



Blessings or curses? The contribution of the blesser phenomenon to gender-based violence and intimate partner violence

**Authors:**

Brent V. Frieslaar¹ 
Maake Masango¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Research Project Registration:

Project Leader: M.J. Masango
Project Number: 02467526

Description:

This research is part of the project, 'Pastoral Care and Trauma Counselling', directed by Prof. Dr Maake Masango, Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

Corresponding author:

Maake Masango,
maake.masango@up.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 09 July 2020

Accepted: 09 Dec. 2020

Published: 16 Mar. 2021

How to cite this article:

Frieslaar, B.V. & Masango, M., 2021, 'Blessings or curses? The contribution of the blesser phenomenon to gender-based violence and intimate partner violence', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6242. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6242>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article examines the blesser phenomenon in South Africa, which gained rapid popularity in 2016. A large body of research exists that reveals that transactional sex is a significant theme within the phenomenon of blesser and blessee relationships. Scholarship has demonstrated that transactional sex has contributed to an increase in human immunodeficiency virus infection rates, especially amongst women aged 15–24 years, as well as a concerning increase in teenage pregnancy. Whilst these are dire realities of blesser–blessee relationships, the one that is most concerning in the current climate in South Africa is the increase in gender-based violence (GBV), intimate partner violence (IPV) and femicide. Therefore, this article concerns itself primarily with this epidemic as it seeks to demonstrate how the blesser phenomenon contributes to GBV and IPV. Blessees are the young women in the blesser–blessee relationships who experience trauma and shame because of the violence and abuse inflicted on them by the older male blesser. The article argues that the church should be seen to be taking decisive action in addressing the scourge of GBV and IPV. The narrative approach is used to give the blessees the opportunity to share their stories. By applying the techniques of narrative therapy, positive deconstruction and the art of holy listening, the study reaches its key outcome: to offer to the church a framework for a pastoral care and healing methodology to help our sisters in Christ to experience healing and to move from shame to self-worth.

Contribution: The Blesser phenomenon has never been dealt with in theology, especially from the African perspective. Both sides of the problem need pastoral care. The major issue is where do we begin? I started, pastorally working with the blessee, who is in relationship with an older man. The main question that could be pastorally followed is, why pursue an older man for provision? This is a major pastoral issue, especially in poor communities. The younger women are in need of finance, in order to complete their studies and eke out a living. Beside the Covid 19 pandemic, this is the second major issue affecting black townships.

Keywords: blesser phenomenon; transactional sex; blesser–blessee relationships; gender-based violence; intimate partner violence; femicide; positive deconstruction; art of holy listening.

Introduction

The central theme of this article is that blesser–blessee relationships and the blesser phenomenon contribute significantly to a shame-oriented and patriarchal culture that objectifies women, and this culture is the root cause of the violence and abuse inflicted upon women. The study was conducted within a university context, where young women are short of resources, for example, monetary family support.

This phenomenon of transactional sex or sex with benefits (for whom?) has mushroomed in recent years. The broader context is the problem of gender violence, manipulation and abuse.

The research is based on narrative therapy and leads to the conclusion that the concept and practice of patriarchy need to be deconstructed and challenged.

Defining transactional sex and establishing its link to blesser-blessee relationships

The researchers Thobejane, Mulaudzi and Zitha (2017) conducted a study of blesser–blessee relationships amongst female understudies in a provincial college within Limpopo Province,

in which they define transactional sex as 'any sexual relationships where gifts have been given and sexual relations have occurred'.

These researchers are also quick to highlight that the 'line distinguishing transactional sex from general pre-marital sexual relationships is blurred'. Making reference to research conducted by Kaufman and Stavrou (2004), Thobejane et al. (2017) point to the southern African setting, where blessing giving is connected to sexual access and could be a broadly practised standard. They further refer to the giving of bride wealth or lobola as a prime example of this.

Mampane (2018) comments that 'transactional sex can be defined as the exchange of sex for money, favours, and/or material goods'. He continues to clarify that the phenomenon of 'transactional sex is common in both rural and urban areas'. Yet, he emphasises the prevalence of the phenomenon in 'poverty-stricken communities such as rural areas where young women are likely to engage in sexual relationships for money or material gain'.

According to Mampane, the transactional sex phenomenon grew in popularity in 2016 because of media coverage and was subsequently labelled the 'blesser and blessee' phenomenon. In describing these blesser and blessee relationships, he says that more seasoned wealthy men (blessers) tend to lure youthful ladies (blessees) with cash and costly endowments for sexual favours.

In a rural university study in Limpopo, the researchers state that blessers play an important role in the lives of young female university students because they contribute to their financial needs, including the provision for tuition fees, accommodation and food (Thobejane et al. 2017).

However, their research also reveals that the gifts do not stop there. They provide historical context to the blesser and blessee phenomenon by pointing to the fact that the term gained rapid popularity in 2016, when young ladies would post pictures on social media stages such as Instagram and Facebook. These pictures boasted of them (blessees) sipping cocktails on the beach, popping bottles of champagne in the club or getting their nails done, using the hashtag '#blessed' (Thobejane et al. 2017).

