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Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale

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COVID-19 and Ubuntu Disruptions: Curbing the violence against Women and Girls with Disabilities through African Women's Theology of Disability

By Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale¹

Abstract

The COVID-19 restrictions that require the lockdown of public and economic activities heighten the levels of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls with disabilities. As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across the globe, particularly in Africa, women and girls with disabilities become vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence, highlighting that the home is no longer a safe space for the vulnerable. The restrictions have eroded the community structures that are promoted by *Ubuntu* to protect vulnerable community members from violence and different forms of abuse. This article grapples with the question of African women's theology of disability and *Ubuntu* in the context of COVID-19. It seeks to address the vulnerability of women and girls with disabilities to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in private homes. The question, therefore, that this article seeks to answer is how African women's theology of disability informed by *Ubuntu* can curb the violence and abuses perpetrated on women and girls with disabilities in the context of COVID-19.

Keywords: Ubuntu, COVID-19, African women's theology of disability, Self-isolation, social distancing, Sexual and gender-based violence

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 that was first reported in mainland China in the city of Wuhan, Hubei province on February 26th (Zhan et al., 2020, p. 2267). On the 11th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic, mainly due to the speed and scale of its transmission (WHO, 2020). Although there are many theories on how this disease is transmitted, the most strongly supported theory is that of human-to-human transmission through respiratory droplets, close contact with diseased patients, and possibly by faecal-oral and aerosol contact (Dos Santos, 2020, p. 2). The disease is identified as highly transmittable through airborne, thus prevention includes lockdowns, self-isolation, social distancing, masking up and hygiene awareness, among other strategies. Some of the strategies for preventing COVID-19, such as lockdowns, self-isolation, and social distancing, are risky in a context of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), towards children, women, and girls with disabilities.

According to WHO and World Bank (2011), there are over 1 billion people estimated to be living with disabilities, and 80% of this population lives in the Global South.

¹ Dr Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale (DTh, UNISA; MA-Sociology (Cumulaude) UNISA, MTh Theology and Development UKZN) is a research associate at the University of Pretoria. She is currently working on a research project titled: 'Gender Studies and Practical Theology Theory Formation', with Prof. Dr Yolanda Dreyer, Department of Practical Theology and Mission Studies. Her research focuses on Ubuntu, children, migration, pastoral care, gender, gender-based violence, sexuality, disability, and religion. She has published over 30 articles in accredited IBSS prestigious local and international academic journals and book chapters. She is an Assistant Editor in HTS Theological Journal, and her current book *Mother Earth, Mother Africa and Theology* (2021) was published by AOSIS book publishers. Email: sinengwenya@gmail.com. Her ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7227-2206>

According to research, roughly 80 million people living with disabilities are in Africa (Brouillard, 2020). Among those living with visible disabilities, women and girls with disabilities remain vulnerable to SGBV in some of their African families. As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across the globe, women and girls with visible disabilities become vulnerable to SGBV, particularly for those in rural areas. The United Nations Women Report (2020a) highlights that women in rural areas are particularly vulnerable to the effects of SGBV during lockdowns due to less access to response services. The report indicates that the vulnerability of women and girls with visible disabilities is two to four times higher than their female counterparts (UN Women Report, 2020a). Since COVID-19's detection as a global pandemic, SGBV has been identified as a twin pandemic to COVID-19 (Dlamini, 2020) and as a shadow of COVID-19 (UN women report, 2020b). SGBV has become a global pandemic affecting women and children, and women and children with visible disabilities are at increased risk.

