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Gendered political violence and the church in Africa: Perspectives from church leaders

Abstract: This study investigates the gendered effects of political violence on women (and children) from a church leader's perspective. The paper critically examines the role of church leadership in protecting vulnerable groups in society (particularly women and children) and interrogates how church leadership has incorporated women and children into peacebuilding programs. Using qualitative methods, in-depth interviews were conducted with church leaders affected by political violence in Zimbabwe. The results of the study show that women and children are disproportionately affected by political violence. The women are affected socially, economically, and psychologically as a result of political violence, which results in severe trauma, disruption, and loss of livelihoods, and in severe cases loss of lives. The results further indicate that the church plays a crucial role in providing safe havens for the victims, offering spiritual guidance and counselling for the victims. However, the findings show that the church continues to lack gender sensitivity and inclusivity in the peacebuilding programs. Women and children continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles in churches, as well as in driving the peacebuilding agenda. The paper argues for a transformative and gender-sensitive framework in church-led peace interventions, which prioritizes the needs of women and children and incorporates them in the process. The paper argues that by adopting this approach, the church harnesses its transformative capacity as a change agent for building sustainable peace and addressing political violence in a holistic manner. This interdisciplinary study contributes to the evolving scholarly debates on the intersections of gender, religion, and peacebuilding.

Keywords: Gendered Political Violence; Church Leadership; Peacebuilding; Political Violence; Vulnerable Groups ; Empowerment

1. Introduction

The gendered nature of political violence remains a critical yet under-explored area in postcolonial African societies. While political violence is often assessed in terms of electoral manipulation, militarised state repression, and civil unrest, the intersectional impacts on women and children (particularly as interpreted and responded to by local institutions) require closer scrutiny. In Zimbabwe, decades of political instability have entrenched systemic vulnerabilities, with women and children disproportionately bearing the burden of social, economic, and psychological consequences (Bengesai & Chikhungu, 2024:2). Community-level institutions, especially churches, play an ambivalent role in both responding to and reproducing these vulnerabilities.

Religion, and the church in particular, has historically functioned as both a site of refuge and a site of exclusion. As Tarusarira (2020:2) contends, mainstream religious institutions have often favoured conciliatory, apolitical approaches to peacebuilding, thereby marginalising the radical advocacy required in deeply politicised environments. However, growing calls for transformative justice have placed new demands on churches to move beyond spiritualised neutrality and engage directly with gender justice and political accountability (Chidhawu, 2024:130).

This article investigates the role of church leadership in Zimbabwe in addressing the gendered consequences of political violence, focusing specifically on how women and children are incorporated or excluded from peacebuilding initiatives. Drawing from qualitative data gathered through in-depth interviews with church leaders in communities

affected by political violence, the article foregrounds the lived experiences of women as a lens through which to evaluate the efficacy and inclusivity of church-based interventions. The findings highlight the protective yet patriarchal role of churches, which, while offering spiritual and psychological support, often perpetuate gender exclusion in leadership and peace processes (Manyonganise, 2017; Mtero, 2023). By critically engaging the intersection of religion, gender, and peacebuilding, this article contributes to broader debates on post-conflict recovery and the potential of faith-based actors as transformative agents. The study contends that a gender-sensitive approach is not only ethically imperative but essential for achieving sustainable peace in Zimbabwe and similar conflict-prone contexts.

2. Background

Zimbabwe's political trajectory since independence has been marked by recurrent episodes of state-sanctioned violence, often intensifying during electoral cycles. The 2008 elections in particular are widely recognised as one of the darkest chapters in the country's post-independence history, with widespread reports of abductions, torture, and extrajudicial killings (Ndlovu, 2024). As Chidhawu (2024:130) underscores, Zimbabwe has endured dark episodes of gross human rights violations that include political killings and enforced disappearances, particularly in rural areas where state-sponsored violence became systemic (Chidhawu, 2024).

Women and children[1], often considered peripheral to formal political participation, have paradoxically been central to the experience and consequences of such violence. According to Bengesai and Chikhungu (2024:2), 'intimate partner violence and child marriages remain persistent public health problems with detrimental effects on the health and well-being of women and girls,' exacerbated by political instability and weak institutional protection. Zengenene and Susanti (2019:84) similarly argue that "despite the enactment of laws at the national and international level, women and girls are affected more by the violence in Harare, Zimbabwe," illustrating the state's failure to enforce legal protections for the most vulnerable groups in society.

Religious institutions (particularly churches) have historically played a complex role in the Zimbabwean religio-political context. These institutions have served simultaneously as moral guardians, apolitical sanctuaries, and at times, complicit actors. Manyonganise (2017) critiques the ecumenical churches for adopting a general approach to the national healing and reconciliation process, which has made women's experiences of political violence invisible. This exclusion from peace narratives has implications for the design and implementation of community-based interventions, where women remain "systematically excluded from leadership positions" despite bearing the consequences of violence (Manyonganise, 2017).This paper argues that the blanket approach to national healing and reconciliation is problematic in that it fails to be sensitive to the plight of women and the gendered nature of violence.

Moreover, the patriarchal political culture in Zimbabwe continues to inhibit meaningful participation of women. Online attacks, driven by patriarchal beliefs, have the potential to turn into physical violence, deterring women from freely participating in elections (Mtero et al., 2023). This violence, both physical and digital, not only silences women but reinforces their marginalisation in civic, religious and political spaces. Therefore, any approach to mitigate such violence must be sensitive to these gender dynamics at play. It is crucial for actors to understand the effects of deep-seated patriarchal cultural impact on violence, especially political violence.