The researcher finds Mampane's definition of 'blesser and blessee' useful yet is more aligned with Thobejane et al. (2017) when they contend that the blesser is a modern-day 'sugar daddy'.

A key social challenge and a human rights issue is that of gender violence and intimate partner violence (IPV). A large body of the current scholarship on blesser-blessee relationships reports a link between transactional sex, sex work and gender violence and IPV (Dunkle et al. 2007; Luke & Kurz 2002; PEPFAR 2015; Stoebenau et al. 2016).

The link between transactional sex and gender violence, intimate partner violence, manipulation and abuse

According to a President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) (2015) online article:

[T]ransactional sex often coexists with risky sexual behaviours such as early sexual debut and inconsistent condom use. Consequently, there is considerable evidence linking transactional sex to undesirable sexual and reproductive health outcomes including sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and gender-based violence.

Hoss and Blokland (2018) quote the researchers Stoebenau et al. (2016), Luke and Kurz (2002) and others, who comment on the vulnerability of young girls and women in interactions with blessers, whereby they state that 'it is impossible for the women to negotiate the conditions in which to have protected sexual intercourse. This in turn influences their experience of force, coercion and abuse'. Furthermore, Hoss and Blokland report on the feedback by the participants of the study, which reveals that young ladies encounter controlling behaviour from, or are manhandled by, more seasoned men. In the interviews, there were descriptions of girls being muddled in their interactions with blessers, which was ascribed basically to the control imbalance between a young lady and a more seasoned man (blesser).

The researchers Dunkle et al. (2007) investigated the predominance and indicators of transactional sex in their study amongst men in rural Eastern Cape, and their investigation discovered a solid and steady affiliation between the execution of gender-based violence and material goods and exchange'. This, they reported, 'suggests that transactional sex in both main and casual relationships should be viewed within a broader continuum of men's exercise of gendered power and control'.

In an article titled 'South African men who commit gender-based violence are more likely to have transactional sex', the researcher Doskoch (2008) reports that violence against women was a substantial indicator of transactional sex with a spur-of-the-moment partner. Furthermore, Doskoch (2008) comments that 'just as in the case of transactional sex with a casual partner, IPV was the strongest predictor of having been in a relationship with a main partner'. In addition, it was found that the likelihood of young men to have provided financially in 'exchange for a relationship was higher if they had a history of physical violence and/or sexual violence against a main partner'.

Mampane (2016) conducted an investigation amongst South African rural women, which 'identified marital rape, gender-based violence (GBV) and IPV as high-risk factors for HIV [*human immunodeficiency virus*] infection'.

The impact of gender norms

In his study of the blesser phenomenon, Mampane (2018) identifies gender norms as one of the factors contributing to

blesser–blessee relationships. He highlights that the African cultural practice of lobola requires that ‘a man pay a bride price to the family of the woman he intends to marry’. Consequently, it is argued that ‘this gender norm has inculcated a cultural expectation for which men are compelled to make economic provision for women’. Researchers contend that, when seen in this way, ‘men are mainly perceived as providers and women as receivers of financial benefits in relationships, including in transactional sex encounters’ (Jewkes & Morrell 2012; MacPherson et al. 2012).

In the PEPFAR (2015) article referred to earlier, it is stated:

[T]hat transactional sex is widely practiced in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and is closely linked to sociocultural expectations of gender whereby men are expected to act as a provider to their partners, and women expect compensation for having sex.

Hoss and Blokland (2018) argue that ‘a patriarchal understanding of the role of men is what gives birth to the notion that a man has to provide for a woman’. This, they say, results in the expectation by many women for financial provision, and men vie to perform that role. Reference is made to the frequent assumption of a man’s entitlement to command sexual contact with a young lady if he is making economic provision for her.

Public perceptions and the actual interactions between the participants in blesser–blessee relationships are largely shaped by social norms. Hoss and Blokland (2018) quote research by Shefer and Strelbel, who report of attempts made to evaluate such relationships from a moral standpoint. This leads to a ‘blame and shame’ culture, which places judgement on young ladies for what is viewed as a lack of standards and morality.

The authors are inclined to agree with Hoss (2016) when she says in an interview with Radio 702 that she would caution against judging and blaming young girls. The authors would argue that, rather than reinforcing a culture of blame, shame and judgement, these young women should be shown the love and grace of God and understanding, and they should be empowered to make life choices that will liberate them from transactional sex and blesser–blessee relationships.

The central premise of the study is that blesser–blessee relationships and the blesser phenomenon contribute significantly to a shame-oriented and patriarchal culture that objectifies women, and this culture is the root cause of the violence and abuse inflicted upon women.

Establishing gender-based violence and intimate partner violence within the context of blesser–blessee relationships

The phenomenon of female and child abuse featured prominently in South African media recently with the death of University of Cape Town (UCT) student Uyinene Mrwetyana

in August 2019, who was raped and killed inside a Cape Town post office (Meyer 2019). The death of Mrwetyana and the abuse enacted on many young ladies in South Africa sparked the resurgence of the #AmINext campaign.

