

# Surveillance and Violence against Women in Grace Bible Church and the Zionist Christian Church

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## Abstract

South Africa (SA) has alarmingly high statistics showing that everyday millions of women experience violence perpetrated against them, yet few women report their abuse. Drawing on data from participant observation and interviews, this paper examines how a group of women in Grace Bible Church and the Zionist Christian Church understand experiences of violence against women and why they so often do not report abuse. Using Foucault's theoretical understanding of surveillance and the pastorate, the paper shows how technologies of power are used by church women to control how women attending these churches understand acts of violence perpetrated against them, to such an extent that they come to believe that it is part of their roles as women to be submissive to their husbands, even if these men abuse them. This research finds that women are silenced with technologies of power and are not given spaces in which to acknowledge, express or report the violence against themselves that they experienced or had seen other members in their church go through.

**Keywords:** Zionist Christian Church, Pentecostal Charismatic church, women, violence, Christianity, domestic violence, Foucault, violence against women

## Introduction

The Department of Justice estimates that one out of every four South African women is a survivor of domestic violence.<sup>2</sup> POWA [People Opposing Women Abuse] report the horrifying statistics that 1 in every 6 women who is killed in Gauteng, is murdered by an intimate partner.<sup>3</sup> The Institute of Security Studies found that 90% of the women that they interviewed reported having experienced some form of emotional abuse from their partner, 90% of the women reported physical abuse, 71% reported sexual abuse and 58% had been the victims of economic abuse.<sup>4</sup> Given these statistics it is highly likely, that vast numbers of women in churches in SA are or have experienced violence against them<sup>5</sup> and yet, as this study shows, there is a veil of silence on the topic in many churches.<sup>6</sup> This is in line

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Jewkes, Loveday Penn-Kekana, Jonathan Levin, Matsie Ratsaka and Margaret Schriber, *“He must give me Money, he mustn't beat me”: Violence against Women in Three South African Provinces*. Pretoria: Medical Research Council, (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Women in Action, “Statistics on Domestic Violence in South Africa,” <http://www.womeninaction.co.za/statistics-on-domestic-violence-in-south-africa>.

<sup>4</sup> Women in Action, “Statistics on Domestic Violence”.

<sup>5</sup> The United Nations defines violence against women (VAW) as “any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” Vijaykumar Harbishettar and Suresh B. Math, “Violence against Women in India: Comprehensive Care for Survivors,” *Indian Journal of Medical Research* 140, no.2 (2014): 157-59. (Accessed 26 March 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Elisabet Le Roux, “An Explorative Baseline: The Role of the Church in Sexual Violence in Countries that are/were in Armed Conflict, in a Preventative Sense and as a Caring Institution,” (2010). Online at:

with the general population trends where few women seek formal help<sup>7</sup> and even fewer lay charges against their abusers.<sup>8</sup>

This paper shows that a set of four social mechanisms of power – patriarchy, surveillance, the pastorate and silencing explain why few church-going women report abuse. The research study examined how some women at Grace Bible Church (GBC) in Soweto, a Pentecostal Charismatic Christian church, and members from the Zionist Christian Church (ZCC) a type of African Independent Church, living in Johannesburg, experienced and dealt with domestic abuse. In both churches a patriarchal socio-religious system together with a culture of surveillance and silencing meant that women were not given the space to acknowledge, express or report the violence they experienced or had seen others suffer. The focus of this paper is at the intersection between these two forms of violence – surveillance and domestic abuse and shows that the presence of the first, surveillance, makes it almost impossible for the second to be acknowledged as a real and urgent problem.