However, religious institutions are not monolithic. There is emerging expressions of faith-based activism which suggest a growing willingness to confront injustice more directly. Tarusarira (2020) observes the emergence of a new breed of religious leaders that

[1] Children are constitutionally excluded from active participation. The legal age of majority in Zimbabwe is 18 years. Children can therefore not participate in politics as the legal age for voting is also 18 years.

deploy relatively radical and confrontational strategies to advance peace and reconciliation has emerged. These actors have challenged traditional conceptions of piety by incorporating demonstrations, petitions and critically speaking out into their strategies for peace (Tarusarira, 2020:2). While this is plausible, it is not clear how such religious entities have been gender-sensitive in their approaches and radical strategies.

This context underscores the urgency of interrogating how church leadership perceives and responds to political violence, particularly its gendered dimensions. Although the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and other ecumenical bodies have issued pastoral letters and initiated dialogues, their reach remains limited. According to Mapuranga (2020) despite contributing to development, the church in Zimbabwe often reproduces conservative gender norms that exclude women from decision-making processes. This reproduction of traditional patriarchal norms fails to recognise the gendered nature of violence and indirectly continues to perpetuate violence against women. This exposes a disjuncture between the church's perceived moral authority and its actual praxis in addressing gendered dimensions of violence. Understanding this tension is vital for reimagining the role of religious institutions not only as spiritual sanctuaries, but as transformative agents in the reconstruction of post-conflict societies.

3. Literature Review

The intersections of gender, political violence, and religion constitute a dynamic and increasingly urgent area of scholarly inquiry in African gender and peacebuilding discourses. The Zimbabwean context, characterised by prolonged episodes of state-sponsored political violence, offers a complex terrain in which the gendered impact of such violence and the role of church leadership remain insufficiently theorised and empirically documented. The following literature review synthesises the key debates on political violence in Zimbabwe, the gendered nature of such violence, the function and limitations of church leadership in peacebuilding, and the emerging demands for gender-sensitive religious intervention.

3.1. Political Violence and Postcolonial State in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe's post-independence political trajectory has been shaped by a political culture deeply steeped in allegations of militarism, authoritarian nationalism, and periodic outbursts of state-orchestrated violence. Chidhawu (2024) describes the country's experience as a case of institutionalised impunity, where victims of politically orchestrated violence have received neither apology nor compensation from the government. The 2008 election crisis and the 1 August 2018 shootings have been widely cited as emblematic of this structural violence, which undermines transitional justice and peacebuilding. Existing scholarship also tends to focus primarily on formal political actors and electoral dynamics, largely overlooking how violence reverberates through community institutions and intimate social spaces, particularly for vulnerable groups in society.

According to Tarusarira (2020:2) it can be argued that 'peace and reconciliation by religious actors is not a predefined and linear… but rather a paradoxical and hermeneutical exercise,' which then complicates attempts to delineate clear lines of moral authority in the religious sector. While acknowledging the growing visibility of radical church actors, such scholarship still neglects the gendered implications of their interventions. This study contributes to existing knowledge by positioning gender not as a peripheral concern but as a central analytical lens.

3.2. Gendered Nature of Political Violence

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Zimbabwe manifests in complex, layered ways, compounding the already vulnerable status of women in a patriarchal society. The study by Bengesai and Chikhungu (2024) provides empirical evidence that Zimbabwe has one of the highest rates of intimate partner violence and child marriage in sub-Saharan

Africa. Such a trend intensifies in politically unstable contexts. In their systematic review of VAWG in Zimbabwe, it has further been suggested that children who have witnessed violence (in comparison to those who are not) are affected in a number of ways, including negative physical and mental health outcomes and a decline in academic performance (Bengesai and Chikhungu 2024). This shows that vulnerable groups in society particularly women and children suffer the most at the hands of political violence and experience violence differently compared to the other groups. These studies reflect a significant research gap in literature in that there are few studies which examining the role of local institutions (particularly religious ones) in either perpetuating or mitigating these diverse forms of violence.

Other studies have elaborated further on how structural and cyber-violence reinforce exclusion in political and civic spaces. For instance, Mude et al (2022) conclude thatwhile the civic space is theoretically open for women's civic participation, structural violence and cyber-violence have militated against women's civic space visibility. This reflects broader continental trends in which gender equity is constitutionally guaranteed but systematically undermined in practice. Zimbabwe serves as a potent case study for these contradictions.

Recent studies also show how violence in Harare targets women and girls with devastating consequences. According to Zengenene and Susanti (2019:84) 'regardless of such recognition [in law], there have been rampant incidences of politically motivated and domestic violence against women and girls in the country.' Their use of Althusser's repressive state apparatus concept foregrounds the state's role in legitimising gendered violence, but it does not extend this analysis to religious institutions.

This study therefore builds on this scholarly work by bridging this gap and extending the analysis to the church institution. The paper acknowledges that the interface between gendered political violence and religious responses remains under-theorised and empirically weak, particularly from the standpoint of affected women and church-based peacebuilding agents. The paper brings in the voices of church leaders as relevant actors in peacebuilding and draws their insights and experiences on how women and children have been affected by political violence within their communities.

3.3. Church leaders and peacebuilding

Churches in Zimbabwe have historically presented themselves as moral voices of the nation. However, as Manyonganise (2017) cautions, this moral voice often masks patriarchal exclusion and makes women's experiences of political violence invisible. As highlighted earlier, her empirical research reveals that even where churches intervene in conflict, they often fail to articulate and consider how women have suffered differently and disproportionately from political violence (Manyonganise 2017). This is problematic as women's voices remain in the periphery. Moreover, the broader literature critiques the church's tendency to prioritise unity over justice. In a study of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, it was observed that "despite contributing to development, the church in Zimbabwe often reproduces conservative gender norms that exclude women from decision-making processes." (Mapuranga, 2020:12). They are particularly excluded from the peacebuilding processes. This results in a peacebuilding praxis that is spiritually rich but socially regressive.

