



Faith-Based Support for Survivors of Domestic Abuse: The Insights of Church Leaders in the Eastern Cape

Author

Linda Mshweshwe 

Author's email: mshweshwelinda77@gmail.com

University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Cite this article in APA

Mshweshwe, L. (2026). Faith-based support for survivors of domestic abuse: The insights of church leaders in the Eastern Cape. *Journal of pastoral and practical theology*, 5(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jppt.v5i1.901>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 2025-12-07

Accepted: 2026-01-04

Published: 2026-02-02

Scan this QR to read the paper online



Copyright: ©2026 by the author(s). This article is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



Abstract

The study aimed to explore faith community-based support for women experiencing abuse in rural areas of the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Using qualitative methods, this study interviewed nine faith leaders to explore their perspectives regarding the support they provide for women surviving domestic abuse in their congregations. Insights highlight that faith leaders provide well-needed support, including prayers and counselling, for abused women navigating the aftermath of domestic abuse. However, this study found that the attitude of some faith leaders in understanding marriage relationships is influenced by patriarchal ideology, which is reflected in the way they justify male dominance in the family sphere. The adherence to traditional gender role norms that emphasise male authority reveals a broader systemic belief that has the potential to negatively influence the support they provide for abused women. The study concludes that while all faith leaders who took part in this study demonstrate a commitment to helping abused women, the majority of them have limited knowledge on how to effectively deal with survivors of domestic abuse, which tends to weaken their efforts. This paper recommends that faith leaders receive training on domestic abuse so that they can respond effectively to the needs of survivors.

Key terms: Domestic abuse, domestic violence, faith-based support for survivors, faith leaders, support for victims.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Domestic abuse remains a critical social issue and a public health concern affecting many women across the globe and in South Africa (World Health Organisation, 2025). Research has frequently identified men as perpetrators while women are usually the victims (Mazibuko, 2016; Truong, 2022). Research shows that domestic abuse is closely linked to patriarchy, a system that promotes male authority and subordination of women in many spheres, including politics, the workforce and family (Dobash & Dobash, 2017; Walby & Towers, 2018). Numerous studies have demonstrated how patriarchy is preserved and reinforced through religio-cultural norms that oppress women (Ajayi et al., 2022; Whitnah, 2022). They highlight that, regardless of the scourge of violence against women, the church remains silent rather than speaking out against it (Davis & Johnson, 2021; Kanyeredzi & Wilson, 2023). Also, the faith-based support for survivors of domestic abuse has been under scrutiny in recent years, with research revealing its potential for supporting the victims (Ferrari et al., 2016; Gibbs et al., 2018), as well as complexities surrounding it (Mahomva et al., 2020; Westenberg, 2017).

While domestic abuse affects many women from different demographics, its intersection with faith introduces a unique aspect to understanding it and supporting the victims (Takyi & Lamptey, 2020; Wallace, 2024). Studies consistently highlight that women who live in rural areas are more vulnerable to experiencing domestic abuse due to their geographic and social location (Chisale, 2018; Mahomva et al., 2020). In their studies in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, Moore (2020) and Mshweshwe (2020) reported that religious and cultural norms promoting gender roles increase the vulnerability of rural women to domestic abuse. Similarly, studies show that rural women are less likely to seek help from specialist services; instead, they rely on their religious leaders for support (Chowdhury, 2023; Femi-Ajao et al., 2020; Wachter et al., 2017). Other studies have argued that faith-based support reinforces domestic abuse by discouraging the victims from seeking formal help and escaping (Chisale, 2018; Wachter et al., 2017).

Most of the knowledge on the topic of domestic abuse and faith-based support is accumulated from the perspectives of survivors and rarely from the faith leaders. Research into domestic abuse and support for abused women has predominantly focused on the experiences of women. While this body of work has significantly contributed to the literature of domestic abuse, it has, by and large, overlooked the perspectives of faith leaders. Yet they are often the first point of contact for abused women seeking help and spiritual guidance. This study addresses this gap by examining faith leaders' perspectives on domestic abuse and the support they offer to abused women in their communities. By adopting an evangelical feminist lens, this research recognises the importance of faith in shaping both individual and communal responses to domestic abuse. The research seeks to identify pathways for constructive engagement with both faith-based values and feminist principles. The research seeks to answer the following question: What are the views of faith leaders regarding domestic abuse and the support they provide for abused women within their communities? The objectives of this study are to (1) explore the views of faith leaders regarding support for abused women within the faith community. (2) to explore the challenges they may experience, if any.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies demonstrate how faith-based support helps the survivors navigate the aftermath of domestic abuse and strengthens their recovery journeys (Gezinski et al., 2023; Gibbs et al., 2018). For example, Simonič (2021) and Truong et al. (2022) highlight that abused women often turn to their faith leaders for emotional and spiritual support. According to Simonič (2021), Tonsing & Barn (2021), and Vaughan et al. (2020), the support that abused women usually receive in church includes counselling and prayer. The findings of these studies suggest that faith-based support has the potential to promote healing and recovery, especially in a context where the leader has awareness of domestic abuse.

