

The Sexual Politics of Gender-based Violence in South Africa: Linking Public and Private Worlds

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Abstract

Contemporary South Africa is poised at the intersection of a polarizing and contentious paradox. On the one hand, South Africa boasts one of the world's most inclusive and representative constitutions concerning women's rights and protections. On the other hand, the nation currently weighs in with some of the globe's highest levels of sexual and gender-based violence. This article investigates the origins of this paradox, exploring the nexus between South Africa's history of structural violence during Apartheid and current mores of behavior in intimate domains. The article probes the ways gender identities have been scripted and problematizes the complicity of state, legal and religious institutions with silence around gender-based violence. It concludes with reflections on individual and collective agency and highlights the vital role that faith communities have in social transformation.

KEYWORDS: gender-based violence, South Africa, structural violence, intersectionality

Ties that Bind: Embedding Gender Relations in Social Context

The hot summer sunshine beats down mercilessly on the pocked concrete surface of Old Potch Road leading into Soweto. The road's craggy pavement and loosely tarred perimeters belie its historical function as the symbolic transit corridor into township life. Old Potch Road (now renamed Chris Hani highway) is an iconic boundary point; a marker of the transition from one location and world into 'another' Johannesburg. On one side of the road, a derelict Apartheid era surveillance tower is partially visible in the distance. On the other side of the road next to the up-market Maponya Mall, a gigantic and flashy billboard boldly proclaims its message:

Your Rules – remember, they are exactly that -- Yours

Lauded as the rape capital of the world, Johannesburg is precariously situated as it navigates a mammoth social experiment: the social (re)construction of rules and rulers. As a state twenty years into development, not only are the rules, rulers and ruled being demarcated in new (and old) ways, but the instruments of measurement are being revisited. As a distinct signpost in this contested space, domestic relations function as a measure of the health or dysfunction of the social environment. Already in 1993, Graeme Simpson, the director of South Africa's Center for Violence and Reconciliation characterized this burgeoning space in this way:

Women and children, as victims of violence, are a barometer of the pervasive 'culture of violence' in our society. They are a tragic indicator of the extent to which violence has come to permeate the very fabric of our society. The ultimate irony is that this 'culture of violence' is making itself quite apparent at precisely that point in time when the prospects for peace and negotiated solutions appear to be more attainable than ever before ... (1993, p. 1)

Twenty years later and following both the 1995 Beijing women's platform and Resolution 1325, disproportionately high levels of violence against women and children continue unabated in South Africa (South African Medical Research Council, 2009). It would seem that the country's macro-level political emancipation could afford to be more robustly activated on the micro-level and in the private worlds of the nation's households. Moreover, South Africa warrants particular scrutiny because historical factors have uniquely linked macro forms of structural violence to gender-based violence on the family level.

Viewed as one of the most elemental units of social organization, families lie at the heart of processes of socialization and social reproduction. They represent one of the 'deep structures' of society akin to Durkheim's 'collective representations' or Jung's 'archetypes' (Boulding, 1979). In their most functional state, families are locations for social capital formation and transmission (Coleman, 1988). They are also sites where the division and specialization of labor are introduced (Parsons, 1956). As one of the 'deep structures' of society, however, families are, by no means, autonomous.

Families should not be singularly viewed as independent nuclear units but should rather be conceived of as products of larger meso and macro-level structures and transactions (Levi-Strauss, 1949). This symbiosis is especially heightened in settings where marginalized households experience 'structural violence'. In such contexts, reliance on extended family support structures becomes a key contingency and survival strategy.

According to Galtung (1969), structural violence significantly shapes conflict patterns and behavioral mores at all levels of society. South Africa provides a case-in-point of the mixed package that comes with the systemic interdependence of household relations with surrounding political, economic, and cultural milieus. This is particularly the case as regards the far-reaching

impacts of the structural violence unleashed by Apartheid and its aftermath. These effects have penetrated deeply into multiple aspects of domestic relations in ways that are still evident today.

