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The angst of the Dehumanized: *Ubuntu* for Solidarity

By Lillykutty Abraham¹ and V. P. Krishna Prabha²

Abstract

This article attempts to delve into the multiple forms of violence experienced by South African women, within the theoretical framework of the ecological model of abuse proposed by Lori L. Heise (1998). The objective of the article is to explore how the communitarian dimension of *ubuntu* is absent when the womenfolk is in question. Their existence itself appears to be insignificant compared to their counterparts. *Ubuntu* cannot be lived or practiced while some are excluded from this concept. Gender inequality and inequitable status of existence cannot be part of *ubuntu*, as “I am, because you are” or the meaning of *ubuntu* cannot be fully experienced in such unbalanced circumstances. The violence against women by members of the same community and family is quite alarming. It is evident in such instances that women are commodified for the benefit of men due to their patriarchal nature. The subtle ways in which patriarchy operates, silence women and make them incapable of standing for their rights or resisting the oppression. The article thus discusses the oppressive social systems that exist in South Africa and their implications for the practical living of *ubuntu*.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, *ubuntu*, abuse, ecological framework, oppression of women, human rights, patriarchy

Introduction

Violence against girls and women is a sign of a society’s orientation towards patriarchy. Silenced women are inclined to believe in and get accustomed to the traditional cultural practices that control them. African women who are subjected to several forms of human rights violations stand testimony to the patriarchal social structures that devalue the worth of women. Though African communities are known for the communitarian philosophy of *ubuntu*, it is quite disheartening to note that in the same society, women continue to suffer for being women. In this light, one begins to question the whole philosophy of *ubuntu*, as it cannot be practiced by ignoring the sufferings of women.

This article looks at violence as defined by the UN and exposes the escalating violence against girls and women, particularly in South Africa, within the theoretical framework of the ecological model of abuse proposed by Lori L. Heise (1998). The debate on *ubuntu* zeroes in on its aspect of solidarity and its role as a living tradition. The angst of the dehumanized can be mitigated only through the collective efforts of both men and women, in solidarity.

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Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of an ecological model of abuse adapted by Lori L. Heise (1998) from Jay Belsky (1980), with later modifications by theorists Bonnie E. Carlson (1984), Donald G. Dutton (1988), J. L. Edleson and R. M. Tolman (1992), and Jorge Corsi (1994), “conceptualizes violence as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors” (Heise, 1998, pp. 263-264). This framework focuses on “those factors that have been empirically shown to be related to different rates of violence against women and girls” (Heise, 1998, p. 265).

Heise (1998) adopts the descriptive nomenclature used in Belsky’s framework that consists of four levels of analysis. These are everyone’s personal history factors; the microsystem, which represents the immediate context, i.e., the family or other intimate or acquaintance relationship; the ecosystem, which includes the institutions and social structures, both formal and informal, that embed the microsystem, i.e., the world of work, neighbourhood, social networks, and identity groups; and the macrosystem, which represents the general views and attitudes that pervade the culture. She also works on an additional layer that represents the interplay between various aspects of a person’s social environment, i.e., the linkages between his or her family and other ambits of involvement, such as place of work, extended family, or network of peers, and social institutions, such as the police, courts, and social services.

Within this theoretical framework, the article explores the various factors that have led to the present escalating gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa and attempts to uphold the dynamic philosophy of *ubuntu* with its communitarian dimension to include everyone without any discrimination. South Africa is chosen for the study to explore the existing paradoxical relationship between violence and *ubuntu*.

Defining Violence against Girls and Women

The point of departure for the present study is the understanding of violence that leads to the dehumanization of the less privileged, especially women. The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China in September 1995, which adopted The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, defines violence against women as encompassing but not limited to the following (Number 113. a.):

Physical, sexual, and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation. (UN Women, 1995)

After defining violence against women, the conference looked into its cultural and historical roots and how it still affects society (Number 118):