This article grapples with the question of African women's theology of disability and *Ubuntu* in the context of COVID-19. It seeks to address the vulnerability of women and girls with disabilities to SGBV in private homes. The introduction of COVID-19 restrictions requiring self-isolation and social distancing has somehow destroyed the solid humanity encouraged by *Ubuntu*, which is the pride and joy of African communities. *Ubuntu* is an African praxis where communities feel safe because they are interdependent and interconnected to the greater community. It protects the community's wellbeing by connecting the lives of all community members into a web of life. However, the self-isolation and social distancing encouraged by COVID-19 restrictions have disrupted *Ubuntu*. Self-isolation and social distancing place the lives of women and children with visible disabilities in even greater danger as they take away the sense of *Ubuntu*, thereby eroding the community structures that under normal circumstances protect them against SGBV and other forms of abuse. The question therefore that this article grapples with is how African women's theology of disability informed by *Ubuntu* can curb the violence and abuses perpetrated on women and girls with disabilities in the context of COVID-19. Written from a feminist standpoint theory, this article first begins by describing its methodological considerations and theological underpinnings of disability, which include feminist theology of disability and African women's theology of disability. Secondly, it struggles with the question of how *Ubuntu* is used by African communities to protect vulnerable community members, particularly women and girls with visible disabilities, from abuse and violence. Thirdly, the COVID-19 restrictions, particularly self-isolation, and social distancing, are critiqued for promoting privacy, which is dangerous for women and girls with visible disabilities. Fourthly, the article argues how *Ubuntu* can be restored through African women's theology of disability to curb the violence and abuses perpetrated on women and girls with visible disabilities. And lastly, the concluding remarks.

Disability and Feminist Perspective

Considering intersectional feminism (standpoint politics), where issues of race, culture, religion, and identity are seriously considered, the voices and experiences of women with disabilities are often disregarded. Women theologians with disabilities argue that feminist theologies are dominated by able-bodied women who construct their theologies from an ableist approach (Elshout, 1994; Wilhelm, 1994; Eiesland, 1994). The ableist approach overlooks the lived experiences of women with disabilities by promoting physical strength, where women want to be fit, good-looking, healthy, or productive. Thus, Elly Elshout, a feminist theologian of disability, argues that the ableist approach suggests that, for abled women in feminist movements, women with disabilities embody all that they do not want to

be (1994, p. 100). This is a result of “disability phobia” where people fear disability due to their misconceptions of what disability is and what it is not.

This power struggle between women with disabilities and able-bodied women makes the fight against gender injustice complicated. Feminist theology’s politics have been challenged by women from marginalized spaces who feel dominated and controlled by feminists who are influenced and sometimes originate from the Euro-American context. Mainstream feminist theology tends to generalize women’s struggles by suppressing the struggles experienced by black women from the margins of the African continent, particularly women with low literacy, from rural areas, and, worse, those living with physical disabilities. There are different conceptualizations of what disability is and is not. However, there are increasing voices that perceive disability as a social construction (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). Drawing from a social construction of disability, this article borrows Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s definition of disability as she says: “disability is a cultural and *religious* interpretation of human variation rather than an inherent inferiority, pathology to cure, or an undesirable trait to eliminate” (Emphasis added, Garland-Thomson, 2005, p. 1557). It also acknowledges and applies the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) of 2007 that describes disability as an “evolving concept” and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. These definitions highlight the role of society, religion, and culture in disabling people. Nancy Eiesland (1994) rightfully perceives disability and ability as only temporary. As a result, she challenges all people, regardless of ability or disability, to reflect on issues of disability. According to Eiesland, holding our bodies with and without disabilities together, reveals that we are collectively “a body in trouble” (1994, p. 116). Micheline Kamba (2013, p. 3) agrees with Eiesland, who says that the human body’s abilities change over time and that every human body has a disability, whether it’s obvious or not. The two authors suggest that every human is born with a disability or is disabled in one way or another. Through society’s teachings, individuals develop the ability to use their bodies in the best way possible for full participation in society. In the same way, as people age, their bodies weaken and they struggle to freely access societal spaces, without assistance. In other words, a body is born with a disability and dependent on others for survival. This then calls for “disability consciousness” where society is believed that all bodies are perfect, they are only disabled by societal attitudinal and environmental barriers, as highlighted by UNCRPD of 2007. ‘Disability consciousness’ creates societal awareness that by discriminating against a body with a visible impairment, we are undermining the creator’s purpose of creation.