Notwithstanding, some studies have questioned the usefulness of faith-based support in helping abused women escape, arguing that faith-based support tends to prioritise preserving the marriage over victim safety (Mahomva et al., 2020; Oram et al., 2017; Westenberg, 2017). It has been suggested that doctrine can harm survivors' responses to their predicaments, for example, by intensifying feelings of guilt and shame and hindering their ability to seek professional help (Akangbe Tomisin, 2020; Lutwak, 2024). Evidence further indicates that faith leaders often subscribe to doctrinal interpretations that promote male dominance, thereby fostering environments in which abuse is tolerated (Barnes et al., 2024; Truong, 2022). They conclude that such a miscarriage of justice undermines the victim's rights to safety and particularly leads to siding with the perpetrator in situations where a woman reports her husband's abusive behaviour.

Studies have raised concerns regarding how faith leaders' tendency to encourage the victims to persevere and remain in marriage regardless of abuse, as well as deter them from seeking help from specialist services (Chowdhury, 2023; Femi-Ajao & Kendal et al., 2020; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2019). Additionally, Aghtaie et al. (2020), Kim (2019) and Njie-Carr et al. (2021) draw attention to the fact that faith-based support tends to emphasise reconciliation and forgiveness, making domestic abuse inescapable. As such, women of faith have been found to stay longer than necessary in abusive situations (Ghafournia, 2017; Priest, 2018; Wachter et al., 2017).

Some studies suggest that abused women can sometimes stay in abuse longer because of financial dependence on their husbands (Cervantes & Sherman, 2021; Heron & Browne, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2015). They suggest that economic dependence can hinder a woman's ability to escape abuse and perpetuate the cycle of violence. Sullivan et al. (2015) indicate that financial constraints can force a woman to tolerate abuse due to fear of financial repercussions if she were to escape. Such implications include the loss of shared income or housing, which may bring more trouble, adding to the existing burden caused by the experience of abuse. Further, the fear of losing financial support, especially when one has children, can be overwhelming. Forcing a woman to persevere even when the abuse is severe and demands action. Sullivan concludes that a woman's financial dependence not only limits options but also affects self-esteem and freedom, making escape seem impossible.

Some studies, for example (Nason-Clark et al., 2017; Pepper et al., 2021), show that faith leaders may be sceptical about advising the abused women to divorce due to their traditional theological stances on the permanence of marriage. Further, the desire to uphold biblical principles regarding the covenant of marriage may influence their guidance for abused women as to whether they must stay or leave. Such mandates can contradict the urgent need to prioritise the safety of victims, creating a serious dilemma for women trying to escape abuse. On the one hand, MacArthur & Mack (2017) and Odeleye (2022) suggest

that pastoral care should not involve the pastor's personal opinions; it should be grounded solely in biblical scripture and aimed at guiding the counselee to view their problem from a biblical perspective. They argue that the purpose of pastoral care should be to equip individuals to navigate their challenges from a faith perspective. Given this view, it may be challenging for pastors to uphold biblical principles on marriage like "till death do us part" and at the same time advocate for the freedom of abused women. This is especially true if a woman is undecided about whether to escape abuse. Thus, some studies, for example, Barnes et al. (2024), Davis & Johnson (2021), Kanyeredzi & Wilson (2023) have highlighted concerns regarding how the faith leaders handle the complex issue of domestic abuse and counselling of victims.

While the reviewed studies have successfully illuminated domestic abuse and faith-based support, gaps have been identified. Firstly, many of the studies reviewed are international, and the cultures in which they were conducted differ from those of South Africa. Secondly, there are fewer studies conducted from the evangelical perspective; many studies are mainstream feminist-focused and lack the faith discussion. Finally, many of the reviewed studies have been conducted with survivors, and there is a lack of research from the perspectives of faith leaders on this topic, particularly in the Eastern Cape. Thus, this current study will focus on the perspectives of faith leaders regarding the support for abused women in the faith community. Gaining knowledge of faith leaders' viewpoints will help serve as evidence to build interventions aimed at addressing domestic abuse and fortifying support systems for survivors.

