed if communities position women as the sole "subjects of vigilance" while leaving men as "unchallenged subjects." The literature shows that programs targeting norms within faith communities can produce significant change because they mobilize existing moral authority and social networks. Experimental studies of faith-based norm-shifting programs, such as Masculinity, Faith, and Peace initiatives, demonstrate reductions in partner violence and improvements in relationship quality when communities collectively renegotiate masculinity, respect, and peace (Shaw et al., 2023). These findings align with systematic reviews of interventions among adolescent boys and young men in low- and middle-income countries, which show that behavioral change becomes more likely when interventions develop relational skills, transform peer norms, and create environments that reward non-violence socially (DaSilva-Ibru, Stöckl, Pearson, & Zimmerman, 2025). Within a practical theological framework, engagement with men must not culminate in a hierarchical morality of "being a good husband," but must shift ethical centers from power toward responsibility, inviting men to act as agents of social protection rather than guardians of dominance.

Building on primary prevention, the findings underscore the urgency of bystander intervention and a communal ethic of responsibility. GBV often persists because communities witness warning signs yet feel neither authorized nor safe to act. Research on community action against violence against women shows that social courage does not arise automatically; it depends on legitimacy to intervene, collective strength, and risk protection for helpers (Gram, Paradkar, Osrin, Daruwalla, & Cislaghi, 2023). In many cases, communities refrain from action not because of indifference, but because of fear of conflict, retaliation, or lack of procedural guidance. Here, churches can organize social responsibility by establishing norms that "silence is not neutral" and by providing safe steps for bystander action. Evidence from bystander program implementation within church networks shows that success depends not on moral rhetoric, but on operational design: contextual adaptation to religious settings, leadership capacity-building, social marketing, co-design, and consistent monitoring and measurement systems (Pearce et al., 2022). In this sense, practical theology functions as an "architecture of action," specifying what congregants may and must do when they hear a neighbor's screams, notice control dynamics in young relationships, or learn of a woman's isolation. Through this work, communities become social protectors rather than moral spectators.

The next layer involves church advocacy and public accountability. Field data indicate that some church leaders increasingly interpret GBV as a public issue rather than a private family struggle, yet they encounter institutional barriers: fear of "politicizing the church," anxiety about reputation, and limited capacity to engage policy spaces. The literature shows that religion can sustain patriarchy, but it can also generate transformative energy when religious actors mobilize moral authority for social

reform (Maponya, 2021). Practical theology at the advocacy level requires churches to pursue two simultaneous commitments: first, public witness, by declaring openly that GBV violates human dignity and justice; and second, implementation support, by promoting local GBV committees or councils, strengthening reporting mechanisms, and demanding state accountability across health services, policing, and social protection. In some contexts, research on religious actors in legal reform campaigns shows that effective advocacy emerges precisely from the ability to translate faith language into policy language, linking gender justice demands to shared moral values so that change appears not as an "external agenda," but as a collective ethical obligation (Adamu & Para-Mallam, 2012). Under this logic, churches do not replace the state; they transform the moral climate that compels the state to act. The patterns of faith community engagement in GBV prevention and social transformation identified in this sub-finding are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Patterns of Faith Community Engagement in GBV Prevention and Social Transformation

Domain of Findings	Main Patterns/Tendencies	Forms of Practice in the Field	Meaning for Practical Theology
Faith communities as producers of social norms	Churches function as spaces that shape relational meaning; they can reproduce violence normalization or become sources of protection	Normalization of male control, silencing of women, cultures of silence for the sake of "reputation," alongside potential for early intervention due to social proximity	Practical theology reorders the community's "ecology of meaning," shifting from justifying silence toward an ethics of safe relationships
Community-based prevention through relational education	Prevention becomes effective when it targets the social curriculum of relationships (*respect–consent–non-violence*), not merely moral prohibitions	Healthy relationship education in churches; discussions on *consent*; reinterpretations of love, leadership, and reconciliation	Faith operates as public relational literacy rather than private ethics or abstract moral advice
Formation of men and young men	Masculinity norm transformation proves more effective when pursued collectively within faith communities	Men's formation programs; discussions of non-violent masculinity; responsibility-based relationships	Practical theology shifts masculinity ethics from power toward social responsibility
Bystander intervention and communal responsibility	Violence persists because communities feel neither authorized nor safe to act	Normalization of silence; absence of safe procedures; emerging church-based *bystander* programs	Faith constructs moral legitimacy for action: silence is not neutral, and the community acts as protector
Church advocacy and public accountability	Churches increasingly view GBV as a public issue, yet fear politicization and reputational risk	Public anti-GBV statements; support for GBV committees or councils; moral pressure on the state	Practical theology functions as public ethics that bridge faith and policy
Interdisciplinary collaboration	Effective responses require cross-sector networks	Cooperation with health services, police, social workers, shelters, and women's organizations	Churches act as network nodes rather than single

			actors or state substitutes
Measuring social transformation impact	Impact must be measured concretely rather than normatively	Increased safe reporting; attitude change among congregants; strengthened referrals; reduced normalization of violence	Practical theology undergoes testing through social consequences, not moral intentions alone