God created human bodies purposely. As a result, a body with a visible impairment was consciously created. Those who discriminate against a body with a visible impairment discriminate against God’s incarnated body that became “disfigured” in crucifixion (Eiesland, 1994, p. 100). The disability of God’s incarnated body activates “disability consciousness” that raises awareness about the identity and dignity of every human body, reminding us that, dignity and identity cannot be altered by an impairment, whether visible or invisible. Thus, ableism is not a norm but a social construction that ignores the diversity of ability. Disability consciousness raises humanity’s awareness that the ability of the body is temporary. This is affirmed by WHO and World Bank (2011, p. 7) that “disability is part of the human condition—almost everyone will be temporarily or permanently impaired at some point in life, and those who survive to old age will experience increasing difficulties in functioning”. This then means that all humanity should be conscious of the vulnerability of their bodies to disability.

Methodologically, disability has underlying identity politics linked to the feminist and womanist standpoint epistemologies as articulated by Sandra Harding (1993), Dorothy Smith (1987, 1992), Patricia Hill Collins (1986), and other feminist theorists. The feminist standpoint theory is a second-wave feminist theory based on two principal theses, which include: situated knowledge (social location influences epistemologies) and epistemic privilege (knowledge and theories of the marginalised hold epistemic authority) (Harding, 2004; Harding, 1993; Gurung, 2020). The weakness of the feminist standpoint is that it overlooks the internalized oppression of the marginalized, discriminated, or oppressed groups. As a result, I conduct disability research from the perspective of an “insider-outsider,” as defined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986). Being an African woman theologian, clergy and coming from a family and community with members living with physical disabilities, I am an insider. Hence, this standpoint enables me to understand and identify assumptions that are being made in feminist theology about disability. Jennie Weiss Block calls this “secondary consumer” (2002, p. 11). She describes herself as a “secondary consumer” because she does not have a disability but has a family member with multiple disabilities (2002, p. 11). This suggests that people who do not have visible disabilities also experience disability as family care givers. In African communities where the communality principle is at the core of human existence, if there are members of the community with disabilities, the whole community implicitly and explicitly experiences disability. As an insider, I can apply ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ and identify the dehumanizing assumptions about disability that people living with visible disabilities, particularly women and girls, may have internalized while advocating for empathic and genuine solidarity.

Theological Underpinning of Women and Disability: Feminist Theology of Disability

In the fight against SGBV, the dominant voice is that of a third party or activism, which tends to forget or silence those who have first-hand experience of this scourge. Although feminists’ discourses are developed by insiders (mainly women), often the insider becomes an outsider when she is uninformed about “other” women’s lived experiences. Feminist discourses developed by outsiders tend to cause conflict when the insider tries to search for her story or lived experience and does not find it. As a result, feminists with disabilities perceive it fit to construct their own feminist theology of disability, which emerges from their own stories and lived experiences. Feminist theology of disability discourse emerges from the works of Nancy Eiesland (1994), particularly her book titled: *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, that describes the resurrected Christ’s wounds or scars- as a *disabled God*. Eiesland explains that she encountered the disabled God through her lived experiences within her religious community that was uninformed about a disabled individual’s relationship with God. She explains that for a disabled individual, the church is inaccessible, and it has become a “city on the hill” (2002, p. 10). She argues that although her church tries to be inclusive in the Eucharist by bringing the Eucharist over to her chair, this attempt is contrary to the traditionally community-based communion by making the experience solitary (2002, p. 10). Thus, rather than enjoying communion with other Christians, a person with a disability feels like a trespasser in an able-bodied space (Eiesland, 2002, p. 10). She constructs a theology of a disabled God based on her epiphany of the wounded, resurrected Christ as a “disabled God” (2002, p. 14). For Eiesland, by embracing a disabled saviour, “disability not only does not contradict the human divine integrity, but it also becomes a new model for wholeness and a symbol for solidarity” (2002, pp. 14-15). Through her recognition of God incarnate as the disabled God, Eiesland has challenged ableist notions of wholeness and perfection of the body by arguing that the theology of disability must be constructed through an extensive process of re-symbolization

where new symbols are linked to the dominant symbolic order. This, according to Eiesland, deconstructs the notions of normalcy.