Families 100 Years Later: From Parallel Systems to Social Capital Networks

On the cusp of one hundred years since the introduction of the *Native Affairs Act*, South Africa is still navigating the repercussions of this historic legislation. The original *Native Affairs Act* institutionalized a 'parallel system' of treatment for black households and functioned as one of Apartheid's cornerstone domestic policies. In a speech on 22 May 1917, General Smuts unveiled this approach towards the 'management' of the black African households of the country:

There is now shaping a policy which may have far reaching effects ... we have realized that political ideas which apply to our white civilization largely do not apply to the administration of the native affairs ... and so a practice has grown up in South Africa of creating parallel institutions ... giving the natives their own separate institutions on parallel lines with institutions for whites ... In land ownership, settlement and forms of government, we are trying to keep them apart, and in that way laying down a policy which may take a hundred years to work out, but which in the end may be the solution of our native problem (SAHO).

The *Native Affairs Act*, and the many accompanying pieces of legislation introduced after 1948 by the Apartheid state, regulated virtually all aspects of household life for non-white populations. The impacts of these regulations were evidenced in multiple arenas and served as reminders of the 'disciplining' reach of the Apartheid state (Foucault, 1975). Examples of restrictions placed on black households included: prohibitions on inter-racial marriage, Pass Laws restricting access to urban centers, forced removals to the Bantustan areas, inferior Bantu education, and limited access to a variety of social services.

Of all the negative attributions of Apartheid, however, one of the most significant ones was arguably the migrant labor system. This system spatially divided households and functioned as an extractive strategy that appropriated black labor power. The migrant labor system relegated African men to habitation in single-sex hostels on the outskirts of mining areas. This arrangement divided households and resulted in women, children, and the aged being consigned to domestic servitude in the townships or Bantustan 'reserves'. As separations and household dissolutions occurred, these circumstances resulted in profound disruptions to family life.

One hundred years later, negative trans-generational impacts are still being experienced. These effects have been cited in myriad studies that link historic forms of structural violence to current outcomes such as: low educational attainment levels (Lu, 2011), compromised adolescent identity formation (Adhikari, 2009), high levels of criminal activity (Thaler, 2012), high rates of

HIV transmission (Onyejekwe, 2004), high incidence of domestic and gender-based violence (Wood, 2005; Baumann, 2010) and the low status of women (Sideris, 2001). In summary, the capacity for constructive inter-generational socialization within families suffered significantly as the external constraints put on households limited their internal provisioning capabilities.

It is important to note that the deleterious impacts of Apartheid were also resisted and remediated in creative ways by affected families. Resilience strategies emerged both ideologically as well as pragmatically in the South African context. The Africanist notion of 'Ubuntu' (cooperative identity/action on behalf of the common good) was touted in both political rhetoric and strategic public action and emerged as a significant form of resistance. Youth mobilized under the larger 'Struggle' banner orchestrating mass actions (such as the uprisings of 1976) and sacrificing themselves in aid of desired collective outcomes. These investments in future generations catalyzed the social mobility now enjoyed by many newly enfranchised black middle-class families (Seekings & Nattrass, 2002).

Another form of resilience practiced in response to the dismembering impacts of Apartheid revolved around the mobilization of extended family networks. These networks were enlisted in care-giving, asset swapping or resource pooling activities. Households in both urban townships and rural reserves made use of social capital exchanges to link resources across multiple generations. These resources were used to expand the future 'life chance' options (Weber, 1922) of upcoming generations. Such exchange practices illustrate the ways that material conditions significantly shaped the social architecture of families and communities during Apartheid.

Boomerang Effect: The Aftermath of Intersectionality

Now twenty years since the first national democratic elections in April of 1994, the fragile peace within many South African households has been shattered. Women's organizations estimate that as many as one in three South African women will experience rape and one in six is in an abusive domestic relationship (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Violence and trauma are at endemic levels such that South Africa has been characterized as having a pervasive and normalized culture of violence (Hamber & Lewis, 1997; Sigsworth, 2009). Criminal violence such as 'breaking and entering' is often accompanied by sexual assault, and the stigmas associated with reporting (coupled with a lack of trust in the police) further exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls.