In light of these heinous crimes of gender violence, the researcher is inclined to agree with respected Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (‘the Circle’) member Denise Ackermann, who states that ‘[a] war is being waged against the bodies of women and children in this country’ (Phiri 2002:19). This researcher contends that all men and women who are studying and practising theology should commit to an active ministry of healing this evil.

Police statistics for the last 9 months of 2016 reveal that 1713 women were murdered. *The Star* newspaper reported that half of the women killed were murdered by someone with whom they had an intimate relationship (The Star 2018). One is reminded of our sisters in Christ: Anelisa Dulaze, Karabo Mokoena, Reeva Steenkamp, Annelene Pillay, Zestah September and Nosipho Mandleleni. They are from South Africa, and there are untold others both in South Africa and in other parts of the world (Phamotse 2017:214).

Siswali states that, on average, ‘a woman is murdered every four hours, and contends that South Africa has one of the highest rates of femicide in the world’ (The Star 2018). With relevance to the current study, the article emphasised that ‘such violence can be expressed within a culture of predatory male sexuality as in the case of forms of promiscuity’. Relationships with blesser were described as being included in such forms of predatory male sexuality (The Star 2018).

The researcher agrees with Ban Ki-moon, who is the United Nations secretary-general and who is quoted in a 2013 World Health Organization (WHO) (2013:2) report as stating that ‘[t]here is one universal truth, applicable to all countries, cultures, and communities: violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable’.

Having now established the phenomenon of blesser–blessee relationships within the context of abuse against women and children, the researcher will next discuss the concept of violence as it relates to women and adolescent girls.

In her chapter titled ‘Conjunction of gender violence and HIV/AIDS’, pastoral psychotherapist Dr Anne Gatobu (2017) distinguishes between domestic violence and gender violence. ‘Domestic violence’, she argues, ‘presumes stable relationships, usually bound by the marriage covenant or other long-term commitment’, whilst:

[G]ender violence, on the other hand, encompasses both the domestic violence as described above but moves beyond to casual encounters, sexual assault, sex trafficking and any other forms of violence vented on another simply by virtue of their gender and vulnerability. (p. 62)

This researcher believes that this distinction is helpful for the resolutions of the present investigation in that it helps to

better understand how the blesser–blessee phenomenon operates within the context of violence in its broadest sense.

Domestic violence and intimate partner violence

The WHO (2013:2–5) global and regional statistics estimates of abuse against women and children emphasised that ‘almost one-third of all women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner’.

In South Africa, a newspaper article by Johannesburg advocate Brenda Madumise titled ‘Scourge of violence against women has to be stopped’ cited alarming statistics that nearly 50% of women in South Africa are reported to have been brutally violated. She points to research findings highlighting that more than 50 000 reported cases of rape occur annually, and she continues to say that ‘[i]ntimate partners are the most likely perpetrators of violence against women’. Madumise contends that this behaviour is underpinned by what she calls the ‘preservation of patriarchal power’.

In addition, she describes a vicious cycle of violence, which ‘keeps women in conditions of poverty and fear of poverty, keeps women trapped in violent situations’. Madumise (2018) asserts that the culture of blesser enables this reprehensible environment. She further describes the term ‘blesser’ as a perverted misnomer that celebrates the abuse of young women by men old enough to be their fathers.

Many research studies (Ali & Naylor 2013; Kiss et al. 2012; Rose 2015) have been conducted on IPV. The study by Ali and Naylor (2013) describes IPV as ‘referring to the use of sexual, psychological and physically coercive acts against an intimate partner’. Varying terminology, often used interchangeably, exists to describe the phenomenon, including ‘domestic violence, domestic abuse, intra-family violence, wife abuse, spousal abuse, wife battering, courtship violence, among others’.

As noted above, ‘domestic violence’ is one of these terms. According to the WHO study (2013), the broad term:

[V]iolence against women encompasses many forms of violence, including violence by an intimate partner (intimate partner violence) and rape/sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by someone other than an intimate partner (non-partner sexual violence), as well as female genital mutilation, honour killings and the trafficking of women. (p. 4)

The discussion of domestic violence and IPV that follows is informed by an African perspective, set within an African context. Therefore, this researcher firmly grounds this study in an Afrocentric context.

According to Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike (2013:121), domestic violence can be expressed in various forms:

1. ‘Physical assault like bullying, punching, hitting, slapping, shoving, throwing things about, pulling hair, twisting of arms and ankles and choking’.
2. ‘Use of dangerous weapons: for example, knife, gun, cane’. An example of this is cited in Phamotse’s (2017:26) book *Bare*, where Treasure’s father, Thabo, enters the house in a violent rage with a gun, and ends up shooting his wife Thato in the arm.
3. ‘Damaging property: for example, breaking or smashing furniture to scare the partner, burning clothes’.
4. ‘Emotional abuse: for example, intimidation, isolation, ridicule, cursing, humiliating and making the woman feel worthless’. Here too, the violent scene in *Bare* is a case in point, where Thabo uses the word ‘bitch’ twice in addressing his wife Thato.
5. ‘Denial of basic needs such as food, proper medical care, money, contact with friends and/or relatives’.
6. ‘Sexual abuse or assault’.