Given the repeated motifs of silencing, observation and punishment, Foucaultian technologies of panopticism, surveillance, and the pastorate<sup>9</sup>, offer a rich lens through which to gain insight into women's responses to, understanding of, and coping mechanisms with regard to violence against women (VAW). In his work Foucault details the mechanisms of discipline, observation, silence and punishment as institutional technologies of power used to control people and regulate behaviour, set norms of acceptable behaviour, and stipulate the consequences when that behaviour is not lived out by people within a given social group. These offer frameworks through which to think about power and how people self-discipline their behaviour. In his work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault unpacks the architectural structure of the Panopticon prison structure. He argues that this mechanism of

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<http://www.religion-and-development.nl/documentation-centre/3351/an-exploration-baseline-the-role-of-the-church-in-sexual-violence-in-countries-that-are-were-in-armed-conflict-in-a-preventative-sense-and-as-a-caring-institution>. Elisabet Le Roux, "Telling Stories': Talking about VAW within Church and Seminary," in *Living with Dignity: African Perspectives on Gender and Equality*, ed. Elna Mouton, Gertrude Kapuma, Len Hansen and Thomas Togom Stellenbosch: Sun Press, (2015): 236-37.

<sup>7</sup> Shahana Rasool, Kerry Vermaak, Robyn Pharoah, Antoinette Louw and Aki Stavrou, *Violence against Women: A National Survey*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, (2002).

<sup>8</sup> L. Meyer, J. McConnell, R. Fensham, L. Groth, R. Jansen and V. Phillips, *Assessment of the Implementation of the Domestic Violence Act and its Effects on the Lives of Women Seeking Protection Orders: A Study of Abused Women at Four Courts in eThekweni*. Development Resources Africa, Lawyers for Human Rights and Advice Desk for the Abused, (2007). Jean Giles-Sims, *Wife Battering: A Systems Theory Approach*. New York: Guilford Publication, (1983).

<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 3rd Edition. London: Penguin, (1991). Pascah Mungwini, "'Surveillance and Cultural Panopticism': Situating Foucault in African Modernities," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31, no.4 (2012): 340-353.

surveillance – the metaphor of “seeing without being seen” – is, at the heart of the modern systems of control, dominance and normalized behaviour. The panopticon is not just a building but “a scheme which can be used for characterising many aspects of society.” Marroum, looking at literature, and Gordon, looking at the structures of the modern open-plan office, both show how the panopticon is practiced in these very different spaces. The aim of this scheme of continual surveillance is to shape the soul or internal psyche, such that people internalise the normalised ideals of good behaviour upheld by those who control the society. This surveillance “derives its power from the gaze which immobilizes its subject and normalizes it.” This paper argues that these technologies of power are central to explaining why so few women in these two churches report VAW or even spoke freely about it.

## **Gender Dynamics in both Churches**

### ***Grace Bible Church***

GBC is a large mega Pentecostal Charismatic church which was founded in Soweto by Pastor Mosa Sono in the early 1980s. The main church complex is in Soweto and there are another 23 churches that make up the Grace Bible Church family. The church attracts black, coloured and Indian members from all economic. In this church men and women can sit together and women are pastors, music leaders and senior elders, but cannot be the head pastor of the church. Only men can be at the head of the body of Christ. While men and women are regarded as spiritually equal, the husband is identified as the head of the household based on Ephesians 5:22-24 with the wife expected to submit to him in the home. At GBC this notion of patriarchy is based on a fundamentalist reading of the Bible and a selective understanding of a generalised African patriarchal culture, in which only those aspects of this culture that can be maintained within an urban, modern social setting that prioritise the nuclear family are engaged with. Within this church the nuclear family made up of a father, mother and their children living together in one house, is regarded as the ideal and Pastor Sono and wife are held up as the example of this family. Being married is considered the highest calling for women. This does not mean that women should not or cannot work outside the home. Women are encouraged to excel in their careers as much as men: an ideal held up for women is the wife in Proverbs 31 who worked hard outside the home, cared for her family and satisfied her husband.

### ***The Zionist Christian Church***

In the ZCC a traditional African cultural understanding of patriarchy influenced largely by Sotho customs forms the bedrock of their patriarchal worldview. The church was started in the 1920s and is now lead by the grandson of the founder Engenas Lekganyane. The church has over 5 million members, all of whom are black and most of whom are working class. The main church headquarters are in Moria. In the Johannesburg area there are many small church groups that meet in informal settings. In the ZCC, interviewees gave a list of important rules that govern the behaviour of women, sometimes even quoting the scripture from which these ideas came. They said that women are called to be submissive to their husbands and to be obedient to the male authorities over them, quoting Ephesians 5:22-24. Based on Leviticus 15:19, they argued that a menstruating woman is not allowed to cook for her husband nor is she allowed into the ZCC's Moria holy site or any other holy place. Drawing on Isaiah 4:1, the women explained that men are allowed to marry other wives and that their current wife/wives are expected to support this decision. Children are to be seen as a blessing from God so that women may not use contraception. Women and men have to sit separately in church and at the ZCC's Easter services at the sacred place of Moria, women are not allowed to enter the space where the Bishop is preaching and they may not interpret for him, based on the argument that the Bible sanctifies men as being spiritually superior to women.