What is sadly ironic is that some of the social capital networks once used as protective household shields have now become sites of neglect or predation. Extended families can no longer protect vulnerable household members because friends and relatives have now become the most frequent perpetrators of rape and sexual assault (Jinda, Jewkes, Christofides & Loots, 2008). While predation by known assailants is a worldwide phenomenon, what especially problematizes this in the South African context are the presence of high-risk factors that

compound a household's risk of violence. These conditions have surfaced as 'latent' (Merton, 1957) after-shocks in the face of South Africa's transition. In the newly enfranchised South Africa, a quarter of households (23%) are still experiencing deprivations related to poverty, unemployment, lack of education, HIV/AIDS and/or a combination of these factors (World Bank, 2006). All of these structural factors negatively impact on households, straining their coping capacities and predisposing them to high levels of internal violence.

In their seminal text *Domestic Violence at the Margins*, Sokoloff and Pratt (2005) suggest that domestic violence should explicitly include dimensions such as race, class and gender as factors that explain the asymmetry of intimate partner violence. Their work builds on the concept of 'intersectionality' as theorized by Patricia Hill Collins (2010). This perspective highlights the ways that socially constructed marginalizations (related to such categories as race, class and gender) layer themselves in 'mutually constitutive' ways. Collins suggests that for persons at the center of multiple forms of exclusion, social inequality becomes an inexorable and interlocking matrix of domination (2010). Caught in the midst of this perfect storm, many South African households have faced multiple forms of 'intersectionality' and this puts their members at higher risk for being victims and/or perpetrators of domestic and gender-based violence.

Child-headed households affected by HIV/AIDS are 'intersectional' locations that are inordinately vulnerable to sexual predation (Onyejekwe, 2004). According to World Bank data (2009), high levels of poverty coupled with a nationally elevated Gini coefficient (63.1) have significantly compromised the employment and resource procurement options for AIDS orphans and surviving partners. This has served to increase levels of transactional sex, which in turn perpetuates the cycle of high-risk behaviors associated with HIV transmission (Dunkle et al., 2007). Such cycles readily feature in the lived experience of many migrant and refugee women. With borders now more porous since the lifting of Apartheid restrictions, in-coming flows of migrant women are prolific. Under these circumstances, migrant women find themselves all too frequently becoming economically dependent on local male 'patrons' and subsequently at high risk for victimization and abuse (Dzimwasha, 2014).

A further boomerang effect experienced by marginalized communities in post-1994 South Africa relates to elevated levels of unemployment. The government attempted to remediate this through the Reconstruction and Development Program of the mid-1990s, followed by the more liberalized GEAR program. While these legislative initiatives made concerted efforts to generate growth in employment opportunities, high levels of unemployment have continued unabated over the last two decades. For the youth age band of 15-24, in particular, unemployment levels in 2012 stood at a staggering 52 percent (World Bank, 2013). Among these youths, males comprised the majority, and this has resulted in an unemployed male youth bulge in the nation's demographic profile. With such high levels of unemployment, the security implications of a 'surplus male youth population' add complexity to domestic contexts that are already under duress.

While links are clearly visible between the latent dynamics of intersectionality and high levels of domestic and gender-based violence in South Africa, it is also important to note the possibility that these links may rest more heavily on correlation dynamics as opposed to a causal relationship. In her research on the connections between socio-political marginalization and sexual violence, Sigsworth (2009) challenges the overlay between these factors. She contends that ascribing violence against women merely to structural factors takes the culpability away from male perpetrators and diminishes personal as well as collective accountability. Teboho Maitse (as cited in Sigsworth, 2009) develops this idea further by suggesting that:

Using the theories of social deprivation to explain crimes against women results in projecting blame onto an abstract, albeit genuine, reality, rather than placing responsibility with the perpetrator. The rationalization that crimes against women are a by-product of social deprivation is not rooted in historical reality – men have been assigned the ultimate power and authority over women from time immemorial. Women are not exempt from poverty – in fact, they are the poorest of all people in this country; yet they do not rape or commonly commit violent acts against people. Most critically, using poverty to explain men’s violence towards women risks excusing violence, and does not force men to take responsibility for their actions (p. 20).