A pattern of behaviour and treatment of women exists that used to be called ‘wife discipline’ but today is called ‘wife abuse’ (Nasimiyu-Wasike 2013:123). Teresia Hinga (2013:140) states that there are many occasions on which women have been subjected to violence, and the excuse was that they had in some way or another offended their male folk. This, she submits, is particularly the case with wife battering or beating.

African tradition and wife beating

This practice is underpinned by the cultural and traditional belief that a woman should belong to somebody. In marriage, she belongs to her husband, who can do anything with her. This is according to Julia Gichuhi, who is quoted by Nasimiyu-Wasike (2013:122). The researcher vehemently disagrees with this way of viewing women, as he sees all women equal to men, being made in the image of God and having human rights just as men do.

Several African countries report a traditional practice where a man pays substantial amounts of money or large herds of cattle, sheep and goats to a girl’s parents before marriage. This is the African cultural practice known as ‘lobola’. Earlier the researcher emphasised the contention by several scholars that ‘this practice or gender norm has inculcated a cultural expectation that men are compelled to make economic provision for women. This has relevance to the “blesser–blessee” phenomenon’ (Mampame 2018).

This cultural practice or gender norm of lobola has led to men believing that they have a sense of total ownership of women. A Cameroonian woman is quoted as saying (Nasimiyu-Wasike 2013):

[T]herefore, the men own the women for they have bought them, just like shoes, cars or other property. They feel that they can beat them as much as they like – after all, it is their money. (p. 123)

It needs to be pointed out that it is not the objective of the current study to offer a critical assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of the African lobola model. That is

beyond the scope of this research. However, where the practice of the model leads to the violation of the rights and human dignity of women, then the researcher disagrees with it and submits that very careful and serious theological reflection thereof is required, followed up by decisive action.

Gender violence

The researcher deems it necessary to begin this section with a definition of 'gender violence' and, for the intentions of the present research, the source will be the definitions offered by the United Nations General Assembly's 'Declaration on the elimination of violence against women' (UN General Assembly 1993). Article 1 of the declaration states:

[F]or the purposes of this Declaration, the term 'violence against women' means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (p. 3–4)

Furthermore, Article 2 states:

Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following:

1. Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation
2. Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution
3. Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs (UN General Assembly 1993:3–4).

Within the framework of these definitions, the researcher seeks to demonstrate how the blesser–blessee phenomenon contributes to GBV.

An actual case of violence inflicted upon a woman involved in a blesser–blessee relationship that resulted in death is illustrative here to substantiate the argument of how the blesser–blessee phenomenon contributes to violence. A *Mail and Guardian* newspaper article (Rupiah 2018) relates the unfortunate story of Sharon Otieno, a second-year student at Rongo University in south-western Kenya. The writer of the article states that she was allegedly in a bond with Okoth Obado, the married governor of Migori County, who impregnated her. Sharon's mother had the paternity of the baby confirmed. Sharon and Barack Odour, a journalist from Kenya's *Daily Nation* newspaper, had arranged to meet with Obado's personal assistants to get Okoth's version of a story that implicated him. Not long after the encounter, the duo were captured. Odour succeeded in escaping, but Otieno was taken to an unidentified

site. On 05 September 2018, her corpse, riddled with stab wounds, was discovered in a forest (Rupiah 2018).

In an interview, Jackie Phamotse shared with the researcher that, in her work on researching the blesser phenomenon, she had discovered that many girls go missing. 'Girls disappear. They never come back' (J. Phamotse [Frieslaar interview with Phamotse] pers. comm., 04 October 2018). In addition, in a media interview on eNCA, Jackie shares with the interviewer that her own experiences with a blesser (narrated through the character of Treasure in *Bare*) led her to the conclusion that, if she did not get out of the relationship, she was going to die – he was going to kill her or arrange for her death (J. Phamotse [*Bare* spills the dirt on transactional sex] pers. comm., 02 June 2018).

Another article that is illustrative of the gendered power imbalances that lead to violent situations is titled 'Too scared to even ask him'. It reports a grim new study that reveals the fear that many young women have of asking their sugar daddies (blessers) to wear condoms or be tested for HIV. Their fear is rooted in the possibility of their older sexual partners becoming violent. The article was written in the context of a protest called #TheTotalShutdown in which women marched against GBV, rape and sexual assault. The article also refers to a study reported by *Times Live*, which reveals that, despite some women choosing older partners, there was an admission that the biggest downfall of having a blesser is the fear of asking him to wear a condom. The outcome of the study is the revelation that the young women feel a sense of obligation to their blessers, and these blesser–blessee relationships expose them emotionally and physically to violence (February 2018).

The challenging essays of Hinga and Gatobu are instructive in this discussion of gender violence. Hinga (2013:138) states that her work seeks to highlight the dimensions that 'abuse and violence against women and children can take as well as exposing the underlying attitudes and factors that render women and children vulnerable'. She further asserts that her essay operates on the hypothesis that the contexts and environment in which abuse and violence against women occur are inherently nurtured by patriarchal structures and values. Gatobu's work seeks to demonstrate the interconnectedness of HIV/AIDS and gender violence. Gatobu (2017:62) contends that the 'transmission of HIV/AIDS both in consensual and commercial relationships should be considered as a form of gender violence'. Both Hinga and Gatobu refer to various aspects of gender violence.