In both churches the cultural and religious premise on which they shape and regulate the idea of the "good Christian woman" is a patriarchal system that defines men as the head of the home and the leader or dominator of women. Women are the helpmate of men and should submit to them. This cultural understanding is then read into Biblical texts such that religion is used to support a cultural construct of patriarchy. While different, both these patriarchal systems make it possible for VAW to seem invisible and even normalise it. The cases of the women in this study show the normalisation of abuse to the degree that many women who experience violence believe they do so because they lack sufficient faith, they deserve it, or they deny that abuse is actually taking place. This was so extensive that at the beginning of our research we were concerned that we would not be able to conduct any interviews with women willing to speak about VAW.

The first section of this paper reviews the ideal of female behaviour within the socio-religious patriarchal systems of these churches and the technologies of surveillance used to regulate how women should behave and respond to VAW. A Foucaultian understanding of panopticism, surveillance and the pastorate are used to examine how regulated ideas of the 'good Christian

woman' are imposed. The second part engages with the technologies of silencing women's experiences of violence that are employed in both churches and why so few women report abuse. This section shows why some women were only able to speak about their abuse once they left their church and that for these women leaving their abuser also meant leaving their church.

## **Methodology**

The data on the experiences and understanding of VAW within the context of these two churches was drawn from a larger project exploring the faith experiences of women between the ages of 21 and 45 who were members of GBC and ZCC. This data was collected during 8 months in 2014 by three female researchers, aged 28, 33 and 42, two of them black and one white, and all Christian though not members of either church. The women interviewed in this study were all black women, between 21 and 44 years of age, either working or middle class and had all been or were members of either church. During the interviews VAW was not a topic that was engaged with, with every woman, but only with those willing to speak about it. This highlights that not all women were open to discussing this topic. As researchers we observed and participated in services, bible studies and prayer gatherings with the GBC in Soweto and with a group of ZCC members who met regularly in Johannesburg. During Easter of 2014 one of the researchers went to Moria and participated in the Easter Pilgrimage. Twenty open-ended interviews were held with women who said that they had no personal experience of VAW but were open to speaking in general terms about VAW. Another 10 women from the ZCC and 9 women from GBC who were in or had been in abusive domestic relationships were willing to speak to us about VAW. With each of these women we had two in-depth interviews. For these women it was the fact that we were not members of their churches that often made it possible for them to speak freely about abuse. Within this cohort of women there was a subset of women from GBC whom I had engaged with during field work done in 2004 and 2010. This group of women were willing to open up to me because we have a long term relationship of trust and they know how I have dealt with and published previous material from fieldwork done related to their faith experiences<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup>Maria Frahm-Arp "Religious Ideals Shaping the Understanding of Work amongst Pentecostal Charismatic Christian Women in South Africa." *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 20, no. 1 (2014): 5-17.

Data was analysed using Atlas.ti. As a qualitative study, the study makes not statistical evaluations but strongly indicates the ideologies that the women live under and through which they rule their own lives and that of their fellow church members. Through this research method the technologies of surveillance, silencing and patriarchy became apparent and it is in this complex intersection that explanations of how and why women respond to VAW in such a way that they deny it is happening, normalise it, or blame themselves, become apparent.