There is a growing recognition of the church's potential as an agent of change (Ndlovu and Masondo, 2025). Manyonganise (2022) notes that churches have begun to confront the state over the Zimbabwean crisis by issuing pastoral letters and calling for dialogue. This aligns with Tarusarira's (2020) concept of religio-political nonconformism in which radical Christian voices challenge both state and ecclesiastical complacency. However, these studies (except Manyonganise) still do not centre women's agency in their analysis. They focus on male church leaders and high-profile institutional responses rather than everyday forms of religious resistance, solidarity, and leadership enacted by women at community level. What remains missing is a grounded analysis of how

gendered impacts of political violence are experienced and mediated through faith-based spaces, and whether these spaces serve as instruments of healing or reproduce existing inequalities.

3.4. Religion, Gender and Agency in peacebuilding

Recent feminist engagements with religion have challenged simplistic narratives that position religious institutions solely as sites of patriarchy. Mapuranga (2020:12) argues for a more nuanced perspective that recognises the complex and at times contradictory roles that churches play in both upholding and challenging patriarchal norms. Similarly, Magwegwe (2024:2), examining the post-COVID surge in gender-based violence in Zimbabwe, shows how traditional leaders and religious figures were both part of the problem and the solution. He argues that: societal norms and economic instability in a low-income, masculine-dominated work culture" contributed to GBV, yet survivors often turned to churches as the only available refuge when state systems failed (Magwegwe, 2024). This role of religion (as both a constraining and enabling force) requires further empirical investigation. Moreover, existing literature fails to explore how women within religious spaces challenge their marginalisation and participate in informal peacebuilding, spiritual care, or community mobilisation. Such practices may not always be recognised as "leadership" by traditional metrics but are nevertheless central to resilience and recovery in contexts of political trauma.

This study responds to this gap by foregrounding the lived experiences of women from the perspective of church leaders, focusing on how churches provide support or exclusion in the aftermath of political violence. It draws on the perspectives of church leaders to offer a more holistic view of how religion mediates gendered suffering and agency. In addition, the study makes a theoretical contribution by proposing a gender-sensitive interpretive framework for analysing faith-based peacebuilding efforts in Zimbabwe. Existing work by Tarusarira (2020:2) introduces the notion of religio-political nonconformism, highlighting how radical religious actors are reimagining peace and reconciliation through confrontational methods such as protests and petitions. While this is a valuable starting point, the framework has largely ignored how such radicalism may (or may not) translate into gender-inclusive peace practices. By interrogating how women and children are situated within these religio-political dynamics, this study extends Tarusarira's work and foregrounds gender as a critical lens of analysis rather than a secondary concern.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework combining African Feminist Theology and the Theory of Religious Peacebuilding to critically examine the role of church leadership in addressing the gendered impacts of political violence in Zimbabwe. African Feminist Theology provides a lens to interrogate patriarchal structures within religious institutions, while the Theory of Religious Peacebuilding offers insights into the dual role of religion as both a potential source of conflict and a facilitator of peace.

4.1. African feminist theology

African feminist theology provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting and resisting the gendered political violence experienced by women and children across the continent. Rooted in African women's lived experiences, this theology exposes how violence (physical, structural, and symbolic) is often legitimized by patriarchal cultural norms and ecclesial silence. It asserts that the church cannot remain neutral in the face of systemic injustices without becoming complicit in them. Gendered political violence, including sexual assault in conflict zones, state repression of women protestors, and the exclusion of women from peace processes, is not experienced in a vacuum. According to Oduyoye (2023:73) "women's pain is often spiritualized and made invisible within religious rhetoric that demands silence and submission." In countries like Zimbabwe, where

political crises have resulted in displacement and militarized violence, churches often face serious challenges indealing with the compounded vulnerabilities of women. Mupangwa and Chirongoma (2020) highlight how female pastors in Zimbabwe are marginalized in decision-making spaces and subjected to spiritual and psychological abuse. This reflects broader societal patterns of exclusion. Against this background, African feminist theology resists these patterns by centering the narratives and bodies of African women. It offers what Yafeh-Deigh (2020) calls a theological space where African women articulate divine justice from the margins, insisting that God is present in the cries of those brutalized by both the state and sacred institutions. This theology emphasizes communal healing, story-sharing, and resistance as forms of spiritual activism (Landman, 2022).

African feminist theology equips church leaders with tools for transformative action. Through a theology of mercy and justice, leaders can become agents of healing. Maseno (2021) stresses the role of theology in reimagining community in ways that affirm dignity and justice for women and children. For example, churches in Nigeria working with survivors of Boko Haram violence have begun to incorporate lament and testimony into liturgy—an approach aligned with African feminist theology's insistence on truth-telling (Dube, 2020). This theology challenges ecclesial hierarchies. According to Ipadeola (2022) the recognition of difference as political and spiritual opens paths for inclusion. However, despite this, resistance remains particularly in the African context. Many African church leaders view feminist theology with suspicion, fearing it undermines ecclesial authority (Alak, 2020). Despite such resistance, Byrne (2020: 40) contends that African feminist theology is a radical reclamation of faith as liberative practice. It calls church leaders not just to protect the vulnerable, but to be transformed by their testimonies, reshaping theology and policy alike to confront political violence head-on. As such, African feminist theology is applicable for this study as it seeks to understand how African church leaders have incorporated women experiences in shaping their theology and programs for peace. African feminist theology provides a critical theoretical framework for understanding and challenging the church's entanglement with gendered political violence.