Sexual abuse, sexual assault and rape

'By far, the most humiliating acts of terrorism that women are faced with are the acts of rape' (Hinga 2013:140):

a. Defining Rape

According to the 'Sexual Offences and related matters Amendment Act of 2007', rape is defined, as 'Any person ('A') who unlawfully and intentionally commits an act of sexual

penetration with a complainant ('B'), without the consent of B, is guilty of the offence of rape. Sexual assault is defined in two ways:

1. A person ('A') who unlawfully and intentionally sexually violates a complainant ('B'), without the consent of B, is guilty of the offence of sexual assault.
2. A person ('A') who unlawfully and intentionally inspires the belief in a complainant ('B') that B will be sexually violated is guilty of the offence of sexual assault (South African Government 2007:20).

A sexual assault story that the researcher was exposed to was that of the gang rape of Treasure in Phamotse's book *Bare*. It is significant to remember that *Bare* is Phamotse's articulation of her own experiences in the form of a novel. The detailed narrative of the horrific gang rape is presented in the opening pages of Chapter 14 of *Bare* (Phamotse 2017:71–75). Not only was Treasure brutally violated in this incident, but also she had to endure a subsequent rape later at the hands of a model scout named Allen (Phamotse 2017:99–100). These rape incidents were also referred to in the interview with J. Phamotse ([Frieslaar interview with Phamotse] pers. comm., 04 October 2018:13–14). One can only imagine the trauma that Phamotse experienced because of these rapes, as well as the sexual acts inflicted on her by her blesser.

The researcher is aware that there are other types of rape, such as acquaintance or date rape, as well as spousal rape. Discussions of these are beyond the scope of this article but are covered in the researcher's full dissertation.

Patriarchy: The root cause of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence

Whilst there are various definitions of 'patriarchy', the researcher resonates more with the definition offered by Phiri: 'Patriarchy can be defined as a father-ruled structure where all power and authority rests in the hands of the male head of the men'. She further states that '[p]atriarchy has defined women as inferior to men, thereby perpetuating the oppression of women by religion and culture' (Phiri 1997:11).

Therefore, the researcher is of the view that Musimbi Kanyoro (1996) is correct in her assertion that:

[C]ulture is the leading issue, which has pre-occupied the theology of African women. Culture has silenced many women in Africa and made us unable to experience the liberating promises of God. Favourable aspects of our cultures, which enhance the well-being of women, have been suppressed. Those that diminish women continue to be practiced in various degrees of our societies, often making women objects of cultural preservation. (p. 5)

The researcher's view is supported by Phiri (2002:20), who attributes the reasons for this violence to be the patriarchal structures of African cultures, which, she contends, are reinforced by the patriarchy that is found in the Bible. Furthermore, she argues that the lives of African women are significantly shaped by the dominant position taken by both

African culture and the Bible. In addition, Hinga (2013:145) argues that the patriarchal and endocentric culture in which women live is the root cause of the violence they experience. This is evident in the presence of two cultures, both African and biblical, which she says are formative of the environment in which women live in Africa.

Biblical history reflects a patriarchal culture in which women were often seen as possessions to be used and bargained with in ways that benefitted the men. It is most unfortunate that the Bible is often used to reinforce patriarchy, and the church has often shown itself to be guilty of perpetuating the idea of the male as the head and women as subservient and secondary to men.

Commoditisation and objectification of women

According to Hinga (2013:146), when one examines biblical culture, it is noticeable how, in many instances, the Hebrew culture that underpins and informs the biblical narratives expresses behaviour that is itself endocentric in nature. There are many incidents, anecdotes, stories and laws in the Old Testament that depict the handling of women in Hebrew culture as less than human. An example of this is found in the Decalogue, which demands that a man should not desire 'another man's wife or his donkey', implying that the woman and the donkey are related to the man in the same way, that is, they are both viewed as property or things.

She further argues that, within African religion and culture, one can also find cultural scripts of terror. The conception of a heterosexual marriage relationship bears testimony to the commodification of women. A prime example of this is evident in the Gikuyu language, with the imagery of what a man does when he takes a woman for his wife. The imagery resonates with the language of the marketplace, the description being *Kugurana* or *Kugura Muka*. The same root word, *Kugura*, is used in reference to the acquisition of commodities like sugar or goats. This becomes even more painfully evident in the case of pregnancy out of wedlock; for example, should a person's unmarried daughter be impregnated, there is the saying *Mburi ya ng'ania niironirwo Kuguru*. Translated, this says that 'x has broken the leg of y's sheep'. Once more, the imagery in the language reflects women as a commodity equivalent to sheep. It is Hinga's (2013:146–147) assertion that the manner in which women are perceived as 'a commodity to be bought and sold' is what contributes to the indiscriminate abuse of women.

Earlier reference was made to several researchers who emphasise the gendered nature of the phenomenon and the patriarchal structures, attitudes and norms that underpin the phenomenon. Data in an article by Watt et al. (2012) reveal that 'the norm of transactional sex reinforced the undervaluing and commoditization of women', and the title of the article reflects a gendered belief: 'Because he has bought for her, he wants to sleep with her'. This reflects the attitude of some

men, who believe they have ownership over women's bodies because they bought things for the women.