Theoretic Framework

This analysis adopts an evangelical feminist perspective as a framework to investigate the views of faith leaders regarding the support they provide for victims of domestic abuse in the faith community. The evangelical feminist approach constitutes a significant movement within feminism for individuals who identify as evangelical Christians (Griffis, 2017; Hardesty, 1999). This approach advocates for women's rights while upholding adherence to evangelical biblical principles and traditional understandings of marital relationships. At its core, evangelical feminist theory asserts that traditional interpretations of the Bible have frequently been utilised to justify the subordination of women (Pears, 2019; Sherwood & Fisk, 2017). This approach is aligned with feminist thought on understanding domestic abuse as a problem linked to patriarchy, a system that promotes male dominance and oppression of women (Dobash & Dobash, 2017). In this sense, domestic abuse may be a consequence of men's desire to exercise power and control over their female partners, a behaviour that has been legitimised within the patriarchal system (Quek, 2019).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study applied qualitative research methods to unravel the views of faith leaders regarding domestic abuse and their role in supporting the victims. Using a purposive sample, nine (9) faith leaders from different Christian churches in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, participated in this study. Initially, the study had thirteen (13) potential participants; however, the saturation was achieved by the ninth participant when interviews no longer produced new themes relevant to the research questions. All main patterns and themes had emerged, and no further data were identified. All participants in this study supported victims of domestic abuse. During recruitment, all participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the research aims. The participants were also informed how the research would be used and that the research findings would be published.

All the participants were given a consent form to sign. They were informed that they had the right to choose not to participate or to withdraw at any time. The data were collected through open-ended, in-depth individual interviews, which allowed participants to influence the topic and provide detailed descriptions of their views. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent, and identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the University of Johannesburg prior to the study. The researcher diligently adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the study, ensuring that all procedures were conducted in a manner that respected participants' rights and caused no harm.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the views of faith leaders regarding domestic abuse and the support they provide for abused women in their communities. Following qualitative interviews with nine faith leaders, this study gained knowledge regarding domestic abuse and the support they provide for survivors who approach the church for help. The analysis revealed six main themes, including spiritual support, marriage counselling, non-acceptance of divorce, gender role norms, wife submission, and a lack of awareness regarding domestic abuse.

Spiritual Support

Based on the responses, it appears that faith-based support serves as a source of emotional and spiritual support for abused women navigating the aftermath of domestic abuse. Furthermore, the responses suggest that faith-based support is crucial for creating a safe environment in which faith leaders can guide and pray for women surviving domestic abuse, as demonstrated in the next passage:

I take time to pray with the person, continuously...I believe that only God can heal the victim from her brokenness. Many of these women who come to church for help are brokenhearted, so we start with prayer before anything else. We believe that nothing is impossible with God. Even the most broken hearts God can fix.

This perspective highlights the crucial role that faith leaders play in survivors' journeys of navigating the aftermath of violence. It features the efforts of faith leaders in recognising the brokenness of abused women and the need to walk with them in their journeys towards recovery.

Marriage Counselling

Another prominent theme that emerged from the responses was the understanding of marriage as a sacred and enduring covenant. Thus, the concept of "marriage" will be discussed primarily in terms of its religious connotations, as all participants appeared to understand it within the biblical paradigm. When they were asked about the support they provide for abused women, marriage counselling was amongst the list. Responses demonstrated that faith leaders perceive marriage not merely as a social contract or personal decision but as a sacred covenant established by God, as noted in the following response:

As a Pastor, whenever a woman comes to me for help about a domestic violence situation, especially if her life does not seem to be in danger, marriage counselling is one of the starting points. Why do I start there? It is because I have a duty to ensure that I have fulfilled my obligation to help a woman keep her marriage as she promised to do so, for

better or worse, until death do them part. Difficult times and hardships come in marriage, but the bible says a couple is one flesh, joined forever.

While marriage counselling may not be ideal in cases of domestic abuse, the quote above demonstrates that some faith leaders may fall into the trap of attempting to save the marriage rather than working to free the victim from abuse through signposting her to specialist services for the support necessary to help the victims escape.

Non-Acceptance of Divorce

Responses suggest that marriage is understood in the biblical context of "till death do us part." The responses in this study suggest that many faith leaders tend to advise women against divorce and encourage women to persevere and make the marriage work, as demonstrated:

I always pray that God intervenes and restores the marriage and guides them towards preserving unity for the sake of the family and the children, because divorce is not the right thing to do, in the eyes of God. When a woman says 'till death do us part' during the wedding vows, it means that she is entering into an agreement not only with the husband, but with God as well. It becomes wrong, then, to break such a promise that one has made to God. Any promise to God must be kept.

A similar perspective is noted in the following passage: "The Bible talks about marriage as God's institution. No matter what, marriage is God's will, and no man must interfere there. Even me I cannot advise a woman to divorce. Who am I to change the will of God? I can't."

The above response suggests that the participant's views on divorce are influenced by the bible scripture that he cannot override by advising a woman to divorce, even in circumstances where a woman is being abused. The participant explains that the Bible describes marriage as an institution created by God. Therefore, regardless of the circumstances, no one should interfere with a marriage by advising a woman to divorce.

One of the participants is captured quoting the bible verse explaining why he finds it difficult to endorse divorce: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate. This appears in Mathew 19:6."

This interview quote highlights how the participant's religious beliefs, specifically rooted in Christian scripture, strongly influence his views on divorce. By citing the scripture, the participant invokes a biblical mandate that marriage is a sacred, permanent union that he cannot interfere with. It looks like this scripture he quoted creates a moral and spiritual barrier to endorsing divorce, indicating that his perspective is severely rooted in his religious doctrine. This illustrates how religious convictions can significantly shape attitudes toward marriage and divorce in the study's context.