### **Surveillance: Talking about ‘Difficulties’ or ‘Struggles’**

The various church meetings like prayer groups, prayer vigils, bible studies and home cell groups were all spaces in which women shared their experiences of faith with each other. They testified to the blessings in their lives and also talked about their hardships but never once did we hear anyone mention domestic abuse. In these groups the most women would say was that their husbands were ‘being difficult’ or ‘being filled with an evil spirit of anger’. When the researchers spoke to the interviewees individually some opened up and admitted situations of abuse. These interviewees spoke about church gatherings as spaces in which women were continually watching each other to see that they were living according to the standards of the church. Through our participation it became clear that these groups were spaces of in which technologies of surveillance and the pastorate loomed large.

In our research we met women who felt that they were continually being ‘gazed at’ or ‘judged’ and others who were clearly surveying their fellow members. Patience<sup>11</sup>, a woman in her early forties, living in Johannesburg, had been a member of the ZCC for a long time and, as she talked about her experiences in the church, it became clear that she had internalised the church’s ideals of hard work, sober living and strict self-discipline. In an interview she talked about VAW:

(a)All women experience this thing [domestic abuse] here in Johannesburg. Who does not know that? My neighbour is worse, though. The husband drinks a lot, even though the Church forbids drinking. Whenever he drinks, he causes havoc. The wife also asks for it, she is a lazy bugger, doesn’t clean the house nicely, her cooking is terrible.

Patience did not feel that her neighbour’s experience of domestic abuse was something she should become involved in or a situation in which she should try to mediate. She rather observed the

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<sup>11</sup>Throughout the paper pseudonyms are used when referring to interviewees.

behaviour of her neighbour and measured it according to the ZCC's strict code of disciplined behaviour. She described her neighbour, who she said was also a member of the ZCC, as someone who wasn't a "real member" because she did not follow the teaching of the church. The neighbour's failure to conform to the church's standard is what, in Patience's worldview logically lead to hurt and pain. Thus, the abuse her neighbour suffered was "justifiable" because she did not conform to good Christian behaviour she was lazy and cooked badly. As a member of good standing in her church, Patience regarded it her duty to observe and judge her fellow members behaviour.

At the other extreme, we spoke to several interviewees who felt everything they said and did was surveyed by other members and this hampered them for speaking truthfully about their abuse.

Gladys a 30 year old secretary and member of GBC said; 'I always wear my best clothes to church so that it looks like everything is fine. I don't want people to know that I am struggling at home'. In an interview she explained how her 'struggles', as she called them, were centred around an ex-boyfriend who failed to pay his share of child support for their child. 'I can't say this in the prayer meeting because the church teaches us not to have sex before marriage.' This small snapshot into Gladys' life is highlighted here because it is typical of comments made by women in both churches. Many women, like Gladys felt that they could not verbalise or admit their abuse but spoke of it in veiled terms as 'their struggles'. The reason they often gave was that they were continually being watched and judged by other women. The cameo from Patience shows that women were in fact surveying each other and perpetuating patriarchal power structures. "The gaze works by penetrating the body helping to shape the body so that it conforms to existing rules, codes, mores and standards instituted by powerful figures of the society and ... from patriarchy."<sup>12</sup> Surveillance was thus a mechanism of power which distorted how women understood abuse not as violence against themselves or other women but as a 'struggle' or 'difficulty' or even deserved punishment for bad behaviour. This technology of power, a form of violence in itself, is one dimension that explains how women understood violence, often by not even acknowledging its existence, and why they did not report it. As second aspect is the role of the pastorate.

## **The Pastorate: Pray and your Husband will Change too**

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<sup>12</sup>Mungwini, "Surveillance and Culture," 346.

Thandi, was in her early thirties, a lawyer, mother of two young children and wife to a husband who was an engineer. She and her family had been going to GBC for the last seven years and attended a weekly bible study. Over the series of our two in-depth interviews Thandi explained that she earned more than her husband did, but her salary was paid straight into his account.

Whenever I need money or I use the credit card, I have to ask him. I can't just go for coffee with my friends. He keeps thinking I am having affairs just by going to Dopio's [a chain of coffee shops in Johannesburg].

She explained that she wanted to feel less "suffocated" by her marriage and so went to see a church counsellor. The counsellor told her that her husband was the head of the family and that "I could change my husband by praying for him and living as a good Christian wife." Thandi said that she found this counselling helpful because it had reminded her that divorce was not the answer, but prayer was. The solution therefore lay in Thandi's hands. It was up to her to discipline herself to commit to times of prayer every day where she would pray for her husband. At no point did Thandi suggest that her husband was at fault or that he should seek counselling.