In order to demonstrate the correlation between the concepts of commoditisation and objectification of women and the blesser–blessee phenomenon, the researcher refers to images, captions and slogans on websites that are available on the Internet. According to the investigation undertaken by the Youth Research Unit (YRU) at the University of South Africa (UNISA), participants in the study elaborated on the existence of websites dedicated to activities connected with the blesser–blessee phenomenon. Examples of these are BlesserInc, BlesserFinder and BlesserFinder Mzansi (Basson 2018:10). A perusal of these websites and others reveals that, whilst both older men (blessers) and younger women (blessees) search for the other, it is the language and images used that convey the messages of objectification and commodification. Young women are lured into these transactional sex relationships with material things such as cars, ocean cruises, jets and shopping bags with designer labels. Even more shocking, in the view of the researcher, is the images that are posted of young women who wear as little as possible and whose bodies are flaunted in a way that suggests that their value and worth are only defined by their bodies and sexuality.

On websites like BlesserFinder and others, one finds descriptions posted by blessers stating some of the criteria that their blessees must meet. In a study of blesser–blessee relationships within a Limpopo Province rural university, researchers Thobejane and associates refer to such slogans as #UpgradeYourWorth and #YourPussyIsNotCharity. The authors of the study argue that these slogans are an attempt to present the blesser–blessee relationship as a source of female empowerment through their private parts (Thobejane et al. 2017). These websites with their images and slogans are evidence of how the blesser–blessee phenomenon contributes to the commoditisation and objectification of women. The researcher's perusal of some of these sites revealed several images that can be described as pornographic (Blesser Club 2019; Facebook 2019a).

The need to dismantle patriarchy and its structures and values

The researcher concurs with Hinga (2013:147), who asserts that 'patriarchal culture and values that objectify women are, it would appear, the root cause of the abuse that women experience'. Similarly, Gatobu (2017:74) attributes the major reason for GBV being sustained in Africa to patriarchal systems, which, she argues, are those that demand women to construct female identities that are demeaning and give birth to perceptions of themselves as second-place citizens.

Therefore, Gatobu, Phiri and others argue that patriarchal structures must be dismantled. Gatobu (2017:73) asserts that effective intervention strategies should focus on 'the need to dismantle patriarchal systems that continue to fuel and maintain the gender violence and breed the perfect contexts for HIV/AIDS to thrive'.

Phiri (2002:19) contends that sexual violence is a result of patriarchy, which, she says, has made violence a power game. She follows up this assertion with a crucial question: 'How then can one dismantle patriarchy to ensure that women and children are protected regardless of what problems a nation or home may be facing?' The Circle have, according to Phiri, therefore raised the importance of a theology that addresses the seriousness of the impact of patriarchy on the experiences of women, and she cites Dr Nyambura Njoroge, who also emphasises the need to dismantle patriarchy (Phiri 2002):

[P]atriarchy is a destructive powerhouse, with systematic and normative inequalities as its hallmark. It also affects the rest of the creation order. Its roots are well entrenched in society as well as the church – which means we need well-equipped and committed women and men to bring patriarchy to its knees. (p. 19)

A call for the downfall of blessers

The YRU study at UNISA concluded that the blesser–blessee phenomenon is extremely dangerous for the blessee participants in the relationship. It exposes them to unsafe sexual practices, the risk of contracting HIV infection and being impregnated at an early age in their life, not to mention emotional manipulation, sexual exploitation and being drawn into criminal activities such as sex trafficking (Basson 2018).

Padmanabhanunni and Edwards (2016:84) agree with the dangers of transactional sexual relationships, as put forward by Basson and others, that these relationships render girls vulnerable to the 'risk of exploitation and domination by older, wealthier men, also to physical and sexual abuse', unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. This researcher would also add GBV and IPV.

Methodology

In conducting this research, the narrative approach was used to engage with the living human 'documents' (the young women who were interviewed). In his book titled *The Living Human Document*, pastoral counsellor and Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) supervisor Charles Gerkin (1984:30) acknowledges Anton Boisen as the founder of CPE and this paradigm of pastoral care – the living human document.

The interviews with the women revealed that the lived experiences of the women were, in many ways, consistent with the secondary literature with regard to the contribution of blesser relationships to GBV and IPV. Both the primary and secondary sources revealed that the blessees experienced trauma and shame because of the violence and abuse inflicted by the blessers.

Towards a pastoral care and healing methodology

In helping young women to move from 'shame to self-worth' and healing, this researcher finds pastoral theologian Edward Wimberly helpful. Wimberly speaks of a 'shame-oriented'

culture, and he is of the view that, as a way of coming to grips with this shame-oriented culture, what the world needs today is to mimic how Jesus felt about himself. Wimberly (1999:13–14) further states that his mission is to embark on an in-depth exploration of Jesus' self-understanding, his relationship with others and his ministry. In doing so, he expresses that it is his hope that as we emulate Jesus, we can be motivated to discover our God-given possibilities.