On the contrary, another participant explained how he feels strongly about protecting women from staying in abusive situations by encouraging them to divorce, as demonstrated in the following response:

But if a marriage has no peace and is suffering extremely, being beaten up all the time, there is no union and there is no purpose for that marriage. Therefore, instead of allowing a situation that puts someone's life at risk of being killed divorce is advisable. Divorce is the best solution in that kind of situation because God does not want to see anyone suffer, not even women and children.

The above response suggests that faith-based counselling can provide helpful guidance for abused women, especially when the counsellor has an awareness of domestic abuse and the danger it poses to a victim's life. It shows that faith-based counselling is more effective when biblical principles are balanced with a prioritisation of the victim's safety.

Gender Role Norms

Participants' views in this study varied; many demonstrated exceptional support for the survivor, including compassionate counselling and spiritual guidance aligned with the realities of women seeking help. They demonstrated a dedication to fostering environments in which survivors feel safe and understood. In contrast, some demonstrated a lack of understanding of how best to assist survivors. Their perspectives on domestic abuse revealed a troubling viewpoint of linking domestic abuse to a woman's perceived failure to submit to their husbands, as exemplified in the following quote:

We men want recognition for the role that God has given us as leaders in our homes. In my view, fighting is a sign that things are not going the way they should. It can mean that a wife is not obeying her husband's orders. Remember that the Bible tells us how we must live as people in the body of Christ. The man is the head, according to the Bible, and a wife must submit to him.

A similar view is demonstrated in the following quote:

The thing about marriage is that a woman must allow the man to lead her, as long as he is not leading her into sin. If a woman is submissive, she makes a happy marriage; a rebellious wife brings chaos.

Both comments indicate a strong consensus among the participating faith leaders that male headship is a divinely ordained responsibility, with husbands having authority over their wives. This suggests an acceptance of the limitations imposed on women that perpetuate unequal marital relationships. On the contrary, few leaders expressed concerns about the implications of traditional gender roles and how some men can abuse their positions of power. One notable participant's perspective was as follows:

The tendency for a man to want to dominate in decision-making creates tensions because it is not supposed to be that way; a Godly husband should share decision-making about family matters with his wife.

This statement reflects an acknowledgement of the existence of male dominance that usually escalates to domestic abuse in relationships. The participant highlights a conflict between traditional gender roles and his understanding of marital partnership within a religious context. Additionally, the participant notes that

men's dominant role in family decision-making creates problems in marriage, whereas the ideals of a Godly husband emphasise shared decision-making. This particular response demonstrates awareness that domestic abuse stems from male dominance that has been accepted and promoted over time, as the participant adds the following statement:

The problem here [domestic abuse] is the abuse of power by some men who see themselves as bigger than their wives. Sometimes, it is because of how a man has been brought up and his beliefs that may not be constructive.

In the above response, the participant connects domestic abuse to the problem of unequal power dynamics within marriage, pointing out that some men consider themselves superior to their wives. The response suggests that the participant has awareness that domestic abuse usually results from a perpetrator's sense of superiority, an attitude that can be influenced by broader social norms and upbringing rather than an individual failure.

Wife Submission

The notion of wife submission emerged as a dominant theme in the interview responses, suggesting that some participants believe women must make a greater effort than their husbands to make the marriage work. This is apparent in the following response:

The thing about marriage is that a woman must allow the man to lead her, as long as he is not leading her into sin. If a woman is submissive, she makes a happy marriage; a rebellious wife brings chaos.

Seemingly, the response above implies that this participant views domestic abuse as a problem that women cause by not submitting to their husbands. In this sense, it appears that the idea of wife submission is misused and taken out of context to justify and promote male dominance.

Lack Of Knowledge on Domestic Violence

Although many faith leaders are committed to supporting abused women, a lack of comprehensive knowledge about the complexities of violence was expressed in many responses. One participant highlighted this sentiment, stating:

The Bible school taught me pastoral counselling, but they never touched on how to deal with domestic violence specifically. I think it would be essential to have specific training on this issue because it is complex.

This highlights the necessity for training to equip faith leaders with the tools they can use to effectively respond to women reporting domestic abuse.

Also, responses suggest that some faith leaders believe that domestic abuse is a complex, challenging issue to deal with in the religious context; as noted, *"It is difficult to deal with this issue because you can say the right thing based on the scriptures, but how about the woman who is suffering? You end up caught in between."*

When they were asked if there were any challenges they may be encountering when supporting domestic abuse survivors, many participants emphasised the difficulty of addressing domestic abuse while reconciling it with scriptural teachings on marriage. This suggests that while faith leaders are interested in helping women, their limited knowledge about domestic abuse affects how they counsel the victims. Providing meaningful support and counselling for victims may require a deep understanding of what domestic abuse is and its underlying causes, especially the societal norms and rigid gender roles. Also, it requires understanding the impact of domestic abuse on victims, as well as the needs they may have to safely escape abuse.