Violence against women is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of women’s full advancement. Violence against women throughout the life cycle derives essentially from cultural patterns, in particular the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices and all acts of extremism linked to race, sex, language, or religion that perpetuate the lower status accorded to women in the family, the workplace, the community and society. Violence against women is exacerbated by social pressures, notably the shame of denouncing certain acts that have been perpetrated against women; women’s lack of

access to legal information, aid or protection; the lack of laws that effectively prohibit violence against women; failure to reform existing laws; inadequate efforts on the part of public authorities to promote awareness of and enforce existing laws; and the absence of educational and other means to address the causes and consequences of violence. Images in the media of violence against women, those that depict rape or sexual slavery as well as the use of women and girls as sex objects, including pornography, are factors contributing to the continued prevalence of such violence, adversely influencing the community at large, in particular children and young people. (UN Women, 1995)

Despite strenuous efforts for 25 years after this conference to eradicate violence against women and girls (VAWG), reports of violence continue to flood media platforms while many similar cases are unreported or manipulated. In this frightening scenario, the angst of the women who are victims of gender-based violence is a global concern. The World Bank (2019) deems violence against women and girls, as a global pandemic that affects 1 in 3 women in their lifetime. Accordingly, 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence. According to UN WOMEN's data,

137 women are killed by a member of their family every day. It is estimated that of the 87,000 women who were intentionally killed in 2017 globally, more than half (50,000) were killed by intimate partners or family members. More than a third (30,000) of the women intentionally killed in 2017 were killed by their current or former intimate partner. Women make up for 82 percent of all victims of homicide perpetrated exclusively by an intimate partner. (UN Women, 1995)

The World Bank (2019) draws the attention of the public to the devastating effects of violence spilling over to society and the nation at large: "In some countries, violence against women is estimated to cost countries up to 3.7% of their GDP – more than double what most governments spend on education" (2019). This data is sufficient to fathom the magnitude of a single act of violence against women and girls. Since it also affects the entire socioeconomic network of a nation, it needs to be addressed with the utmost urgency.

Various socio-economic factors have intensified GBV. In the case of Africa, in addition to many other causes, poverty, illiteracy, as well as traditional beliefs and practices, have exacerbated violence against women and girls. The current COVID-19 scenario presents an alarming state of violence that African women and girls experience. The policy paper "Gender-based violence in Africa during the covid-19 pandemic" (2020), jointly published by the African Union Commission-Women, Gender and Development Directorate (AUC-WGDD), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), reports a surge in violence against African women and girls. The data presented in the policy highlights that "some categories of women and girls in Africa are among the most vulnerable groups exposed to the negative impacts of the coronavirus pandemic". The study spanning the Eastern, Central, Southern, Northern, and Western countries of the African continent reports "exacerbated gender inequalities under COVID-19, placing women and girls at greater risk of GBV" (2020, p. 6). The policy also makes note of how "school closures intensify gender inequalities, especially for the poorest girls and adolescents who face a greater risk of early and forced marriage, sexual abuse, and unintended pregnancy during emergencies" (2020, p. 8). In addition to this harsh reality, it is also quite devastating to note that during the lockdown "gender-based violence survivors

have experienced limited access to legal protection services as most civil hearings and case-file reception at courts are suspended; issuances of court orders are significantly delayed; and most legal aid centers are closed, including limited access to helplines for girls and women” (2020, p. 5). In the face of such helplessness, the entire process of raising consciousness and attempting to alleviate suffering reverts.

According to the World Health Organisation’s Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018, published on March 9, 2021, the lifetime prevalence of ever-married/partnered women aged 15–49 subjected to physical and/or sexual violence from a current or former husband or male partner at least once in their lifetime (since the age of 15) is 33% as per the WHO African Region prevalence estimates, as opposed to the 27% of the global prevalence estimates. The same category when estimated for the past 12 months is 20% as per WHO African Region prevalence estimates as opposed to the 13% of the global prevalence estimates. According to WHO African Region prevalence estimates, the lifetime prevalence of women aged 15–49 subjected to one or both forms of violence at least once in their lifetime is 36%, compared to 30% in global prevalence estimates. It is quite appalling to note that this works out to an average of 70 to 80 million women in this region.