In light of the above, the writer emphasises the importance of searching the scriptures to discover what the biblical narratives tell us about Jesus' relationships with women during his life and ministry in 1st-century Palestine. What was the mind of Christ? Wimberly (1999:13) teaches us that '[w]e contemporary Christians can learn a lot by trying to emulate the mind of Christ Jesus'.

Biblical scholars Stagg and Stagg (1978:124) and Bilezikian (1989:82) find no 'recorded instance where Jesus disgraces, belittles, reproaches, or stereotypes a woman'. These scholars claim that 'the many examples of the manner of Jesus are instructive for inferring his attitudes toward women and show repeatedly how he liberated and affirmed women'.

Hinga (2013:149) asserts that Jesus models for us a way forward in our search for appropriate responses to the problem of gender violence and abuse. He does this not only in his teachings but also in his praxis in relation to women. It is clear that Jesus resists the prevailing contexts that objectified women.

The researcher is in agreement with Borland (2017) when he emphasises Jesus valuation of women:

[J]esus demonstrated only the highest regard for women, in both his life and teaching. He recognized the intrinsic equality of men and women, and continually showed the worth and dignity of women as persons. Jesus valued their fellowship, prayers, service, financial support, testimony and witness. He honoured women, taught women, and ministered to women in thoughtful ways.

The writer submits that this way of viewing, treating and ministering to women, as Jesus did, will make a significant impact in any pastoral care and healing intervention that the church can formulate as it seeks to empower women and enable them to experience the liberating promises of God.

In heeding Wimberly's (1999:14) advice to emulate Jesus as the model of pastoral care and to seek the mind of Christ as exhorted in Philippians 2:5–8, the author endorses the narrative approach. Wimberly states that, in his attempt to address the shame-orientated culture characterised by a lack of purpose and meaning in life, he uses the narrative or storytelling method, which is found so often in scripture.

Conclusion

In his application of the narrative approach, the writer integrated the principles of narrative therapy and Nick

Pollard's positive deconstruction model to provide a framework for the formulation of a strategy for healing and pastoral care. The intended outcome is to journey with blessees through enabling them to tell their stories, to help them deconstruct the negative aspects of their stories and to reconstruct narratives that are life-giving, empowering and that help them to move from shame to self-worth, from brokenness to healing and wholeness.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Jackie Phamotse for her time and willingness to be interviewed as part of the research study. In addition, the authors thank Kgopotso Nakin for her significant contribution to the fieldwork and for being co-researcher for the project.

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Authors' contribution

This article is a reworked version of a section of B.V.F's master's dissertation, with M.M. as supervisor.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Ali, P. & Naylor, P., 2013, 'Intimate partner violence: A narrative review of the feminist, social and ecological explanations for its causation', *Aggression and Violent Behaviour* 18(6), 611–619. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2013.07.009>
- Basson, A., 2018, *Exploration of the blesser-blessee phenomenon among young people in Gauteng*, UNISA, Pretoria.
- Bilezikian, G., 1989, *Beyond sex roles: What the Bible says about a woman's place in Church and family*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Blesser Club, 2019, *Blesser club*, viewed 21 October 2019, from <https://blesser.club/>.
- Borland, J.A., 2017, *How Jesus viewed and valued women*, viewed 23 November 2019, from <https://www.crossway.org/articles/how-jesus-viewed-and-valued-women/>.
- Doskoch, P., 2008, 'South African men who commit gender-based violence are more likely to have transactional sex', *International Family Planning Perspectives* 34(1), 52–53.