Discussion

This research's primary aim was to gain knowledge on faith leaders' experiences of supporting women who have experienced domestic abuse in the rural Eastern Cape. Through using qualitative methods, this study has gained insights into the perspective of faith leaders regarding the persistent nature of domestic abuse in their communities and the support they provide abused women. An evangelical feminist perspective served as a guiding framework for this study and has proven beneficial for critically analysing the findings, enabling a nuanced discussion rooted in a feminist stance. While also acknowledging the biblical principles regarding marriage.

Findings indicate that faith-based support acts as a source of resilience and motivation for women dealing with the aftermath of domestic abuse. These findings align with several studies demonstrating a strong link between faith-based support and increased emotional well-being among survivors (Campbell & Bauer, 2021; Choi & Disney, 2016; Koenig et al., 2020). These studies show how prayer plays a crucial role in the recovery process of abused women, providing not only comfort but also hope and a sense of connection to a larger community (Ferrari et al., 2016; Gibbs et al., 2018). Similarly, Evans-Gordon (2025), Simonič (2021), Tonsing & Barn (2021), and Vaughan et al. (2020) demonstrate how faith-based counselling can be instrumental in helping abused women deal with the impact of violence through counselling and praying for them.

Another significant finding that emerged from this analysis is the faith leaders' understanding of marriage and its sacredness, referenced in the book of Genesis 2:21-24, where it says, "So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." Subsequently, the Lord said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Following this, Eve was pronounced as Adam's wife. This profound understanding of marriage as a covenant established by God and a lifelong commitment has been found to influence the thinking of faith leaders when they discourage abused women from escaping abusive relationships. This result corresponds with previous studies addressing the same topic, for example, Chisale (2018) and Gezinski et al. (2023) alluded to the silencing of abused women by their faith community, especially if the perpetrator is known to the church, a woman can be blamed for causing the trouble in marriage.

The findings of the current study demonstrate that many faith leaders face challenges in supporting abused women, though well-intended, but the advice they provide can potentially keep women in abusive situations. One of the themes that kept emerging is the opposition to divorce, which can keep women trapped in harmful relationships. While it is justified as an adherence to biblical principles, when it overshadows the immediate need for a victim's safety, such support becomes detrimental. This result aligns with findings reported in earlier studies, for example, Aghtaie et al. (2020); Kim (2019); Njie-Carr et al. (2021), who highlighted that faith-based counselling can sometimes make abused women feel pressured to forgive or endure their toxic marriages rather than escape abuse.

The study has found that the participants may have perceived biblically defensible points for opposing divorce; however, we argue that the safety and needs of survivors should be prioritised in the endeavours to support women. The argument they bring forward, quoting Mathew 19:6, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate," does not seem to have relevance in situations where a woman is abused because the perpetrator has already broken the covenant of 'oneness' through violating the woman. The use of the scripture to justify opposing divorce in situations of abuse demonstrates the counsellors' inability to balance biblical principles with the duty to protect victims. However, it must be noted that some faith leaders do provide helpful guidance for abused women, especially when the counsellor has an awareness of domestic abuse and the danger it poses to a victim's life. This current study also finds that those who have good knowledge of domestic abuse tend to put the safety of the victims first by showing compassion and spiritual guidance aligned with the realities of abused women who need help.

In contrast, the responses revealed that many faith leaders adhere to traditional perspectives that emphasise male authority, the belief that a man is the head of the family. This indicates a broader systemic belief that has the potential to negatively influence how they respond to abused women in need of support. Some troubling viewpoints emerged, for example, a few participants linked domestic abuse to wives' perceived failures to submit to their husbands. This study has found that male headship and wife submission, which is emphasised in religious communities, can easily spill into dominance, and unfortunately, some faith leaders were found to endorse such ideology on gender roles. It appears that the idea of wife submission is misused and taken out of context to justify and promote male dominance. These misinterpretations can inadvertently perpetuate the cycle of abuse rather than providing the necessary support, as argued in previous studies, for example, Chisale (2018), Clifton (2018), and Marsden (2018), who discussed the notion of wife submission and how it negatively affects the faith support for abused women.

Giles (2020) contends that male headship and wife submission teachings have a direct link with the scourge of domestic abuse in Christian marriages. While scriptures such as Ephesians 5:22 highlight the concept of wife submission intended to build better marital relationships, it seems that this scripture has often been taken out of context to reinforce male dominance. Whereas the scripture in Ephesians 5:21, which emphasises mutual submission, is often overlooked. Giles (2020) comments that the agenda behind this selective use of scripture and emphasis on wife submission is to preserve and promote patriarchy. To keep women in positions of subordination.