Jennie Weiss Block (2002), in her book titled *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*, contributes to the conceptualization of feminist theology of disability by describing God as an accessible God. Block argues that people with disabilities should take their rightful place within the Christian community because God is accessible to all (2002, p. 11). She argues that a theology of access demands that we search for the inclusive themes in the Gospel that will inform life in our communities and churches. The inclusion of God is also emphasized in Kathy Black (1996)'s book titled, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability*. In this book, Black describes God as an interdependent God. In describing a theology of interdependence, Black says "we are all interconnected and interdependent upon one another so that we do affect the lives of others and the earth itself" (1996, p. 34). Through this interdependence, she places God at the centre through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Using phrases such "family of God", "communion of saints" and "body of Christ" she builds a strong argument on the interdependence of the creation of God upon each other and upon God.

The above works on theology and disability highlight that the active feminist theologians of disability are from the Euro-western context. This suggests that feminist disability theology is dominated by scholars from the Global North, who are informed by Euro-American theories, philosophies, and theologies. This distorts and silences the lived realities of people with disabilities in African communities. Written from a feminist standpoint approach, the article seeks to explore how African women's theology of disability informed by *Ubuntu* can be used to curb the violence and abuses perpetrated on women and girls with disabilities in the context of COVID-19. It makes the connection between how COVID-19 restrictions, particularly self-isolation, and social distancing, promote family privacy while undermining *Ubuntu*, which in normal circumstances plays a critical role in protecting vulnerable community members.

African women's theology of disability

African women's theology of disability evolves from African women's theologies. It uses the communality principle of *Ubuntu* to challenge the violence experienced by vulnerable humans due to the differences in their bodies. The focus of African women's theology of disability is the inclusion of the body. In African cultural beliefs and in the Abrahamic religions, the dominant form of inequality and injustice is linked to the body. Where the female body experiences a culture of exclusion due to religio-cultural beliefs, particularly the interplay of the female body and purity theology (Chisale 2020a, p. 4).

The aim of African women's theology of disability is to promote inclusion, interdependence, and interconnectedness of diverse bodies in the story of faith and culture. It "reimagines God and the ancestors as a source of life and inclusion, rather than a source of curse or misfortune. A child born alive into a family is a blessing regardless of ability or disability" (Chisale 2020b, p. 6). It rejects and challenges dichotomies (abled-disabled, male-female, perfect-imperfect, and purity-impurity) that create stereotypes, exclusion, stigma, and discrimination of different bodies that do not fit the description of the religio-cultural normative and perfect body. It sifts for the inclusive and liberating metaphors and symbols of the body from both African culture and sacred texts that create inclusion, community, and interdependence of the body. Duality of the bodies not only increases women and girls' vulnerability to SGBV, but also increases their chances of exclusion from life-affirming spaces and praxis. Thus, African women's theology of disability reimagines disability as communal and inherent. Because the body is symbiotic to self, other people, the surrounding

environment, and God, everyone in the community experiences and lives with body disability.

African women theologies, where African women's theology of disability evolves into communal-oriented theologies that do not stop at theory but move to commitment, advocacy, and transforming praxis (Oduyoye 2001, p. 17). Speaking of the theologies of African women and transforming praxis, Nyambura Njoroge argues that African women theologians do not do theology from philosophical and abstract ideas but rather they "are dealing with today's life-threatening/destroying and life-giving/affirming issues. Doing theology means wrestling with God's Word as we confront the powers and principalities of this world" (Njoroge 1997, p. 78). As African women theologians, we are motivated by our lived experiences of oppression in private and public spaces. Thus, we embrace the feminist dictum "the personal is political" in all the struggles we confront. Our theologies are concerned about the wellbeing of the minority and marginalized in both private and public spaces because we have experienced the pains and discomforts of oppression, marginalization, violence, and exclusion. African women's theology of disability as a theology that develops from African women's theologies unites all women regardless of ability, disability, race, class, and gender. For me, this theology enables us, African female theologians, to fight body oppressions from the subjective perspective of Ubuntu.