4.2. Theory of Religious Peacebuilding

The Religious Peacebuilding theory examines the role of religion in both fomenting and resolving conflicts. Scott Appleby's concept of the ambivalence of the sacred highlights religion's dual capacity to incite violence and to foster peace. John Paul Lederach's work emphasizes the importance of building sustainable peace through inclusive, grassroots approaches that often involve religious actors. This theory posits that religious institutions and leaders can be pivotal in peacebuilding efforts due to their moral authority, community reach, and capacity to influence social norms. However, it also acknowledges that religion can be manipulated to justify violence and exclusion. Critiques of this theory point to its occasional romanticization of religious actors and insufficient attention to internal power dynamics, including gender hierarchies, within religious institutions.

4.3. Integration and Applicability to the Study

Integrating African Feminist Theology with Religious Peacebuilding theory allows for a nuanced analysis of how religious institutions in Zimbabwe navigate the complexities of political violence and gender dynamics. This combined framework facilitates an examination of the ways in which church leadership can both challenge and perpetuate gendered injustices in post-conflict settings. By applying this integrated theoretical lens, the study aims to uncover the potential of religious institutions to contribute to gender-sensitive peacebuilding efforts, while also critically assessing the limitations imposed by entrenched patriarchal structures.

5. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically adopting a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of church leaders concerning the gendered effects of political violence in Zimbabwe. Phenomenology is apt for capturing individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they ascribe to those experiences, particularly in contexts marked by trauma and social upheaval. The research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and understood through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences. This paradigm aligns with the study's aim to understand the nuanced perceptions of church leaders on effective peacebuilding and gender justice.

The research was conducted with church leaders in Zimbabwe. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant data. The sample comprised 20 participants (both male and female) from various denominations. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English or Shona/Ndebele, based on participant preference. The interviews were conducted online due to the COVID 19 restrictions andwere audio-recorded with consent from the participants. The interview guide focused on themes such as personal experiences of political violence, the church's role in peacebuilding, gender inclusion in church structures, and perceptions of healing and reconciliation. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019), was utilized to analyze the data. This method involves a six-phase process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis emphasized both semantic and latent content, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions on gendered political violence.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board of a reputable University in Southern Africa. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities of the participants and avoid victimisation. To ensure the study's trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. To achieve credibility, prolonged engagement and member checking were used to validate findings. To ensure that there is transferability, thick descriptions of the context and participants' experiences were provided to allow for applicability in similar settings. Reflexive journaling helped mitigate researcher bias and maintain objectivity

This study is however not without limitations. While the qualitative approach provided in-depth insights, the findings are not generalizable to all contexts. Potential biases include participants' reluctance to share sensitive information due to fear of reprisal and the possibility of researcher bias, despite efforts to mitigate it through reflexivity and member checking. The church leaders interviewed were mostly male church leaders which could provide biased perspectives that further perpetuate the marginalisation of women into the periphery even on matters that involve them directly. While the researcher tried to have a balance on the participants gender, the reality of the Zimbabwean religious context is that there are very few women church leaders, as leadership in churches is mostly male-dominated.

6. Results

6.1. Theme 1: Killings and Loss of Life

A recurring and harrowing theme emerging from the interviews is the widespread experience of killings and loss of life resulting from political violence. This theme captures the violent impact on families and communities, especially among the most vulnerable such as women, children, the elderly, and youths. Political violence, particularly during electoral periods, has not only claimed lives but has deeply fractured social fabrics and

inflicted long-lasting trauma. As Interviewee 7 stated: "most people especially women and youths were killed and some seriously injured at the hands of political violence, especially in 2008 and in August 2018." This was further supported by Interviewee 9 noting that: 'we have lost many lives as a result of this political violence, men and women have lost lives because of this scourge.' This underscores the extent to which political violence affects society. The participants sentiments particularly highlighted that women and youths were amongst the casualties in the politically motivated violence because of their vulnerability status in society. When political violence occurs, the vulnerable groups are exposed to an enhanced risk of being targeted by the perpetrators. As the interview responses show, the period of political violence is marked by pervasive brutality. Interviewee 1 deepened this reflection by noting the deep effects of political violence:

> "Seasons of political violence are terrible. Young people are coerced by political elites to perpetuate violence in their own communities, sometimes against their own will. They beat up their own relatives, neighbours, mothers and even the elderly. They are abused in that manner and some even die as a result of the wounds from the beatings."

This sentiment is particularly revealing as it portrays the dual role youths often play—as both victims and perpetrators. This blunt depiction of a systemic manipulation of young people, whose vulnerability is exploited by political actors and end up inflicting violence even on their mothers in the community. The reflection also indicates that some people fail to recover from the wounds and beatings which eventually leads to the loss of life. This leaves a severe impact on families and communities. According to Interviewee 8:

> "There is a severe way in which the vulnerable groups have been affected… for us to talk about politics it means we are talking about people… when the father is killed or the mother is killed… who is going to play that role of parenthood? So that means the livelihood is severely affected because of political violence."