In the same way, mutual submission has not been as popularised as wife submission. This is even though the apostle Paul wrote these scriptures to complement each other. Thus, well-intended teachings should promote mutual respect and fairness in marriage. A fundamental shift away from traditional narratives that prioritise male authority is necessary, as endorsing patriarchal structures effectively legitimises the abuse of women; it is almost impossible to support patriarchy and still support the victims of domestic abuse effectively (Kroeger & Beck, 2019).

Barr (2021) argues that oppression of women continues to be accepted in the church, though it is ungodly and deeply ingrained in misinterpretations of scripture to subjugate women deliberately (Giles, 2020; Wood, 2019; Whitnah, 2022). Whereas God never intended for gender inequality, as he created a man and a woman in his image and instructed them to both have dominion over every creation on earth (Giles, 2020; Kroeger & Beck, 2019). The findings of the current study are consistent with the existing literature, for example, Chisale (2018), Gezinski et al. (2023), Heron et al. (2022), and Muthangya et al. (2022), who concluded that patriarchal ideologies embedded in the beliefs of those providing faith-based support often affect the quality of support for abused women within the faith community. These studies argue that patriarchal ideologies among faith leaders have the potential to harm victims and further cause secondary victimisation inadvertently. Thus, there is an urgent need for the Christian community to address patriarchal attitudes and promote justice for women (Chabata, 2021; Giles, 2020).

On the contrary, findings show that some faith leaders are concerned about the implications of traditional gender roles and how some men can abuse their positions of power by dominating their wives. These findings are aligned with the feminist work, for example, Dobash & Dobash (2017) and Hamberger et al. (2017), who argue that male dominance is a consequence of patriarchy: a system designed to keep men in positions of power not only in institutions, politics and economics but at home, too. Moreover, patriarchy is a system where men hold more power and privilege than women, creating inequalities across various aspects of society. Based on the findings, it seems that patriarchy is not historical but rather an ongoing system that is reinforced through religious and cultural norms and teachings.

Several studies conducted in black communities in South Africa highlight the problematic nature of socialising boys into attitudes deemed 'manhood-appropriate', including aggressiveness and dominance in the family sphere (Kachel et al., 2016; Kangethe & Nomngcoyiya, 2016; Moolman, 2017). The findings of this study suggest that some faith leaders may have been the recipients of such socialisation. Patriarchy is a widespread issue that seems to be preserved even within the faith context, for example, through teaching bible scriptures that promote male dominance and oppression of women (Bashaw, 2020; Mojola, 2018). Mojola argues that the concept of Christianity is about representing Christ; however, the silence of the church about the abuse of women does not reflect imitating the work of Jesus, who consistently opposed women's oppression and patriarchal religious structures.

One of the strengths of this study is its qualitative research design, the methodological approach that includes in-depth interviews with faith leaders who have supported abused women within the faith community. The study captured the nuanced realities and challenges of these faith leaders, providing insights that contribute to the understanding of support for abused women, while at the same time can be used as a basis for developing interventions. These findings are important because they fill a major gap in the literature on domestic abuse and faith-based support by focusing on the perspectives of faith leaders,

a group whose role as key stakeholders in assisting abused women has largely been overlooked in both research and policy development. By foregrounding the voices and viewpoints of faith leaders, this study enhances our understanding of the complexities and challenges inherent in faith-based support, as well as the opportunities for improvement. This study's findings can be interpreted through an evangelical feminist lens, which features both the potential and the challenges facing faith leaders in supporting survivors of domestic abuse within faith communities. The evangelical feminist thought asserts that misinterpretations of scripture have historically justified male dominance, contributing to power imbalances in marriage, which reinforce domestic abuse; thus, it advocates for ongoing theological reflection and reform within faith communities. By engaging in critical discussions about the implications of misinterpreting scripture and challenging patriarchal religious norms, faith leaders can be active agents in transforming harmful norms in their communities and society, as religion has played a crucial role in influencing the thinking around gender norms.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concludes that the lack of comprehensive knowledge of domestic abuse among faith leaders, as well as the tendency for some to uphold patriarchal norms, affects the support they provide to abused women. This highlights the necessity for training to equip them with the tools they can use to effectively address domestic abuse within their communities and provide informed support to women affected.

Recommendations: Providing effective emotional support to victims depends on a thorough understanding of domestic abuse, its effects on victims, and their specific needs. Therefore, faith leaders must be provided with training so that they gain an in-depth knowledge of domestic abuse to enable them respond effectively to the needs of abused women.