However, effective advocacy requires interdisciplinary collaboration, which the findings identify as both a key weakness and a major opportunity. The second sub-finding emphasized cross-sector referrals at the case level; in this third sub-finding, collaboration advances to the ecosystem level. Churches work with clinics and hospitals, trauma services, shelters, social workers, police, and women's organizations, not merely by "referring during crises," but by building routine coordination. Reviews of religion and faith-based responses to IPV stress that effective interventions must remain contextual, recognize the complexity of survivors' experiences, and rely on inter-institutional networks to prevent fragmented support (Istratii & Ali, 2023). Moreover, safeguarding literature in faith communities demonstrates that strong partnerships require specific local roles, such as safeguarding leads, reporting mechanisms compatible with state services, and clear governance structures to prevent faith communities from becoming trapped in internal handling marked by conflicts of interest (Obuse, 2015). In interviews, several church leaders acknowledged that they often build networks "too late," seeking service contacts only when cases reach severe stages. Practical theology thus shifts the horizon of action from episodic response to stable collaborative infrastructure (P2, P3, P4–Pastors, Personal Communication, June 22-23, 2024).

For this reason, a crucial component of this sub-finding concerns impact measurement, so that faith community engagement does not collapse into normativity alone. The data indicate that impact indicators must capture change across three levels: access, norms, and system capacity. At the access level, indicators include increased safe reporting—not merely "more cases," but more cases handled through secure channels—greater success in referrals to professional services, and reduced waiting time between disclosure and protective action. At the norm level, indicators include shifts in congregational attitudes toward *consent*, divorce stigma, and victim-blaming, which can be measured through simple surveys or pre- and post-training evaluations. At the system capacity level, indicators include the presence of *bystander* procedures understood by congregants, the number of trained leaders, the functioning of local GBV committees, and the sustainability of cross-institutional partnerships, such as memoranda of understanding or active two-way referral systems. Without such indicators, churches may easily assume that they have "done something," while change remains confined to discourse rather than risk reduction.

Ultimately, this sub-finding affirms the position of practical theology as public ethics that bridge faith, survivors' experiences, and social transformation. Practical theology does not abandon faith language; it tests that language in social reality by asking whether it transforms relational norms, strengthens collective responsibility, and expands access to justice. In the South African context—where tensions between religious patriarchy and aspirations for equality remain strong—religion can function either as an obstacle or as a catalyst. This study shows that religious commitment can intertwine with the reinforcement of patriarchal norms, yet precisely therein lies the relevance of transformative work: change cannot rely solely on external pressure, but must undergo negotiation from within communities, through leaders, social curricula, and communal practices that produce norms (Maponya, 2021). Transformative faith community engagement therefore requires three shifts: first, from private morality to community-based prevention; second, from rhetorical concern to *bystander* mechanisms and advocacy; and third, from ad hoc responses to measurable cross-sector collaboration. In this way, faith ceases to function as a cover for shame and instead emerges as a public energy capable

of reducing the normalization of violence and, at the most concrete level, of keeping women alive, safe, and able to access pathways toward recovery and justice.

4. Discussion

This study affirms that the crisis of femicide and gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa cannot be understood merely as an accumulation of individual criminal acts, but rather as an expression of a religious ecology of meaning that shapes how communities interpret power relations, suffering, and justice. Through three principal sub-findings, the article demonstrates that practical theology operates simultaneously across three interrelated domains: theological discourse, pastoral praxis, and community engagement in the public sphere. At the level of hermeneutics and everyday faith language, patriarchal interpretations function as a "symbolic architecture" that normalizes violence, privatizes suffering, and silences survivors in the name of faith, family unity, and church reputation. At the level of pastoral praxis, churches appear ambivalent—serving both as the first spaces of disclosure for survivors and as institutions that frequently fail to provide safety-based responses due to the absence of binding ethical–operational standards. Meanwhile, at the level of community and public engagement, the study shows that churches possess significant social capital for prevention and social transformation, yet this potential materializes only when faith operates as public ethics through relational education, *bystander* intervention, policy advocacy, and cross-sector collaboration with traceable impact.