An additional explanation that specifically ‘engenders’ understandings of intimate partner violence pivots on narratives of identity. With the rise in male-on-male and gang sexual violence in South Africa (Noonan, 2012), local research is emerging that points to the role that gender identities play in the sexual violence equation. Baumann (2010) suggests that interpellations of status may be at stake as culturally appropriated symbols and practices reinforce violent behaviors related to status ascriptions. Moreover in this context threats to gender identity become a tinderbox with high potential for explosion.

Scripting Gender: Masculinities, Femininities and Identity Transmission

In many regards, South Africa’s black families currently find themselves in a liminal space as traditionally gendered cultural protocols are now being replaced by newer practices associated with modernization. This situation is due in many respects to the influx of black populations into the urban areas from which they were previously restricted. It is also due to a newly enfranchised educational system that is at least in principle multi-cultural. These influences of modernity and globalization are reshaping inter-generational relational dynamics as well as redefining aspects of cultural and ethnic identity. In fact it is precisely within this cauldron of transformation that the creation, transmission, and replication of gender scripts is now being vigorously contested on micro, meso and macro levels across the nation (Posel, 2004).

As normative codes of conduct, gender scripts have long been under scrutiny as 'frames' that create individual performance, as well as collective resonance (Goffman, 1974). As such these codes shape gender relations in profound ways, drawing from individual socialization processes, as well as public schemas. In his work in India, Chatterjie (1993) notes how public schemas have specifically influenced the replication of gender roles in post-colonial contexts. He observes that the bifurcation of private and public domains in colonial settings accentuated the polarization between men and women's gender roles.

Chatterjie (1993) suggests that while colonial white males inhabited the *public* domain (where governance, laws, and public discourse were negotiated), colonial white women inhabited the *private* domain (where household tasks, manual labor, and domestic chores were managed). As these very specific gender roles were replicated amongst the colonized, indigenous women became domestic laborers integrating themselves very successfully into the 'private' domain. This contrasted with colonized men who were barred from accessing the political and public arenas and were therefore left with little recourse to a gendered power base. The result of this public/private dualism on colonized men was that no provision was made for them to receive legitimization by an externally validated masculinity script (Brankovic, 2012).

In post-transition South Africa, unemployed black male youths now find themselves with high hopes for emancipation but little access to the goods to deliver on these hopes. Increasing disjuncture from validated gender scripts and serious employment challenges leave these young men with a profound sense of irrelevance in both the private and public domains. In her research on gang rapes in South Africa, Wood (2005) points to a 'crisis of masculinity' among these marginalized youths and cites an associated body of literature that documents their two historically divergent responses to marginalization. On the one hand, Wood notes the radical politicization of many young black men during the Struggle. For other black youths, she highlights the criminal element and the emergence of a newer "rejection of socio-cultural consensus, including a celebration of violence of diverse kinds" (Wood, 2005, p. 304). In the context of these scripts of dysfunctional anomie (Durkheim, 1897), women's bodies become locations for the reinstatement of masculine identity.

In addition to the scripting of masculine identity, black South African women also bore the imprint of their engendered subordinate status during Apartheid. While the private/public dichotomy created space for black women as domestic laborers, it also triangulated their disempowerment precisely within this space. With few civic and legal protections, domestic workers were profoundly vulnerable to exploitation on multiple levels. The right to ensure safe working conditions, the power to negotiate a minimum wage, and the possibility of unionizing were all outside of the reach of a majority of Apartheid's black domestics (Cock, 1980).