6.0 REFERENCES

1. Aghtaie, N., Mulvihill, N., Abrahams, H., et al. (2020). Defining and enabling 'justice' for victims/survivors of domestic violence and abuse: The views of practitioners working within Muslim, Jewish and Catholic faiths. *Religion and Gender, 10*(2), 155–181.
2. Ajayi, C. E., Chantler, K., & Radford, L. (2022). The role of cultural beliefs, norms, and practices in Nigerian women's experiences of sexual abuse and violence. *Violence Against Women, 28*(2), 465–486.
3. Akangbe Tomisin, A. (2020). Culture, religion and help-seeking for intimate partner violence victims in Nigeria: A narrative review. *Culture, 3*(2), 56–62.
4. Barnes, R., & Aune, K. (2024). Christianity and domestic abuse. In *Research Handbook on Domestic Violence and Abuse* (pp. 95–114). Edward Elgar Publishing.
5. Barr, B. A. (2021). *The making of biblical womanhood: How the subjugation of women became gospel truth*. Baker Books.
6. Bashaw, J. G. (2020). "When Jesus saw her...": A hermeneutical response to #MeToo and #ChurchToo. *Review & Expositor, 117*(2), 288–297.
7. Campbell, C., & Bauer, S. (2021). Christian faith and resilience: Implications for social work practice. *Social Work & Christianity, 48*(1), 1–19.

8. Cervantes, M. V., & Sherman, J. (2021). Falling for the ones that were abusive: Cycles of violence in low-income women's intimate relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 36*(13–14), NP7567–NP7595.
9. Chabata, L. (2021). Matthew 1:1–17: Cultural subjugation of women in Shona communities in Zimbabwe: A hermeneutical study. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae, 47*(2), 1–22.
10. Chisale, S. S. (2018). Domestic abuse in marriage and self-silencing: Pastoral care in a context of self-silencing. *HTS: Theological Studies, 74*(2), 1–8.
11. Chowdhury, R. (2023). The role of religion in domestic violence and abuse in UK Muslim communities. *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion, 12*(2), 178–198.
12. Clifton, S. (2018). Spirit, submission, power, and abuse: A response to teaching on female submission and the scourge of domestic violence. *St Mark's Review, (243)*, 72–86.
13. Choi, Y. J., Elkins, J., & Disney, L. (2016). A literature review of intimate partner violence among immigrant populations: Engaging the faith community. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 29*, 1–9.
14. Davis, M., & Johnson, M. (2021). Exploring Black clergy perspectives on religious/spiritual related domestic violence: First steps in facing those who wield the sword abusively. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 30*(7), 950–971.
15. Dobash, R. E., & Dobash, R. P. (2017). When women are murdered. In *Handbook on Homicide* (pp. 131–148). Wiley-Blackwell.
16. Evans-Gordon, N. (2025). *African American pastors' experiences with intimate partner violence among church members*. [Unpublished manuscript].
17. Femi-Ajao, O., Kendal, S., & Lovell, K. (2020). A qualitative systematic review of published work on disclosure and help-seeking for domestic violence and abuse among women from ethnic minority populations in the UK. *Ethnicity & Health, 25*(5), 732–746.
18. Gezinski, L. B., Gonzalez-Pons, K. M., & Rogers, M. M. (2023). "Praying does not stop his fist from hitting my face": Religion and intimate partner violence from the perspective of survivors and service providers. *Journal of Family Issues, 44*(9), 2504–2524.
19. Gibbs, A., Dunkle, K., Ramsoomar, L., Willan, S., Jama Shai, N., Chatterji, S., ... & Jewkes, R. (2020). New learnings on drivers of men's physical and/or sexual violence against their female partners, and women's experiences of this, and the implications for prevention interventions. *Global Health Action, 13*(1), 1739845.
20. Giles, K. (2020). *The headship of men and the abuse of women: Are they related in any way?* Wipf and Stock Publishers.
21. Griffis, C. (2017). "In the beginning was the Word": Evangelical Christian women, the Equal Rights Amendment, and competing definitions of womanhood. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, 38*(2), 148–172.
22. Hardesty, N. (1999). *Women called to witness: Evangelical feminism in the nineteenth century*. University of Tennessee Press.
23. Heron, R. L., Eisma, M., & Browne, K. (2022). Why do female domestic violence victims remain in or leave abusive relationships? A qualitative study. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 31*(5), 677–694.
24. Kangethe, S. M., & Nomngcoyiya, T. (2016). An exploration of the subjugation of women among the communities practising traditional male circumcision rite in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. *Journal of Human Ecology, 54*(2), 124–130.