The disruption of *Ubuntu* during COVID-19

The home is a space where power dynamics are harshly played. In most African households' patriarchy supersedes *Ubuntu* in relative power. In patriarchal households' women and girls with visible disabilities are at the bottom of the hierarchy. They are not only dominated by men, but by abled women and children. This domination puts *Ubuntu* to test because the communal principle or web of life that is promoted by *Ubuntu* becomes an abstract idea. *Ubuntu* is a combination of two words: Ubu and Ntu. *Ubu*-means becoming, and *ntu-meaning* human and being. Generally, *Ubuntu* means becoming a human being, which is known across the African continent as an African morality principle or African ethic. The *ntu, ndu, nhu, thu, tho* all emphasize the human person in African languages. In the Southern African Nguni, the human person is *umuntu*, and *Ubuntu* is the personhood or humanness of a person. Humanity is realized through connection with other human beings, which is commonly known as *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning that I am a person because I am connected to other people. This connection is widely known as "Ubuntu," where humanity in Africa is embedded in a community of others. Thus, the humanness of Africans is interconnected, interdependent, and an interpersonal network of life.

Ubuntu is an African ethic that promotes a culture of inclusion and protection of the vulnerable where communities and all creation exist as a collective and are interdependent on each other as one component. John Mbiti's statement "I am because we are and since we are, therefore, I am" (Mbiti, 1969, pp. 108-109) summarizes *Ubuntu* and is used to develop theologies of human dignity as connected to the image of God among Africans. The Mbiti statement highlights the interconnectedness, cohesion, and solidity of African communities. For Mbiti, the African emphasis on community illuminates the communal dimension of the gospel. The communal dimension of the gospel is that God is communal because of the trinity, God in three persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, all functioning interdependently.

The ethic of *Ubuntu* rejects binaries or dichotomies because it promotes interpersonal networks of life by promoting solidarity and resistance to exclusion, inequality, unfairness, and subjugation. However, as things stand, the sense of community is abruptly challenged by COVID-19 restrictions, particularly the self-isolation, social distancing, and lockdown rules. These hinder the sense of community, which is a spinal code, and the pride of African

communities. Due to self-isolation and social distancing, African communities are no longer able to protect each other from life-threatening behaviours. This is because social behaviors that are dangerous, such as SGBV, exclusion, and stigmatization, happen behind closed doors, hidden from the community, which are the custodians of *Ubuntu*. In the context of COVID-19, there is no “we” but only “I”; help is not able to reach the vulnerable because people have become suspicious of each other. The interdependence and interconnectedness that is promoted by *Ubuntu* are ruined by COVID-19 restrictions. A solitary lifestyle in private homes is a liminal space for SGBV, particularly for women and girls with visible disabilities. The change of home from safe to dangerous appears to have a new meaning; the home is no longer safe. However, it is yet to be safe past COVID-19 when normal is restored. Now, the vulnerable, such as women and girls with visible disabilities, are at “what was” (protected by the community) and “what is next” (unknown). The solitary lifestyle normalizes private ways of life and the privatization of African households, which under normal circumstances are open and accessible to all community members.

The values promoted by *Ubuntu* emphasize interrelatedness, interdependence, welcoming, generosity, caring, accessibility, compassion, empathy, reciprocity, and other attributes that promote the “web of life” leading to the wellbeing, flourishing, and full potential of all members of the community. These values cannot be realized in privatized homes, particularly in nuclear families. Sindile Ngubane-Mokiwa (2018) highlights how the nuclear family’s privatization is a dangerous space for people with disabilities. According to Ngubane-Mokiwa (2018), a family used to be a dangerous space for family members with disabilities who suffered from stigma, discrimination, and worse, sometimes being killed at birth just for being born with a disability. Although the killing of family members with disabilities is no longer common, they still experience stigma, discrimination, and serious forms of violence behind closed doors. Ngubane-Mokiwa (2018, p. 6) confirms that in discrimination, stigmatization, violence, and exclusion, women and girls with disabilities are more affected due to gender stereotypes. The interplay of COVID-19 restrictions, disability and gender stereotypes in Africa is concerning. In some households, family members with visible disabilities are often seen as a burden by the rest of the family. As a result, hidden from the eyes of the community, women and girls with visible disabilities are trapped in uncaring households.

Although Africans are not a homogenous people, there is uniformity in how Africans live. The communality principle and *Ubuntu* are homogenous across African cultures. So, this lets me make a more general point about how Africans live together in the context of COVID-19 restrictions and disability.