This emotional account captures the grief and dislocation experienced by families following the loss of a parent or breadwinner. The emphasis on disrupted parenthood reveals the longer-term intergenerational effects of such violence. Interviewee 15 further reiterated this viewpoint:

> "We have seen members lose their brothers, we have seen children losing their parents, the children are now orphans due to political violence…wives have lost their husbands and were left to fend for their families as single mothers, so everyone has been affected somehow because we all know someone… relative or a friend. They are amongst us, they live with their pain and grief, and we have to be there for them"

The above statement vividly portrays the widespread and personalised nature of trauma, where loss is not abstract but communal. Churches, as repositories of communal interaction, have thus become spaces where such grief is collectively felt but often inadequately addressed. The quote also highlights the economic impact that women face when their husbands are murdered for political reasons. This shows the human cost of political violence, foregrounding the necessity for trauma-informed, community-based interventions. The church, though central to community life, is shown to be both a space of solace and an institution often unprepared to respond adequately to such profound loss. This

theme, therefore, lays the foundation for rethinking church-led responses to political violence, especially in relation to how they engage bereaved and traumatised members, particularly women and girls.

The findings on killings and loss of life due to political violence resonate strongly with the broader literature on the consequences of state-instigated repression in Zimbabwe. As noted by Bengesai and Chikhungu (2024), the impact of violence is particularly acute for vulnerable groups, where loss of life, displacement, and psychosocial trauma disproportionately affect women and children. The participants' testimonies about orphans, broken family units, and youth drawn into cycles of violence directly mirror these concerns. Similarly, Mude et al. (2022) argue that political violence in Zimbabwe is often not incidental but systematically deployed to instil fear and subdue opposition, thus explaining the widespread fatalities. Manyonganise (2017), in her study of the Church in Manicaland, further notes that faith institutions often witnessed and recorded the violent deaths of congregants during election seasons but failed to offer systemic responses beyond prayer and mourning. This study highlights the silence or inadequacy of the Church's institutional engagement with grief and loss despite its proximity to the victims. As most church leaders noted: 'We have witnessed tragic losses of human lives due to violence. We have tried to assist the families after their loss, but it has mainly been spiritual and emotional help. Our resources are limited to cater for their financial needs.' This sentiment was shared by most participants who indicated that the church alone cannot bear the burden left by the loss of lives in conflict. There is need for a multi-stakeholder intervention to deal with the effects of the loss of lives as a result of political violence. Therefore, the data presented in this theme not only reinforce existing scholarly observations but also offer grounded, first-hand validation of the devastating social and spiritual toll caused by Zimbabwe's political violence on ordinary families, particularly on women and children.

6.2. Theme 2: Loss of income and livelihoods

Another dominant theme emerging from the data is the significant economic toll of political violence, particularly as it relates to the loss of jobs, destruction of businesses, and the collapse of household livelihoods. While political violence is often framed as a security or civil rights issue, its economic implications (especially for women and children) are equally devastating. In volatile political environments like Zimbabwe, violence frequently disrupts the everyday economies upon which ordinary citizens depend, with long-term effects on social mobility and wellbeing. Interviewee 8 expressed this by stating that:

> "Political violence disrupts economic activity. The people lose their source of livelihood. Most of our members are self-employed and when there is violence they are not able to trade. In severe cases, even their stock is confiscated by the radical perpetrators."

Another participant added the following:

> "Jobs are lost during violence. Women can sell in the market during chaotic seasons, you can imagine the losses…most women rely on selling so when that is disrupted, the impact is unbearable for most families" (Interviewee 18)

The above insights highlight the economic impact of political violence particularly on women. The loss of employment not only destabilises households but also deepens fear and conformity within communities. The subtlety with which violence operates such

as silent dismissals makes it more insidious and difficult to document or contest. Interviewee 9 offered another example of economic marginalisation:

> "During the peak of political violence, people were not going to work, businesses were closed, and you were told not to go if you're not supporting the ruling party. So, you can imagine the trauma linked to poverty."

This account directly links political repression to induced poverty. The economic coercion described (being excluded from participation in the labour force or market spaces) illustrates how violence is used not just to silence but to further impoverish the people. It also shows how poverty, as a consequence of political action, becomes a persistent trauma for affected communities.

These findings align with the available literature that demonstrates the economic precarity caused by Zimbabwe's political violence. Zengenene and Susanti (2019) argue that economic marginalisation is a routine political tool used by elites to punish dissenters, particularly in the informal and agricultural sectors where many women earn their livelihoods. The participant responses from this study highlight this dynamic, especially where participants report job loss, and disruption of informal economic activities. Mapuranga (2020) also highlights the feminised nature of economic suffering in conflict contexts, observing that women face a double burden of violence: first as targets and second as carers within collapsed economies. This shows that while church leaders acknowledge the economic impacts of political violence, their church-based interventions however remain largely on dealing with the spiritual healing and lack the aspect of economic justice for the victims, particularly women.

6.3. Theme 3: Gender-Based Violence and Psychological Trauma

This theme highlights the deeply gendered nature of political violence, manifesting not only in physical harm but also in emotional and psychological trauma. While overt acts of violence such as beatings and killings are immediately visible, the long-lasting psychological scars and gendered forms of abuse such as rape, intimidation, and humiliation are often silenced or overlooked. For many women and children, political violence continues long after the overt conflict ends, embodied in trauma, silence, and social exclusion. Interviewee 2 shared a devastating personal account:

> "In 2008 I had a member in my church who was pregnant. And during the political violence, she was beaten to an extent that she even lost her pregnancy because of the internal injuries she had sustained Even though we could pray for her and counsel her, it is a difficult process for her to completely heal from the whole experience. Emotionally she was broken. It is difficult for her to erase that picture, yes by grace she has forgiven them over the years but that experience lives with her forever. It's very difficult for women to cope with the aftereffects of violence."