- Dunkle, K., Jewkes, R., Nduna, M., Jama, N., Levin, J., Sikweyiya, Y. et al., 2007, 'Transactional sex with casual and main partners among young South African men in the rural Eastern Cape: Prevalence, predictors and associations with gender-based violence', *Social Science and Medicine* 65(6), 1235–1248.
- Facebook, 2019a, *Blesserfinder*, viewed 14 October 2019, from <https://www.facebook.com/Blesserfind/?ref=nl>.
- February, T., 2018, 'Too scared to even ask him: Asking an older partner to get an HIV test may lead to violence', *Weekend Witness*, Pietermaritzburg.
- Gatobu, A.K., 2017, 'Conjunction of gender violence and HIV/AIDS with implications for assessment and intervention in pastoral care', in T.N. Mucherera & E.Y. Larley (eds.), *Pastoral care, health, healing, and wholeness in African contexts: Methodology, context, and issues*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR.
- Gerkin, C.V., 1984, *The living human document re-visioning pastoral counselling in a hermeneutical mode* Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.
- Hinga, T.M., 2013, 'Violence against women: A challenge to the church', in D.W. Waruta & H.W. Kinoti (eds.), *Pastoral care in African Christianity: Challenging essays in pastoral theology*, pp. 137–155, Acton Publishers, Nairobi.
- Hoss, J., 2016, 'Anti-blesser campaign more focused on the "blessed" rather than the "blessers"', Interview, 29 July 2016.
- Hoss, J. & Blokland, L., 2018, 'Sugar daddies and blessers: A contextual study of transactional sexual interactions among young girls and older men', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 28(5), 306–317. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2361>
- Jewkes, R. & Morrell, R., 2012, 'Sexuality and the limits of agency among South African teenage women: Theorising femininities and their connections to HIV risk practices', *Social Science and Medicine* 74(11), 1729–1737. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.05.020>
- Kaufman, C.E. & Stavrou, S.E., 2004, "'Bus fare please': The economics of sex and gifts among young people in urban South Africa", *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 6(5), 377–391. <https://doi.org/10.31899/pgy6.1069>
- Kanyoro, M., 1996, 'Feminist Theology and African Culture', in G. Wamue & G. Mary (eds.), *Violence Against Women*, p. 5, Acton Publishers, Nairobi.
- Kiss, L., Schraiber, L.B., Heise, L., Zimmerman, C., Gouveia, N. & Watts, C., 2012, 'Gender-based violence and socioeconomic inequalities: Does living in more deprived neighbourhoods increase women's risk of intimate partner violence?', *Social Science & Medicine* 74(8), 1172–1179. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.11.033>
- Luke, M. & Kurz, K.M., 2002, *Cross-generational and transactional sexual relations in sub-Saharan Africa: Prevalence of behaviour and implications for negotiating safer sexual practices*, International Centre for Research on Women, Population Services International, Washington, DC.
- MacPherson, E.E., Sadalaki, J., Njoloma, M., Nyongopa, V., Nkhwazi, L., Mwapasa, V. et al., 2012, 'Transactional sex and HIV: Understanding the gendered structural drivers of HIV in fishing communities in Southern Malawi', *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 15(S1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.7448/IAS.15.3.17364>
- Madumise, B., 2018, *Scourge of violence against women has to be stopped*, Sabinet Online, Soweto.
- Mampane, J.N., 2016, 'Factors influencing the vulnerability of women to the risk of HIV infection in rural villages in North West Province, South Africa', *Gender and Behaviour* 14(1), 7338–7346.
- Mampane, J.N., 2018, 'Exploring the "blesser and blessee" phenomenon: Young women, transactional sex and HIV in rural South Africa', *Sage* 8(4), 1–9.
- Meyer, D., 2019, *Times live*, viewed 03 October 2019, from <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-09-02-breaking-missing-uct-student-was-bludgeoned-with-a-scale-in-post-office/>.
- Nasimiyu-Wasike, A., 2013, 'Domestic violence against women: A cry for life in wholeness', in D.W. Waruta & H.W. Kinoti (eds.), *Pastoral care in African Christianity: Challenging essays in pastoral theology*, pp. 120–136, Acton Publishers, Nairobi.
- Padmanabhanunni, A. & Edwards, D., 2016, 'Derailed by a sugar daddy: An investigation of the failed treatment of an adolescent township rape survivor with PTSD', *Child Abuse Research: A South African Journal* 17(2), 83–94.
- PEPFAR, 2015, *Transactional and age disparate sex in hyperendemic countries*, viewed 28 March 2019, from <https://aidsfree.usaid.gov/resources/pkb/behavioral/transactional-and-age-disparate-sex-hyperendemic-countries>.
- Phamotse, J., 2017, *Bare*, Porcupine Press, Pinegowrie.
- Phiri, I.A., 1997, *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, CLAIM, Malawi.
- Phiri, I., 2002, "'Why does God allow our husbands to hurt us?'" Overcoming violence against women', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 114(1), 19–30.
- Rose, E., 2015, 'A feminist reconceptualization of intimate partner violence against women: A crime against humanity and a state crime', *Women's Studies International Forum* 53(1), 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.08.004>
- Rupiah, K., 2018, *Anger at blessees is misplaced*, Sabinet Online, Johannesburg.
- South African Government, 2007, *Criminal law (sexual offences and related matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007*, viewed 10 October 2019, from <https://www.gov.za/documents/criminal-law-sexual-offences-and-related-matters-amendment-act>.
- Stagg, F. & Stagg, E., 1978, *Woman in the world of Jesus*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Stoebenau, K., Heise, L., Wamoyi, J. & Bobrova, N., 2016, 'Revisiting the understanding of "transactional sex" in sub-Saharan Africa: A review and synthesis of the literature', *Social Science and Medicine* 168(1), 186–197. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.09.023>
- The Star, 2018, *Stop the slaughter of our sisters*, The Star, s.l.
- Thobejane, T.D., Mulaudzi, T.P. & Zitha, R., 2017, 'Factors leading to 'blesser-blessee' relationships amongst female students: The case of a rural University in Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa', *Gender and Behaviour* 15(2), 8716–8731.
- UN General Assembly, 1993, *Declaration on the elimination of violence against women*, s.n., s.l.
- Watt, M., Aunon, F.M., Skinner, D., Sikkema, K.J., Kalichman, S.C. & Pieterse, D., 2012, 'Because he has bought for her, he wants to sleep with her': Alcohol as a currency for sexual exchange in South African drinking venues', *Social Science and Medicine* 74(7), 1005–1012. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.12.022>
- Wimberly, E., 1999, *Moving from shame to self-worth: Preaching and pastoral care*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN.
- World Health Organisation, 2013, *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*, World Health Organisation, Geneva.