Isolation and social distancing promote dangerous privacy

Staying at home, self-isolation, and social distancing are dangerous for the vulnerable, since members of the community are restricted or have no access to their fellow community members’ homes. Thus, when a home is inaccessible to the community, it becomes a dangerous space for vulnerable family members, such as women and children with visible disabilities. The moment a home is inaccessible to the community, it becomes a cage, where the vulnerable experience power imbalances, leading to domestic violence and abuse. The weak are often abused and silenced in such spaces because there is no whistle-blower watching.

The remoteness of a household cultivates the family privacy notion, which is sometimes a safe space for SGBV for vulnerable family members. Privacy is elastic and contextual; it has both positive and negative effects. In the context of vulnerability to SGBV, privacy has negative effects. As a result, feminists and activists of women’s liberation strongly critique privacy for shielding the oppression and violence of women and children

through Carol Hanisch's dictum "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1970). The "personal is political" was adopted by the battered women's movement and women's liberation movement in the 1970s when the dichotomy between public and private life was rigorously challenged (Bailey, 2012) for characterizing violence against women as a private family affair (Schneider 1991). Catharine MacKinnon (1989) and Elizabeth Schneider (1991) critique the idea of family privacy because it protects the perpetrators of violence perpetrated on women and children in the domestic space. This is because an isolated home inaccessible to community members is a safe space for the perpetrators of violence and abuse. Thus, the communal approach promoted by *Ubuntu* is significant in the context of COVID-19 for the sake of protecting the vulnerable members of the community from domestic violence perpetrated by family members.

Curbing the violence of women and girls with disabilities: *Ubuntu* and African women's theology of disability

Ubuntu, which has protected the vulnerable communities in Africa for a long time, needs to be restored and protected as an African pride, no matter what COVID-19 regulations say. This article focuses on SGBV, which is a consequence of COVID-19 restrictions that have eroded significant community structures that protect the vulnerable from abuse. This article grapples with the question of *Ubuntu* in the context of COVID-19 and the vulnerability of women and girls with visible disabilities to SGBV in private homes. The question of *Ubuntu* is difficult to answer in contexts where science instills fear in communities whose lives are interdependent and interwoven with the existence of other humans. *Ubuntu* is deeply engraved in the existence of the other and does not happen at a social distance, but through the physical presence as communities intermingle with each other in their everyday lives. *Ubuntu is performative praxis*; as a result, all theologies that emerge from Africa have performative dimensions that are informed by *Ubuntu*, building up Africans' resilience.

COVID-19 restrictions have instilled fear among communities who are now suspicious of each other. In this case, community members primarily focus on their immediate families and the community, which is the eye in the sky, has become sightless. Gates are locked and doors are closed, what happens behind these locked gates and doors remains a mystery, but the cries of the vulnerable on social media and other social platforms tell a painful story about women and children, particularly women and girls with disabilities (see UN Women, 2020b). How can African women's theology of disability informed by *Ubuntu* be used to curb domestic violence and abuses perpetrated on women and girls with disabilities in the context of COVID-19?

The communality of African women's theology of disability is based on the fact that women as a whole face discrimination and stigmas about their bodies. The collective oppression of the female body promotes a collective struggle that creates alternative communities that restore hope for the liberation and agency of diverse female bodies. Thus, I challenge women and girls (abled-disabled) to focus on shared experiences of discrimination and stigmas that perpetuate exclusions, leading to SGBV. The focus of African women's theology of disability on the dignity of the body fosters inclusion and solidarity, as community members are conscious of their own temporary ability. Thus, African women's theology of disability questions the dis/ability binary by arguing that all female bodies are visibly and invisibly disabled by 'naïve' purity theologies.