In the ZCC individual counselling is far less popular but, prayer meetings and vigils are very important to women. Here members, often made up only of women, come together and, through prayers said out loud, mention or "confess" the trials they are experiencing as they try to live out the good Christian life. During our participation in meetings we did not hear women speak about or confess to having to endure abuse. Karen, a married woman in her early forties who had been a member of the ZCC for over twenty years, illustrates the manner in which these standards of what women 'can' confess are engrained. Her words are particularly expressive as she explained that she had not been confronted with VAW in her personal life. When asked about domestic abuse within the ZCC, she explained that:

(i)f she (any member) knows what our Church teaches, she will stay. As women we respect our husbands and believe that whatever they do, it is for the good of the family. And our culture speaks, a woman has to endure everything in marriage and that's what we do. And this is what the Church says too.



In both these encounters – the counselling session and the prayer vigil women confess their sins to another and so the Foucault dynamic of pastorate power comes into play. In his analysis of Foucault's concept of the pastorate, Chrulow argues that it “deploys techniques of confession and direction of conscience that, in their knowledge of the ‘interior’ of governed individuals, produce a truth that constitutes the bond between shepherd and flock.” The “truth” of women's experiences are filtered through the churches teaching of self-knowledge, obedience and acceptable behaviour for women such that the victim, see her abuse as her experience as her own fault. For Foucault the pastorate was “a way/means of power with/through which people could be directed, their conduct targeted and self-regulation imposed”.

The two patriarchal churches in this study created a space in which women used technologies of surveillance and the pastorate to control each other's behaviour. It was the women themselves who maintained a rigid interpretation of female submission and women who socialised each other to perpetuate patriarchal structures that allowed men to dominate and abuse women. They controlled interpretations of the ‘truth’ meant that women often did not even acknowledge abuse and if they did it was understood, not as a man's fault, but a their own lack of prayer, faith or good behaviour. The question of VAM was silenced and remained unspoken because it would undermine and upset the whole gender construct on which much of the social structure of both churches was based.

### **Silencing Women through Shame**

At one point in our interviews we began to wonder if we were ever going to get anyone to talk about domestic abuse either at GBC or the ZCC. In both churches women were uncomfortable talking about VAW and echoed similar patterns of silence found in board studies of gender violence.<sup>13</sup> The previous two sections have shown the role of surveillance and the pastorate in silencing any mention of VAW. This section examines how feelings of shame and a sense of having failed at being the ‘good Christian woman’ also played an important role in preventing women from talking about or reporting violence they experienced.

Zelda and her husband had been members of GBC for 15 years and were in the process of divorce in 2014. Zelda was questioning her faith, the calling she felt she had heard from God to marry her

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<sup>13</sup>Floretta Boonzaier and Cheryl de la Rey, “Woman Abuse: The Construction of Gender in Women and Men's Narratives of Violence,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 34, no.3 (2004): 443-63. Francine Pickup, Suzanne Williams and Caroline Sweetman, *Ending Violence against Women: A Challenge for Development and Humanitarian Work*. Oxford: Oxfam Publication, (2001).

husband and the divorce that she was currently going through. Over the last number of years her husband had become addicted to pornography and started to engage in violent sexual behaviour with her. After years of agony, and praying for her husband, she finally went to see a pastor in her church. The pastor told her to forgive her husband and start counselling with him. They did so and her husband promised to change his behaviour, but after a few weeks he reverted to his behaviour. This pattern re-occurred several times and finally she filed for divorce. Because her pastor was not supportive of her divorce and she felt judged by other people in the church, she left the church.

Before I decided to divorce him, I only told one friend about all this. I was so ashamed, I had to keep it hidden from everyone, especially people at church and in bible study. I am still not telling people why we are getting divorced, I, I ...can't bear their judgement.