The disempowerment of many black women was additionally compounded by patriarchal cultural norms within their home and community environments (Sathiparsad, 2007). Such norms scripted females as objects of male sexual (and other) entitlements (Mokwena, 1991). Thus, at

home and work (paradoxically both historically domestic arenas), many black women found themselves structurally vulnerable and disadvantaged. Sigsworth (2009) describes these dynamics and their connection to current norms of intimate partner violence as follows:

In this setting, successful masculinity was partially defined in terms of young men's capacity for controlling their girlfriends [partners or wives], and underlying this construction were explicit notions of hierarchy, ownership of women and place within sexual relationships. Violence, including sexual violence, was used as a means of imposing the (often 'implicit') 'rules' underlying relationships or as a form of control or discipline when the female partner [was] perceived to have broken the rules or [was] resisting male attempts to enforce the rules and control their behavior (p. 15).

Lest females be viewed as victims and their agency in 'breaking the rules' under-represented, it is also important to note women's contributions to political resistance against Apartheid. In her work on collective trauma, Sideris (1998) points to the ways that women's involvement in the resistance movement catapulted them into new roles. These new roles included critical functions in the labor movement and the struggle against the migrant labor system and influx control regulation.

As females were detained in increasing numbers during the Struggle, their treatment also took on specifically gendered dimensions. Sideris recounts that research on female detainees depicts how "torturers employed social constructions of masculinity and femininity to devise both physical and psychological methods of torture" (1998, p. 84). Sideris goes on to explain that these forms of violence exploited traditional notions of womanhood and maternal sentiments, particularly for pregnant detainees and in relation to the concurrent torture of other family members (1998).

Even in women's responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) the scripting of gender becomes evident. An interesting finding that emerged from the analysis of TRC submissions was that:

... 72 percent of the female deponents described violations perpetrated against other people (their relatives) rather than directly against themselves. ... very few women, only 24 percent, described violations against themselves. This is in contrast to submissions made by men, who on the whole report[ed] violations *they* had suffered (Sideris, 1998, p. 86, emphasis mine).

Socialized as caregivers to others, these TRC female deponents were clearly enacting the externally mediated 'roles' prescribed for them. Hassim (1991) suggests that many issues traditionally associated with women (such as child-care, sexual violence, and reproductive rights)

have all been put on the back burner of political prioritization processes. In this regard, it could be said that South Africa's political struggle has prioritized race above its consideration of gender. According to Sideris (2001), this has caused a critical component of historic and contemporary violence against women to remain hidden.

The scripting of gender roles is complex terrain, and certainly in the South African context (as in other locations), its dysfunctional formats can be linked to high levels of household violence. It is important, however, to avoid the trap of essentialism in both the analysis and portrayal of gender scripts. This is particularly the case in regards to how young black males have been perceived and represented. In her article entitled *Violence and Gang Youth in South Africa: More Complex than 'Black Menace'*, Noonan highlights the intersection of race and gender in renditions of African masculinity (2012). She suggests that in the same way that there is no hegemonic script that universally narrates experiences of 'femininity', so too it is important to recognize the plurality of experiences that have populated renditions of African 'masculinity'. Barker and Ricardo (as cited in Noonan, 2012, p. 1) reiterate this as follows:

There are numerous African masculinities, urban and rural and changing historically, including versions of manhood associated with war, of being warriors and others associated with farming and cattle herding. There are indigenous definitions and versions of manhood defined by tribal and ethnic group practices, and newer versions of manhood shaped by Islam and Christianity...

The fluid nature of gender identity and its transcriptions are indeed myriad in South Africa. So too are the ways that state and religious institutions have intersected, through prohibitions as well as collusions, with the issue of gender-based violence.

State and Religious Complicity with Violence Against Women

South African government institutions and religious organizations have historically been prime locations for the transmission of patriarchal systems of rule (Meyersfeld, 2003). Insofar as these institutions have influenced and shaped social relations they have also been prime instruments of enforcement through the arms of the legal system. In light of this, the historic definition of what was (or was not) construed as the 'legally acceptable' treatment of women has been a key point of contention in terms of past and present law enforcement practices. This has specifically been the case with regards to the state's legal endorsement of the 'corporal punishment' of wives.