This harrowing account speaks to the direct targeting of women's bodies as political battlegrounds. The assault led to a miscarriage and lasting psychological distress. What is most chilling in this account is not only the physical brutality but the psychological humiliation which reflects the intentional infliction of emotional harm alongside physical abuse. Interviewee 14 recounted:

> "There are women who were raped in political violence… they cannot talk about it. Some were infected with diseases. Some were chased away from their homes

> by their husbands after that. Some even got pregnant and gave birth to children from these unfortunate events. The targeting of women is totally evil."

This narrative highlights the silencing and double victimisation of survivors of sexual violence: first at the hands of perpetrators, and then within their communities and families. The trauma is compounded by patriarchal blame and stigma, reinforcing women's exclusion from spaces of healing and redress. Interviewee 5 offered another insight:

> "It is the women who remain to pick up the pieces. When the husbands are killed or disappear, the woman must be strong, must be both mother and father. But who heals her? No one."

This participant draws attention to the unseen labour women undertake in post-violence contexts. While churches may offer spiritual solace, the psychosocial needs of women, particularly widows or survivors of violence, often go unacknowledged or unsupported. Interviewee 11 poignantly stated:

> "You know we try to address this pain during our church meetings. Christianity is all about forgiveness, unless you forgive and let go, it will continue to hurt you. When we say that it is not because we are ignoring the pain. But where there is need we can also complement the message by having counselling sessions with the victims."

This comment reflects the institutional limitations of many church structures in addressing trauma. The rhetoric of forgiveness, though spiritually meaningful, can become a silencing mechanism when not paired with trauma-informed care and justice.

The findings under this theme strongly resonate with the work of Manyonganise (2017), who asserts that churches in Zimbabwe have often failed to take gender-based violence seriously as a justice issue, instead spiritualising it as a test of faith or call for forgiveness. This critique is echoed in Interviewee 11's statement, where the insistence on forgiveness can be interpreted as dismissing trauma rather than healing it. Similarly, Chidhawu (2024) observes that gender-based political violence, particularly rape, is systematically underreported and culturally repressed in Zimbabwean society, leading to survivors being doubly punished: first by the act, then by silence. The fact that women were being chased from their homes after rape vividly illustrates this social rejection and isolation. Moreover, Mapuranga (2020) emphasises the intersectionality of gender, trauma, and faith, noting that trauma is often gendered and compounded by religious narratives that ignore or downplay structural violence. The study findings affirm this through participants' admission that in most cases, churches tend to offer generalised spiritual support but falls short in addressing the specific emotional needs of women, especially those who have experienced sexual violence or lost pregnancies due to political assault.

Furthermore, Magwegwe (2024) critiques the reluctance of church institutions to engage with women's pain in meaningful ways, arguing that churches often prioritise institutional neutrality over prophetic responsibility. The findings from this study confirm such critiques, illustrating how emotional trauma becomes a hidden wound in faith communities, unaddressed by both theology and pastoral practice. Bengesai and Chikhungu (2024) highlight that psychosocial support for women and girls is among the most underfunded and under-implemented dimensions of peacebuilding in Southern Africa.

6.4. Theme 4: The Church as a Sanctuary and Moral Authority

This theme captures the perceived role of the Church as both a physical and spiritual refuge for victims of political violence. For many participants, the Church offered a critical space of safety, solace, and spiritual care amidst pervasive political repression and social instability. Beyond the provision of pastoral support, the Church is also seen as a potential moral authority with the capacity to influence peacebuilding, promote justice, and provide healing. However, this perceived role is not without limitations and contradictions. Interviewee 10 reflected on this protective role:

> "People normally come to the church when there is political violence. The church is designed to be the middle ground, a place of refuge. When there is crisis, we open our doors to everyone in need. Our people know they will not be beaten or terrorised inside the church."

The above quote highlights the literal function of the Church as a shelter, a space physically removed from the reach of political enforcers. The Church building itself becomes a symbolic and material site of sanctuary. In a context where state violence penetrates homes and streets, sacred spaces offer rare protection. Interviewee 13 added:

> "Even now, when people are afraid, they run to the church. They cry there, they pray, they feel safe. It's the only place where people can speak freely without fear."

The Church is portrayed not just as a place of safety but as one of emotional expression and solidarity. In the absence of mental health infrastructure or state-supported redress mechanisms, the Church becomes a site of communal therapy and emotional release. Interviewee 17 remarked on the spiritual and ethical role of the Church:

> "Our role as the church is to teach people to forgive, not to retaliate. We preach peace even when there is war outside. If it was not for the Church, I think we would have severe killings and continuous violence as people seek revenge."

This quote underscores the gap between rhetoric and praxis. There is need for the Church to go beyond preaching a gospel of peace, but provide tangible support such as trauma counselling, legal assistance for victims, or economic empowerment. In so doing the church becomes not just a spiritual sanctuary with proper structural support and infrastructure that heals the community wholistically. Therefore, when the church does this, it fulfils its moral responsibility to victims.

These findings echo the insights of scholars such as Manyonganise (2022), who notes that during political crises in Zimbabwe, the church became both a spiritual haven and a site of negotiation for safety, often absorbing the emotional burdens of communities. This dual role, of refuge and mediator is evident in the participants accounts shared above. However, as Magwegwe (2024) warns, while churches offer the illusion of neutrality and peace, they often avoid taking firm stances against perpetrators, thus reinforcing impunity. Mude et al. (2022) also assert that Zimbabwean churches often function within a limited theological framework that prioritises spiritual peace over socio-political engagement. This results in missed opportunities to engage meaningfully in transformative justice and peacebuilding. The admission of inadequacy by the church leaders speaks to this effect.