Throughout her traumatic experience Zelda did not see the church as a space of refuge and was silenced by her fear that she would be regarded as a failure. Mechanisms of surveillance and the pastorate discussed earlier explain why Zelda, like Thandi, internalised her husband's abuse of her as her own fault or failing and not his.<sup>14</sup> Instead of being a space that fought against gender based violence the church was a space in which women suffered abuse in silence. Their rigid adherence to concepts of 'wifely submission' created a social space in which women were unable to speak about abuse or find a place of sanctuary.

At ZCC Martha was another women who was prepared to speak about her abuse because she had now left the church. Her husband had cheated on her by having several affairs and had been verbally abusive to her on many different occasions. According to the church teaching a man or woman caught in adultery should be suspended from the church. But according to the women we interviewed in practice this only seemed to apply to women and not men, exposing the bias towards men in these churches, which is upheld by women themselves. Martha had three small children and in 2014 she worked at a retail store. She said, "the Church does not do anything if it is a man they will cover the issue; if it is a woman that is the end of you, you go back to your mother's home." In her experience the church was a harsh and unjust place. "There are no people who are [as] cruel as the ZCC's. I suffered in that Church. I was abused by my husband because of the ZCC."

Most of the ZCC women whom we interviewed largely took the issue of women submission as "a woman's lot" – they believed that this was culturally justified and that submission largely included

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<sup>14</sup>The reasons why Zelda finally acknowledged her abuse and left the church are too complex to explore in this paper, which is focused on why women do not report abuse.

submission to domestic. Their very narrow interpretation of selected passages of scripture, pointed out at the beginning of the paper, meant that the women themselves silenced each other and told one another that abuse was a part of the Christian woman's lot.

## **Conclusion**

Technologies of power work because there is always the threat of punishment if deviant behaviour is observed. As we have seen in GBC and ZCC, the label of deviant behaviour is not applied to the abusive husband but to women who are identified as being "deviant," not being "good enough Christian wives" and therefore are abused by their husbands. In our interviews the women who were the most forthcoming about having experienced abuse were also the women who had left the churches like Zelda and Martha. Breaking fundamental rules and leaving a spouse, even when a woman's life was threatened, meant that they no longer felt welcome in their churches. Women who left their abusers were by far the exception amongst the informants in this study and driven by our research findings the focus of this paper has been to explain why women generally did not speak about or report abuse.

In order to explain how women understand experiences of abuse, how they shifted the blame for their abuse from the male abusers onto themselves, why they often did not even acknowledge that abuse existed and why they did not report abuse, Foucault's concepts of surveillance, silencing and the pastorate were applied. Through this theoretical lens it was found that violence took place not just in situations of domestic abuse about also in the surveillance, a form of violence in itself, which these women experienced. This intersection of violence was underpinned by a complex of four technologies of power namely patriarchy, surveillance, the pastorate and silencing which were continually being implemented. In the interviews and participation in church events, the researchers observed a high level of continual surveillance and women spoke of being "watched all the time." This surveillance mechanism worked to instil continual self-discipline and self-reflection of individual's own behaviour in accordance with the ideal of good Christian behaviour for women, in which women were not given the space to put responsibility for abuse onto their abusers. Through the pastorate women could confess their experiences of abuse either to a counsellor or to members in their bible study, prayer group or prophet. The women in this study who had shared accounts of violence with their counsellors and in

prayer meetings said that they were told to pray for their abuser and through self-disciplined behaviour they would be able to transform their abusers. Interviewees who were no longer able to live in abusive relationships reported that leaving their husbands also meant leaving their church because they felt judged and even condemned by their churches. While other research shows that at GBC many women find the church a safe, empowering and beneficial space<sup>15</sup> this study has looked behind the veil of silence around VAW and shown that for some women both the ZCC and GBC the church space and the rhetoric of the churches plays a significant role in why they do not speak about or report domestic violence. Throughout the study found that it was women themselves, particular those in leadership roles, who enforced a particularly rigid view of patriarchy in both church contexts. Women's own readings of biblical texts meant that they used these to justify female submission to men and socialised themselves and the women around them into self-disciplined personal behaviour which understood VAW as something shameful, which should be silenced, should not be acknowledge and for which women not men were to blame.

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