Questioning the disability-ability binary: An African women theology of disability informed by *Ubuntu*

The focus on inclusion of the body by African women's theology of disability is embedded in *Ubuntu*. Inclusion is emphasised by the interconnection and interdependence of

humanity, which is promoted by what is common to all humanity. Thus, African women's theology of disability rejects binaries that divide humanity. It challenges the ability-disability binary when it comes to women's bodies because all female bodies are vulnerable to disability due to purity theology. Thus, Sinenhlanhla Chisale argues that all female bodies are disabled by cultural and religious interpretations of purity and morality theologies that interpret the body in opposition to what is believed to be holy and pure (2020a, p. 3). The Leviticus Code is often used in parallel to African culture to restrict and abnormalize the female body due to its "biological" impurity, a perspective resulting from discharges that are regarded as dirty, such as menstrual blood, abnormal vaginal discharges, and breast milk (the last obviously refers to women who have recently delivered a baby). This informs cultural communities in formulating purity laws, extending impurity to lactating women (Chisale 2020a, p. 3). Purity laws are also extended to people with visible disabilities. According to the Leviticus Code (Lev 21:17ff), if a person has an impairment, they are considered abnormal and unfit to enter sacred and religious spaces, and for a woman with a disability, this is doubled by her 'biological' impurity and her disability, which makes her ritualistic unclean. This understanding of the female body is in connection with Michel Foucault's "docile bodies" "that may be restricted, used, transformed and improved" (1995, p. 136). The docile bodies are "objects and targets" of power (Foucault 1995, p. 136). The female body is often punished and restricted in the name of purity.

The African women's theology of disability exposes the distorted interpretation of purity in culture and sacred texts. A distorted interpretation of purity presents a distorted image of God and a distorted understanding of community. This image of God and community excludes women due to the limitations and "uncleanliness" of their bodies. It is apparent that the female body is disabled by the hermeneutics of 'purity' long before it is disabled by physical impairment. Doreen Freeman (2002) offers an insightful argument regarding how women's experiences of exclusion are similar, regardless of the ability-disability contrast. According to Freeman, "there are similarities between the androcentric interpretations of the merits of women's sacrifice and the suffering of the bodily pains of the disabled" (2002, p. 75). These similarities should unite women in their struggle, as they are all vulnerable to SGBV and have internal and invisible wounds that bleed when one woman's body is violated. This means that all female bodies are prey and vulnerable to SGBV and other forms of abuse. In the context of COVID-19, this should unite women in guarding each other against possible forms of abuse and violence because all are vulnerable. This then will encourage "good men" to guard the vulnerable due to the common accord and social harmony promoted by *Ubuntu*, which requires all human beings to be concerned and responsive to the wellbeing of others. This calls for a *collective struggle* where communities unite to create *alternative communities* that resist predator-prey relationships during COVID-19. Thus, African women's theology of disability is based on collective struggle, which encourages communities to construct an *alternative community* that is based on good human relationships that embraces all bodies in their diversity. It begins with dignity rather than the physical appearance and "shape" of the body. The focus on dignity is embedded in *Ubuntu*, where dignity overpowers physical difference.

African Women's Theology of Disability as a Collective Struggle of Female Bodies

The evolving African women's theology of disability focuses on the collective struggle of the female body. It borrows from the phrase "united we stand (conquer), divided we fall", which originates from the Gospels (Mark 3:24-25: If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand). It also borrows from the African (Ethiopian) proverb: "when the spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion". This encourages women to put aside their differences and focus on fighting

androcentric hermeneutics of a female body. The androcentric hermeneutics of the female body makes it vulnerable to SGBV and many forms of violence. Thus, the focus on the oppression of the female body by African women's theology of disability includes other minority groups whose bodies are rejected in society because they do not conform to the normative body, such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI), obese, dark, etc., that are constructed as "other" bodies.

A collective struggle of the body mobilizes collective power in our diverse bodies to build collective strength. The collective struggle builds a strong sense of community and spiritual connection; it promotes the integration of the community, which is strongly emphasized by *Ubuntu*. This encourages communities to identify the weak and vulnerable community members and put protective tools in place, for example, implementing surveillance measures to protect vulnerable community members from possible risks of SGBV and other forms of abuse. Surveillance may sound negative, but when it comes life-threatening issues, it protects the vulnerable through whistle blowing.