In her groundbreaking work on the law's complicity with intimate partner abuse, Armatta (1997) highlights how: "Historically in Western societies and still today in others, the '*duty of chastisement*' was codified in law" (p. 12, emphasis mine). This endorsement provided legal

sanction for the beating or 'disciplining' of wives/female family members who were deemed to have broken mores of female conduct. Armatta (1997) goes on to describe how this has been enshrined in time as well as location:

This rule of ecclesiastical law was adopted into civil law as evidenced by the 1775 edition of Blackstone's Commentaries: 'For he, [the husband] is to answer for her [the wife's] behavior, the law thought it reasonable to entrust him with the power of restraining her, by domestic chastisement, in the same moderation that a man is allowed to correct his apprentices or children' (p. 13).

Armatta (1997) explains that practices of corporal punishment meted out to wives grew out of the perception that women were 'dependents' of their male relatives and thus had no political or legal status of their own. Under customary law in South Africa, women in the homelands were deemed minors and under the guardianship of their husbands all the way up until the enactment of the new constitution in 1997. During Apartheid women were not allowed to independently own property, open a bank account, or travel without their husband's consent (Armatta, 1997).

The treatment of women predominantly as 'dependents' was also evident in the 'bride prices' negotiated on behalf of young women by male family members. Practices related to the 'lobola' bride price had the potential to entrench perceptions of women as commodities to be bought, sold, or exchanged at the will of male relatives. Moreover, women's existence within these types of environments made it virtually impossible for them to exit abusive relationships.

What is particularly poignant in South Africa is the way the 'formal' legal system and practices of 'customary law' have colluded in regards to violence against women. This is yet another instance of the paralyzing effects of intersectionality, only this time enacted through the state-sanctioned legal system.. In South Africa, a bifurcated system of justice has attempted to straddle the divide between formal and informal (customary) systems of law. As an umbrella structure, however, this has resulted in many women being left out of the reach of the protections of either system. This gap in the application of legal standards has been modeled from the top down and even among the country's senior political leaders.

Opposition politician Lindiwe Mazibuko has described "a silent war against the children and women of this country... We live in a deeply patriarchal and injured society where the rights of women are not respected." President Jacob Zuma, who was acquitted on charges of raping the daughter of a family friend in 2005, this month launched a national "Stop Rape" campaign "to rid our country of this scourge, to cure the nation of this sickness." (Faul, 2013)

Faul (2013) points out that while South Africa has enacted strong laws protecting women and children, these laws are frequently not enforced. This does not deny the importance of the country's 1998 *Domestic Violence Act* (No. 116), nor its 2007 *Criminal Law: Sexual Offenses and Related Matters* (Act No. 32) legislation. Rather, it recognizes the state's limitations in providing

adequate safety and security infrastructure due to limited funds and personnel. It also highlights the issue of priorities in the national budget coupled with the lack of will to effectively apply legislation that is in place. Callaghan (2010) suggests that what is at stake is “the capacity to effectively provide a function[al] criminal justice system – especially to women who suffer violence which is often *condoned by society*” (p. 20, emphasis mine).

South Africa’s religious institutions have also been accused of ‘condoning’ violence against women by their tacit silence on the subject. Primarily conceptualizing gender-based violence as the product of the individual pathology of perpetrators, churches, in particular, have been reticent to address their complicity with abusive patriarchal ideologies, structures and practices (Horn, 2012). With levels of violence reaching epidemic proportions, however, faith communities have been forced to join hands across religious divides in order to effectively address a national transformation agenda. In November 2013, South Africa’s *National Religious Leaders Council* adopted the following as one of its priority mandates:

South Africa faces a globally unprecedented problem of violence against women and children. With rates of homicide, as well as childhood and domestic violence far above those of other countries, the problem of violence is undermining our nation’s economic and social development. The problem is so severe that it affects people from all walks of life regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, age and religion. Preventing and reducing levels of violence has been a missing piece in the national transformation agenda. It [thus] needs to be addressed vigorously as a national priority (Jamiatul, 2013).