Furthermore, Tarusarira (2020) advocates for a more robust prophetic theology in Zimbabwean churches, one that not only preaches peace but also challenges injustice and state-sponsored violence. The current findings suggest that while the Church has moral capital and access to communities, it frequently underutilises this influence in practical peacebuilding efforts. As Interviewee 4 lamented, without programs or action, the Church risks becoming a theatre of pain rather than an agent of healing. Finally, the literature also points to the gendered limitations of Church-based sanctuary. Mapuranga (2020) criticises the patriarchal structure of many churches, where women are spiritualised but rarely empowered. This was implied in the data where women's emotional needs are acknowledged in sermons but not addressed in structural or gender-sensitive programming.

6.5.Theme 5: Exclusion of Women and Children from Church Leadership and Peacebuilding Processes

A critical and recurring theme in this study is the systemic exclusion of women and children from decision-making processes within the Church, particularly in matters relating to peacebuilding and post-violence recovery. Although the Church serves as a moral and spiritual hub for many communities, its leadership structures often mirror broader patriarchal norms. Women and children, despite being among the most affected by political violence, are frequently relegated to passive roles, with little opportunity to shape the Church's response to violence or influence peace initiatives. Interviewee 3 expressed concern over the structural marginalisation of women:

> "I think we have a huge problem on our hands. We still have very few women in leadership positions of the church. Most of our churches have more women as members but the eldership is mostly dominated by men. This means that in our decision making we should really reflect on how we can incorporate their views and make sure that they are not left out. We have to think about that."

This quote encapsulates the power imbalance entrenched within church leadership hierarchies. Women's lived experiences and insights are systematically excluded from spaces of influence, despite their critical proximity to the suffering caused by political violence. Interviewee 6 reinforced this point, highlighting the performative nature of inclusion:

> "Yes, our inclusion of women on our programs must be meaningful. They should not just be there to serve or sing, but to speak and lead."

This participant was critical of tokenism, where women's presence in church activities is limited to traditional, supportive roles that reinforce gender stereotypes. This façade of inclusion fails to recognise women as active peacebuilders or thought leaders within the faith community. Interviewee 12 pointed to the long-term consequence of such exclusion:

> "Children and youth never speak. No one asks them what they went through. They are expected to move on, to pray, but never to lead or to talk."

This quote highlights the often-overlooked silencing of children and youth in peacebuilding. As survivors and witnesses of violence, their insights are crucial for crafting relevant interventions. However, they remain peripheral, their trauma unacknowledged and their agency disregarded. Interviewee 5 summed up the frustrations of many:

> "If the Church is serious about healing, it must listen to women and children. Jesus ministered to women and children, we should too. They are the ones who carry the pain. They are the widows and orphans because of violence. How can we heal them without hearing their pain? If we are going to be effective, our systems must cater for them."

This call for meaningful participation highlights the epistemic injustice at play—where those most affected are denied voice and legitimacy in peace processes. It demands a restructuring of how knowledge, leadership, and healing are conceptualised in the Church and broader society.

The exclusion of women and children from leadership and peacebuilding structures within the Church has been well documented in recent literature. Manyonganise (2017) argues that church leadership in Zimbabwe remains a male preserve, deeply resistant to the inclusion of women's voices, particularly on matters of justice and conflict. This resistance to inclusion is replicated across denominations and is often justified by patriarchal interpretations of scripture. Similarly, Mapuranga (2020) critiques the Church's tendency to confine women to performative religious labour such as singing, catering, and prayer support, while excluding them from strategic roles in leadership and advocacy.

Children's exclusion is less frequently addressed in church discourse, yet it represents a serious gap in peacebuilding practice. Tarusarira (2020) and Zengenene & Susanti (2019) both argue that youth are often positioned as passive recipients rather than active agents in post-conflict settings, and their voices are rarely integrated into the moral frameworks constructed by religious institutions. This study contributes to filling that gap by presenting the potential of children as peacebuilders, whose silence is institutionally reinforced. Mtero (2023) observes that many churches in Zimbabwe lack gender-responsive programming and continue to replicate state patriarchy in their internal governance, thereby failing to live up to their transformative potential. This aligns with participants assertion that true healing requires listening to those who carry the deepest wounds, particularly, women and children. Moreover, Bengesai and Chikhungu (2024) argue for a paradigm shift in peacebuilding that centres marginalised voices, stating that interventions that do not actively include women and children are not only ineffective but risk reproducing the very violence they seek to redress.

7. Discussion

This study has uncovered a set of interrelated themes, ranging from loss of life and economic deprivation to gender-based violence and exclusion from leadership, that collectively illustrate the profound and gendered impacts of political violence in Zimbabwe. Importantly, these themes also reveal both the transformative potential and the structural limitations of the Church in post-conflict contexts. By engaging these themes with relevant literature, we derive implications for theory and practice in gender-sensitive peacebuilding within religious frameworks.

Theoretically, the study affirms the centrality of *African feminist theology* in understanding the layered experiences of political violence among women and children. As highlighted by Mapuranga (2020), political violence in Zimbabwe is never experienced in isolation but is always mediated by one's gender, socio-economic status, and age. This study validates that proposition by revealing how violence disproportionately targets women's reproductive bodies, domestic roles, and emotional well-being, while simultaneously infantilising and marginalising children.

Moreover, this study expands on the concept of *epistemic injustice* in peacebuilding processes, particularly within religious institutions. As Manyonganise (2017) observes, the Church often acts as a moral gatekeeper that selectively legitimises whose voices matter. The exclusion of women and children from decision-making and leadership reflects what Fricker (2007) would call 'testimonial injustice' where people are not believed or

taken seriously due to structural power hierarchies. By presenting women and children as knowledge holders and moral agents, this study contributes to a reframing of peacebuilding theology that demands inclusion not as charity but as justice.