Although surveillance is critical in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, inclusive metaphors and symbols that promote communitarian behaviour and attitudes should be used to avoid implementing radical measures like surveillance. The African women's theology of disability reveals that the use of inclusive metaphors to build a sense of *Ubuntu* has the potential to end all forms of oppression. This is because inclusive metaphors emphasize equal ontological status for all community members. Thus, the collective struggle that is encouraged by the vulnerability of the female body to SGBV is also encouraged by community members' equal ontological status. Although COVID-19 disrupts this struggle due to the enforcement of self-isolation and social distancing, there are many ways of creating alternative communities rooted in *Ubuntu's* and the Gospel's hermeneutics of neighborliness.

African Women's Theology of Disability creating Alternative Communities

In COVID-19 the African communities are challenged to create *alternative communities* where interconnectedness and interdependence continue to be the norm during self-isolation and social distancing. For this to be possible, there should be collaboration between faith and secular communities in efforts to protect the vulnerable members, such as women and girls with visible disabilities, during the COVID-19 crisis.

The focus of the African Women's Theology of Disability on the collective struggle of the body aims to create alternative communities in which humanity is united not only by shared dignity and equal ontological status, but also by shared oppressions. Shared oppression and discrimination evoke a need for an *alternative community* where everyone equally enjoys fairness at all levels. David Bosch, a South African theologian, has coined the term "*alternative community*" to reimagine a South African community where the concern for democracy overcomes racial difference and class (1982). This term is helpful in constructing an African women's theology of disability that reimagines communities where the concern for human dignity overpowers the physical difference of the body. In his argument for the development of alternative communities, Bosch (1982) refers to the diverse crowd that Jesus allowed to gather around him in addition to the disciples. The crowds that followed Jesus were united by their shared quest for the good news. According to African women's theology of disability, the *alternative community* challenges the politics of separation and difference that perpetuate a dichotomy status between abled women and disabled women. It reimagines an *alternative community* as a space where all are implicitly and explicitly vulnerable and disabled (Chisale, 2021). This then calls for all to unite in creating safe spaces that are embedded in *Ubuntu*. In challenging separation and difference, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1990) calls for an *alternative community* through coining a "two-winged" theology that

invites women and men to partner in having conversations with God and creating inclusive religio-cultural communities. In Africa, the foundation of an *alternative community* is rooted in *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is not gendered; everyone is a human person because of *Ubuntu*. In an *alternative community* rooted in *Ubuntu*, “there is neither male nor female, white nor black, abled nor disabled, righteous nor heathen, child nor adult, because all are human beings made in the image of God”.

African women theology of disability connects human existence to the Agapic love of God (John 3:16; God so loved the World, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (NIV)). The world is united by original sin, that separates us from God. Then God reconciles us to God-self through agapic love when “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (1 Corinthians 5:21 NIV). God’s love is not only for the Christian individual or community, but it is for the whole world. John Wesley defines this love as “prevenient grace”. As a result, in prevenient grace, God gives all humanity a gift through Christ’s atonement. As a result, prevenient grace comes to humanity before the experience of saving faith. This grace enables humanity to be aware of and to seek after God; to know their need and to respond positively to the overtures of the Holy Spirit (Lindstrom, 1980). There is no hierarchy in grace, since we are not saved by who we are or what we do, but because of the work of Christ. As a result, every human being is a sinner that is saved through “underserving grace”. Dualism that causes hierarchy, leading to the social ills of vulnerable community members such as women and girls with disabilities, has no place in an *alternative community*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has critiqued the COVID-19 restrictions for eroding the community structures that are promoted by *Ubuntu* to protect the vulnerable members, such as women and girls with disabilities. In seeking to address the vulnerability of women and girls with disabilities to SGBV and other forms of violence, it grappled with the interplay of African women’s theology of disability and *Ubuntu* in the context of COVID-19. The article highlights that African women’s theology of disability evaluated through *Ubuntu* can protect vulnerable community members, including women and girls with visible disabilities, from SGBV and abuse. This is possible if this scourge is fought collectively and as a collective creates *alternative communities* where concern for dignity and equal ontological status overpowers physical appearance and body shape. In a collective community, everyone is united not only by the shared dignity and ontological status, but also by the agapic love of God and the shared sin that oppresses us by keeping us from God.

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- 1 Corinthians 5:21 NIV
Leviticus 21:17 NIV
Mark 3:24-25 NIV