These findings reflect how theology functions as *lived religion*—faith as practiced and negotiated in everyday life—which not only shapes personal belief but also produces social norms. Faith language delineates boundaries between what communities perceive as normal and deviant, speakable and unspeakable. In the South African context, structural inequality, poverty, and toxic masculinities reinforce patriarchal religious interpretations that provide moral legitimation for unequal power relations. Within this configuration, violence against women does not always appear as a clear ethical violation, but rather as a relational risk that communities naturalize within everyday life.

Church ambivalence at the pastoral level emerges from tensions between institutional symbolic functions and survivors' concrete safety. When churches prioritize symbolic stability—family unity, congregational harmony, and institutional reputation—pastoral responses tend to shift toward delay, spiritualization of suffering, and premature reconciliation. By contrast, when churches translate practical theology into moral–operational protocols—such as *do no harm*, security-based confidentiality, *informed consent*, and cross-sector referrals—they can transform into protective actors. At the community level, the effectiveness of church engagement depends on its capacity to shift faith from private ethics toward public ethics that organize collective responsibility and reorder relational norms.

Comparatively, these findings align with studies that highlight patriarchal theological interpretations as sources of legitimizing violence against women. Previous research documents how gender hierarchies embedded in family doctrines and creation narratives justify male domination and encourage women to tolerate suffering for the sake of household unity (Clarke, Wendt, & Mayer, 2025b; Makant, 2016; Westenberg, 2017). This study confirms these patterns, while advancing the argument by showing that normalization operates as an institutionalized ecology of meaning embedded in pastoral practices and community cultures, rather than as isolated distortions of individual interpretation.

The findings also resonate with literature that critiques pastoral failures, particularly advice emphasizing obedience and forgiveness without justice (Nadar, 2005). This study demonstrates the concrete consequences of such failures in elevating survivor risk. Unlike studies that evaluate faith-based interventions in isolation, this article integrates theological critique, pastoral praxis analysis, and community engagement within a single reflective–transformative practical theology framework. This integration constitutes the study's primary contribution: it positions practical theology not merely as a normative or programmatic response, but as a conceptual bridge linking theological interpretation, survivors' experiences, and measurable social change.

The study further intersects with feminist theology and *African Women's Theology*, which treat women's lived experiences as theological sources (Beecheno, 2021). Its added contribution lies in operationalizing those experiences into pastoral protocols and community impact indicators, ensuring that *lived experience* functions not only as hermeneutical critique, but also as the foundation for ecclesial praxis and policy.

Historically, the findings reveal the persistence of colonial–patriarchal legacies embedded in South African church institutions, shaping how religion operates as a technology of social order. During colonialism and apartheid, Christian theology often legitimized racial hierarchy through selective biblical readings, doctrines of obedience, and sacralization of authority. Post-apartheid transitions did not fully dismantle these patterns; instead, they reemerge in the normalization of gender hierarchy. Within this frame, violence against women appears not as a modern anomaly, but as a continuation of historical practices in which religion disciplines bodies and social relations for symbolic communal stability (Magezi & Manzanga, 2019; Maponya, 2021). Postcolonial theology and *African Women's Theology* emphasize that this continuity arises from colonial legacies that fused political power, biblical interpretation, and social control over women's bodies, rendering women's suffering a legitimate cost of moral order (Adamu & Para-Mallam, 2012; Coleman, 2012; Istratii & Ali, 2023).

Socially, the study positions churches as strategic arenas for both the reproduction and transformation of relational norms. When faith communities reproduce cultures of silence, normalize gender control, and privatize violence as household matters, churches function as sources of social risk that prolong GBV cycles. Conversely, when faith operates through relational education emphasizing respect, *consent*, and non-violence, accompanied by *bystander* ethics and community advocacy, churches can transform into active social protectors. Faith-based intervention literature confirms that normative change occurs most effectively when religious communities move beyond moral messaging to establish collective legitimacy for action and provide safe social mechanisms (Gram et al., 2023; Pearce et al., 2022). Accordingly, GBV must be understood as a relational–communal issue produced by social norms rather than as a private matter confined to survivor–perpetrator relations (Magezi & Manzanga, 2019).