Additionally, the study contributes to *transformative peacebuilding theory* by interrogating the Church's role not only as a site of sanctuary but as a potential agent of structural change. While participants acknowledged the Church as a place of refuge and emotional support, they also critiqued its reluctance to challenge patriarchal norms or confront political powers. This tension resonates with Tarusarira's (2020) critique of the Church's preference for spiritual neutrality over prophetic resistance. Therefore, the study calls for a retheorisation of religious peacebuilding to include institutional accountability, gender equity, and participatory leadership as non-negotiables for transformation.

Practically, the findings demand a reorientation of Church-led peacebuilding to prioritise inclusion, trauma-informed care, and economic justice. The findings reveal that while churches provide spaces of physical refuge and spiritual solace, they often fail to translate these symbolic roles into structured programs for healing, empowerment, and restitution. Women in particular are expected to be resilient and forgiving but are rarely given the tools or platforms to recover, lead, or shape post-violence responses. As Bengesai and Chikhungu (2024) note, interventions that neglect the voices of women and children risk perpetuating the very marginalisation they seek to overcome.

There is also a critical need for trauma-responsive pastoral care. Interviewees repeatedly spoke of unresolved grief, psychological distress, and stigma related to rape and loss, which are rarely addressed through conventional sermons or prayer sessions. Echoing Mude et al. (2022), churches must move beyond spiritual counselling to provide holistic psychosocial services that address the realities of political trauma. This may involve partnerships with mental health professionals, social workers, and legal aid organisations.

Furthermore, the Church must adopt *gender-transformative approaches* to leadership. The exclusion of women and children from peace dialogues and governance structures within the Church mirrors wider political patterns of exclusion. As the data shows, women are often relegated to supporting roles, while decisions are made by male elders. This institutional patriarchy not only silences vital perspectives but undermines the Church's credibility as a peacebuilding agent. As Zengenene and Susanti (2019) emphasise, effective peacebuilding requires deconstructing the same hierarchies that produced violence in the first place.

Finally, the role of the Church as a moral authority must be recalibrated. The current tendency to prioritise peace over justice, especially through discourses of forgiveness and non-retaliation, may help to defuse tensions temporarily but often leaves systemic issues unaddressed. Magwegwe (2024) warns against such pacification theology, arguing that true peace requires confronting injustice and promoting accountability. Churches must therefore embrace a more activist stance, using their moral capital to advocate for victim support, legal reforms, and truth-telling processes.

8. Conclusions

This study has critically examined the gendered effects of political violence on women and children in Zimbabwe, particularly from the perspective of community church leaders and congregants. Drawing on qualitative evidence, it has highlighted the complex and often devastating social, psychological, and economic impacts of such violence, ranging from loss of life and income to gender-based violence and long-term trauma. It also interrogated the dual role of the Church: on one hand, a sanctuary and moral beacon for victims; on the other, a site of patriarchal exclusion that often fails to deliver structural support or inclusive peacebuilding. The themes and findings point to a key tension, the Church has both the potential and the responsibility to serve as an agent of healing and justice, yet its institutional structures often inhibit this role. From a theoretical standpoint, the study enriches feminist and intersectional understandings of peacebuilding by centring the lived experiences of women and children and foregrounds the

importance of including their voices in religious and political reconciliation processes. Practically, the research points to a need for more gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and inclusive religious interventions in post-conflict societies.

Churches in Zimbabwe stand at a critical crossroads. They possess unmatched spiritual capital, institutional reach, and community trust. However, without deliberate transformation in leadership, theology, and practice, they risk becoming complicit in the marginalisation of the very people they claim to serve. A gender-sensitive, justice-oriented, and youth-inclusive Church is not only necessary for authentic peacebuilding but is also a moral imperative in a society still healing from the wounds of political violence.

9. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the study makes the following recommendations:

Institutionalise Gender-Inclusive Leadership in Churches: Churches must move beyond tokenism and actively restructure their leadership models to include women in decision-making bodies. This includes ordaining women, involving them in peace committees, and allowing them to lead restorative justice initiatives. Sustainable peace cannot emerge from structures that replicate exclusion.

Integrate Psychosocial and Trauma-Informed Services in Church Programs: The emotional and psychological trauma described by participants necessitates a more comprehensive response than spiritual platitudes. Churches should partner with psychologists, social workers, and trauma counsellors to create safe spaces for storytelling, grief processing, and community healing.

Establish Economic Justice and Empowerment Programs for Women: Economic exclusion is a recurring dimension of political violence. Churches, with their broad networks and resource mobilisation capabilities, should establish livelihood support programs targeting women, widows, and displaced families. This would complement their pastoral work with tangible recovery initiatives.

Create Child and Youth Centred Peacebuilding Platforms: Children and youth must be viewed not just as victims but as agents of peace. Churches should create forums for youth expression and leadership, integrating their insights into post-violence programming. This will not only empower younger generations but also promote intergenerational healing and participation.

Advance Prophetic Theology and Public Advocacy: The Church must shift from neutrality to active moral engagement. It should use its spiritual authority to advocate for justice, accountability, and policy reforms that protect victims and punish perpetrators. Peace without justice is merely pacification.

Train Clergy in Gender and Conflict Sensitivity: Church leaders require formal training in gender dynamics, conflict sensitivity, and human rights to effectively serve their communities. This would help dismantle harmful theological interpretations that justify silence, submission, or victim-blaming, particularly in the aftermath of sexual violence.

Collaborate with Civil Society and State Institutions: Churches cannot build peace in isolation. Strategic partnerships with NGOs, transitional justice bodies, and government departments are essential for holistic peacebuilding that bridges the gap between spiritual care and socio-political change

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