In his ‘Critique of Some Forms of Evangelical Theology’, Owino (2010) elaborates on what he sees as the failure of faith communities to step up to the challenge of engaging with the power imbalances inherent in many predominantly patriarchal religious institutions. He cites Froise’s (1993) observations regarding theological biases in South Africa that have personalized faith expressions at the expense of public engagement: “We have regarded ourselves as a Christian country, but has it been a Christian culture or a personalized faith?” (as cited in Owino, p. 4) Owino goes on to suggest that a singularly privatized faith requires scrutiny. He asks: “Is it just a ‘form’ of religiosity that does not transform its adherents toward a *mended social reality*?” (2010, p. 4, emphasis mine)

Orlando Costas echoes Owino’s sentiments in his application of this same critique to Western Christendom. Costas (1982, p. 80) indicts the Western church for exporting a culturally accommodating gospel that calls people to:

... a conscience-soothing Jesus, with an unscandalous cross, an other-worldly kingdom, a private inwardly individualistic limited Holy Spirit, a spiritualized Bible, a pocket-size God and a church that escapes the gut issues of society.

In fact, Polanyi (1944), spoke of the dangers of an overly privatized ethic in his text *The Great Transformation*. In his application of this principle to the economic domain, Polanyi points to the hazards of the modernist impulse to 'disembed' economic activities from their accountability to public constituencies. He suggests that the modernist propensity to specialize, personalize and privatize production has disembedded production processes from the weal of the common good. Likewise, when faith expressions become so privatized that they relinquish their prophetic engagement with their historical and material reality, they too lose accountability to the collective and their public witness becomes moot.

Betwixt and Between: Reflections on 'The Way' Forward

In response to the polarization of America's Left and Right political discourses, Anabaptist theologian Myron Augsburger (2000) coined the term 'The Third Way.' Augsburger suggested that the Christian witness should not be held hostage to the left/right divide but should instead interrogate and supersede both. So too, religious institutions within South Africa must increase their prophetic stance by simultaneously critiquing and augmenting the state politic in ways that challenge it to a higher standard. Desmond Tutu is infamous for his criticism of what he calls the South African government's 'gravy train'. He suggests that elites, whether new or old, should be profoundly accountable to public interests, especially the interests of those who continue to be structurally marginalized and vulnerable.

Whether within the ambit of the contemporary legal system or through customary law, South Africa's system of jurisprudence should address the protection of women by elevating their legal status. This must entail developing a national culture that dignifies women, coupled with a legal system that insistently champions and enforces their equality. Doing this would mitigate the strangulating marginalization effects that race, class and gender have in women's lives. For rural women and the 12 percent of the black population living in informal settlements, these vulnerability issues are particularly cogent (Matheson, 2011). Moreover, vulnerabilities that emanate from structural dysfunctions require structural solutions. In this case, solutions will require an alteration of practices, policies, ideologies and theologies.

In the interests of spearheading such change, there has been a rise in South Africa of efforts to intentionally incorporate the subject of gender-based violence into theological training curricula. Petersen (2010) tracks how theological curriculums that address the 'root causes' of violence against women are being given increasing airtime within congregations. This has been the case across a spectrum of denominational and religious lines (Owino, 2010). And while the Church has been castigated by some as a 'road block' in the fight against HIV transmission (Horn, 2012), it has also been cited as a location for refuge, healing and advocacy (Callaghan, 2010). With its history as 'a force more powerful,' the South African liberationist church has a unique track record and a challenging trajectory ahead (Ackerman & Duvall, 2001). Lauded as the institution

with the greatest potentially transformative social capital network across the continent, the South African church may indeed be in the throes of its next liberation struggle.

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