

NEWS RELEASE

Is religion contributing to GBV or playing a role in eradicating it



How can a predominantly religious country be tolerant towards a type of violence that seems to be part of its society? Dr Annelie Botha, senior lecturer in Practical Theology and Pastoral Care & Counselling at the University of Pretoria, interrogates this issue.

Statistics indicate that South Africa is a religious country, with the population professing to belonging to one or other religion. Statistics also indicate that South African society has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence (GBV) against women in the world.

When reading these two statistics together, the contradiction should be apparent. How can a predominantly religious country be tolerant towards a type of violence that seems to be part of its society? This brings the following question to mind: is religion contributing to GBV, or is it playing a role in eradicating GBV?

Religion can contribute to GBV through the roles that are often prescribed to men and women in society. Religious texts are often used uncritically to promote male dominance and the submissiveness of women. This creates hierarchal power relations where power and control are exercised over women. This legitimises violence against women because men, who are often the head of the household and family, have the right to control and exercise power (with violence) over those who, for them, should be submissive – women and children. Within these power relations, women are often blamed for the anger and violence directed against them because they did something to make the man angry or were somewhere that they were not supposed

to be. In some cases, these power imbalances can fuel GBV by normalising unequal relationships and justifying control over women.

Certain religious teachings contribute to the stigmatisation of non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations, fostering an environment where discrimination and violence against individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms are tolerated or even encouraged. This exclusionary mindset can lead to a culture that justifies and normalises GBV against marginalised groups.

For religion to play a positive role in eradicating GBV, the focus of the narrative in roles and relationships should shift from power, violence and control to love, equality, compassion and respect, which are part of religious traditions.

Religious teachings that emphasise the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of every individual, irrespective of gender, can counteract the teachings of dominance and violence. These values can form the foundation for creating societies that reject violence, encouraging believers to treat others with kindness and compassion. By integrating messages of gender equality into religious teachings, leaders can influence their congregations positively. Progressive interpretations of religious texts can challenge patriarchal interpretations, fostering an environment that supports gender equity.

Religious institutions can provide a support system for individuals facing domestic violence, acknowledging the prevalence of GBV and helping victims. By creating safe spaces within religious communities, survivors are more likely to come forward, break the silence surrounding abuse and access the help they need.

While it is essential to acknowledge instances where religious teachings have been misused to justify GBV, it's equally crucial to recognise the positive contributions that many faith traditions can make in preventing such violence. By leveraging the moral foundations provided by religion, communities can work towards creating societies that reject violence and promote equality for all.

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