Ideologically, the findings challenge faith frameworks reduced to moralities of obedience and superficial harmony. The practical theology emerging from the data relocates ethical focus from hierarchical compliance to safety, dignity, and justice as public commitments. Faith functions not primarily as individual piety, but as social ethics that demand accountability for power relations and tangible consequences of religious practice. Within this framework, forgiveness remains clearly distinguished from impunity, and reconciliation signifies not a return to dangerous relationships, but a transformative process toward justice and safety (Barnes & Aune, 2024; Magezi & Manzanga, 2019; Ogden, 2021).

The central function of these dynamics lies in the church's potential as a site of early intervention, survivor protection, and normative transformation. At the same time, the study exposes serious dysfunctions when pastoral empathy lacks clear safety standards and cross-sector collaboration. In such contexts, religious goodwill becomes a mechanism of harm: spiritual counsel without risk assessment returns survivors to lethal situations; confidentiality without security protocols enables intimidation; and faith language of patience, forgiveness, or peace cloaks violence with moral legitimacy. Numerous studies indicate that institutional church failures often stem from ad hoc responses guided by leaders' moral intuition rather than trauma-informed, networked ethical–operational frameworks (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2019; Leimgruber, 2024; Moon & Shim, 2010; Pepper & Powell, 2022).

Drawing on these findings and reflections on dysfunction, the study proposes an action-oriented agenda as structural correction to identified failure points. At the ecclesial level, churches must institutionalize minimum victim-safety standards of pastoral care as formal policy. At the community level, relational education, men's formation, and *bystander* intervention must integrate into the social curriculum of faith. At the public level, churches must assume explicit advocacy roles in supporting GBV policies and demanding state accountability. At the systemic level, interdisciplinary collaboration must be institutionalized through referral networks, safeguarding lead roles, and measurable impact

indicators. Under this framework, practical theology undergoes evaluation not by the sincerity of intention, but by its social consequences: whether faith can interrupt chains of risk, reduce violence normalization, and keep survivors alive, safe, and able to access pathways toward recovery and justice.

5. Conclusion

This study affirms a central lesson: within the context of South Africa's femicide and gender-based violence (GBV) crisis, practical theology operates most decisively when communities read and practice it as public ethics oriented toward survivor safety. The findings demonstrate that violence does not arise solely from individual relationships, but rests upon a religious ecology of meaning—faith language, theological interpretation, and pastoral practice—that normalizes domination, privatizes suffering, and silences disclosure. Through three analytical layers, the article shows that, first, patriarchal theological interpretations and the sacralization of family unity function as a symbolic architecture that normalizes violence; second, church pastoral praxis remains ambivalent, capable of providing protection or becoming part of a chain of risk when it lacks survivor-safety standards; and third, faith community engagement becomes effective and transformative only when faith operates as community prevention, justice advocacy, and cross-sector collaboration supported by measurable impact indicators. Accordingly, the study clarifies that the primary problem does not lie in a "lack of religious concern," but in the absence of a practical theological framework capable of translating faith into protective and transformative action.

In terms of scholarly contribution, this article advances practical theology and religion–gender studies in several ways. First, it offers a conceptual integration of theological critique, pastoral praxis analysis, and faith community engagement within a single reflective–transformative framework, moving beyond fragmented normative approaches or isolated program evaluations. Second, it enriches the literature by positioning survivors' *lived experience* not merely as objects of empathy or illustrative data, but as theological sources that correct interpretation, shape pastoral protocols, and test the validity of faith in public space. Third, the article develops an understanding of practical theology as an "architecture of action," namely a framework that orders relationships among faith, social norms, and policy through safety standards, *bystander* mechanisms, advocacy, and interdisciplinary collaboration with measurable impact. In doing so, the study expands the horizon of practical theology from internal ecclesial domains toward public ethics oriented to the protection of human dignity.

Nevertheless, the study acknowledges several limitations. First, the empirical data derive from a limited number of informants and focus on economically marginalized urban communities; therefore, the findings do not seek broad generalization across the full spectrum of churches and faith communities in South Africa. Second, the study centers on the perspectives of religious leaders and actors; ethical and methodological considerations prevented in-depth exploration of survivors' voices directly. Third, the article emphasizes conceptual and praxis-oriented analysis rather than quantitative evaluation of the long-term impacts of faith-based interventions.

These limitations open avenues for further research. Future studies could expand survivor participation through ethnographic or participatory approaches, explore dynamics across denominations and rural–urban contexts, and empirically test the effectiveness of the impact indicators proposed in this study. In this way, subsequent research can deepen understanding of how practical theology not only reflects on the realities of violence, but also contributes concretely to risk reduction, survivor recovery, and gender-just social transformation.

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