25. Kanyeredzi, A., & Wilson, J. (2023). *Spirit & solace: Black churches and domestic abuse final report*. [Report].
26. Koenig, H. G., Al-Zaben, F., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2020). Religion and psychiatry: Recent developments in research. *BJPsych Advances*, 26(5), 262–272.
27. Kroeger, C. C., & Beck, J. R. (Eds.). (2019). *Women, abuse, and the Bible: How scripture can be used to hurt or heal*. Wipf and Stock Publishers.
28. Mahomva, S., Bredenkamp, I. M., & Schoeman, W. J. (2020). The perceptions of clergy on domestic violence: A perspective from the Kwazulu-Natal Midlands. *Acta Theologica*, 40(2), 238–260.
29. Marsden, D. (2018). The Church's contribution to domestic violence: Submission, headship, and patriarchy. In *Rape culture, gender violence, and religion: Christian perspectives* (pp. 73–95).
30. Mazibuko, N. C. (2016). Ilobolo, the bride price that comes 'at a price,' and the narratives of gender violence in Mamelodi, a South African township. *Gender and Behaviour*, 14(2), 7373–7378.
31. Mojola, A. O. (2018). Bible translation and gender: Challenges and opportunities—with specific reference to sub-Saharan Africa. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 39(1), 1–9.
32. Moore, E. (2020). "My husband has to stop beating me, and I shouldn't go to the police": Family meetings, patriarchal bargains, and marital violence in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. *Violence Against Women*, 26(6–7), 675–696.
33. Mshweshwe, L. (2020). Understanding domestic violence: Masculinity, culture, traditions. *Heliyon*, 6(10), e05110.
34. Muthangya, A. N., Chidongo, T. M., Joshua, S. M., & Wokabi, F. G. (2022). Religious and patriarchal beliefs that influence Christian women to persevere in abusive relationships: With reference to Giriama people, Kenya. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 48(3), 1–18.
35. Nason-Clark, N., Fisher-Townsend, B., Holtmann, C., & McMullin, S. (2018). *Religion and intimate partner violence: Understanding the challenges and proposing solutions*. Oxford University Press.
36. Njie-Carr, V. P., Sabri, B., Messing, J. T., Suarez, C., Ward-Lasher, A., Wachter, K., ... & Campbell, J. (2021). Understanding intimate partner violence among immigrant and refugee women: A grounded theory analysis. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 30(6), 792–810.
37. Odeleye, D. A. (2022). *Overview of pastoral counselling*. College Press.
38. Pears, A. (2019). *Feminist Christian encounters: The methods and strategies of feminist-informed Christian theologies*. Routledge.
39. Pepper, M., Powell, R., & McEwan, T. (2021). NAFVP experience study report: The nature of experiences of family violence for those with a connection with Anglican churches. *NCLS Research Report for the Anglican Church of Australia*.
<http://www.ncls.org.au/research/national-anglican-family-violence-project>
40. Priest, N. (2018). A health and social science view of domestic violence and churches. *St Mark's Review*, 243, 25–42.
41. Reardon, S. L., & Trevillion, K. (2016). Responding to domestic abuse in England and Wales. In *Domestic violence in international context* (pp. 77–95). Routledge.
42. Sherwood, Y., & F., A. (Eds.). (2017). *The Bible and feminism: Remapping the field*. Oxford University Press.

43. Simonič, B. (2021). The power of women's faith in coping with intimate partner violence: Systematic literature review. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 60(6), 4278–4295.
44. Sullivan, C. M., López-Zerón, G., Bomsta, H., & Menard, A. (2019). "There's just all these moving parts": Helping domestic violence survivors obtain housing. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 47(2), 198–206.
45. Takyi, B. K., & Lamptey, E. (2020). Faith and marital violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: Exploring the links between religious affiliation and intimate partner violence among women in Ghana. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 35(1–2), 25–52.
46. Tonsing, J., & Barn, R. (2021). Help-seeking behaviors and practices among Fijian women who experience domestic violence: An exploration of the role of religiosity as a coping strategy. *International Social Work*, 64(6), 931–942.
47. Truong, M., Sharif, M., Pasalich, D., Olsen, A., Calabria, B., & Priest, N. (2020). Faith-based communities' responses to family and domestic violence. [Report].
48. Truong, M., Sharif, M., Olsen, A., Pasalich, D., Calabria, B., & Priest, N. (2022). Attitudes and beliefs about family and domestic violence in faith-based communities: An exploratory qualitative study. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 880–897.
49. Vaughan, C., Sullivan, C., Chen, J., & Vaid Sandhu, M. (2020). *What works to address violence against women and family violence within faith settings: An evidence guide*. University of Melbourne.
50. Wachter, K., Cook Heffron, L., & Dalpe, J. (2022). "We weren't ready": Provider perspectives on addressing intimate partner violence among refugees and immigrants in the United States. *Journal of Family Violence*, 37(2), 235–246.
51. Walby, S., & Towers, J. (2018). Untangling the concept of coercive control: Theorizing domestic violent crime. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 18(1), 7–28.
52. Wallace, T. D. (2024). *A phenomenological study of faith community culture contributing to domestic and intimate partner violence*. [Unpublished manuscript].
53. Westenberg, L. (2017). 'When she calls for help'—Domestic violence in Christian families. *Social Sciences*, 6(3), 71.
54. Whitnah, M. (2022). Evangelical organizations' responses to domestic violence: How the cultural production of religious beliefs challenges or enshrines patriarchy. *Review of Religious Research*, 64(3), 427–450.
55. Wood, H. J. (2019). Gender inequality: The problem of harmful, patriarchal, traditional and cultural gender practices in the church. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 75(1), 1–10.
56. World Health Organization. (2025). Lifetime toll: 840 million women faced partner or sexual violence. <https://www.who.int/news/item/19-11-2025-lifetime-toll--840-million-women-faced-partner-or-sexual-violence>