A study conducted by Muluneh et al. (2020) on Gender-Based Violence Against Women in Sub-Saharan Africa reveals that

More than two-fifths (44%) of women aged 15–49 years of age in Sub Saharan African countries experienced some form of intimate partner violence (IPV) and almost a fifth (14%) experienced non-IPV. All types of IPV (physical, sexual, and emotional violence) are common experiences among women in SSA countries, with emotional violence being the most prevalent. Women living in Eastern and Western African regions experience the highest levels of GBV. (2020, p. 15)

The findings of the World Bank (2019) suggest how VAWG takes a heavy toll on poor and developing countries like Africa. Historically, violence has become part of the socio-cultural life of many communities in a very subtle manner. Basing their study on qualitative and quantitative research findings of 2001 and 2002, Outwater et al. (2005) argue that these “studies have revealed a cultural acceptance of violence. Women and girls are most easily looked on as victims, but the situation is complicated and the subtleties difficult to interpret” (p. 140). This is very common in patriarchal societies. The cultural acceptance of violence makes women silent and submissive without asserting their right to a dignified and free life.

Women are sexually powerless and subordinate to men. Fulata Lusungu Moyo (2004), a systematic theologian, from an African women’s liberation theologian’s perspective, asserts that sexuality is central to their being as women and men in Africa and it influences their worldview as religio-cultural people. She further observes, “whether religio-cultural, Christian, or other religious sexual socialization, there are overlaps in their purposes such that most of these sexual socialisations subordinate women’s sexual lives to men’s. In the process, women find themselves in a position of sexual powerlessness as sexual objects at the service of men” (2004, p. 73). The contentious female circumcision, which marks the physical initiation to adulthood as practiced in the African traditional religion, points to the sexual powerlessness of women (Lugira, 2009, p. 69). Though it is performed by women themselves, it must be viewed in its patriarchal context. Along with the sacredness implied in this practice, the fact that girls and women are made to believe that they are imperfect and unclean as they naturally are and that such practices are part of being women aggravates the practices of this type of human rights violation. Alice Walker observes that Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is sexually blinding because “if a woman is sexually mutilated by removing her clitoris, her sensations are deadened to such a degree that she cannot really feel

her way to the lover of her choice” (Walker, 2016). Here, women’s fundamental rights are jeopardized by ‘silencing’ them to undergo such distressing suffering, the effects of which remain with them as long as they are alive. Walker describes FGM as mutilating women genitally in order to control them. Powerlessness and control go hand in hand. It is the result of considering women as ‘sexual objects at the service of men.’ FGM is a heinous practice that devastates women, mentally, physically. The social agencies that control women ensure that women follow these norms as part of their existence without any resistance. According to the World Bank (2019), 200 million women have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting. The UN Women Statement for the International Day of Zero Tolerance for FGM 2022, issued on February 4, 2022, estimates 4.6 million girls undergoing FGM each year by 2030. In their innocence, or even silence, the sexually powerless girls regard the entire practice as essential to their transition to womanhood. Hence, it becomes of utmost importance to hold these victims close and accompany them to alleviate their plight and liberate them to their full potential as free human beings.

The low socio-economic conditions of women contribute to their sexual powerlessness. In their study on domestic violence against women in North African and Middle Eastern countries, Sezer Kisa, Rusan Gungor, and Adnan Kisa (2021) show that abused women in these countries “were younger, less educated, nonworking, housewives, married to less educated husbands, witnessing, or experiencing violent behaviour in the home, living in rural households, and had a low socioeconomic status” (p. 13). In these circumstances, women have no voice. They are forced to abide by what others decide for them. A woman is commodified; she can easily be bought or sold, and it becomes easier if she is illiterate and socioeconomically weak.

Violence against Women in South Africa

The World Economic Forum on Africa, 2019, reports that nearly 3,000 women were killed in South Africa between 2017 and 2018, as per the records of the South African Police Service. It means the murder rate for adult women is at nearly 15.2 per 100,000, implying that a woman is murdered every 3 hours in South Africa. According to the World Health Organisation report, the year 2016 witnessed a murder rate of 12.5 per 100,000 women and girls, putting South Africa in the fourth-worst position out of 183 countries. (Wilkinson, 2019). Research by the South African Medical Research Council has found that 56% of female murder victims in South Africa were killed by their intimate partners (Pikoli, 2020).

Records reveal that South Africa topped “international rankings of occurrences of reported rape and sexual violence” (Britton, 2006, p. 145) and it is reported that cases of abuse of women are increasing day by day (Baloyi, 2009, p. 122). While the statistics include only reported cases of violence against women, many such cases are not reported, and the perpetrators get off scot-free.

Applying the theoretical basis of the ecological framework of abuse (Heise, 1998), GBV against women in South Africa must be looked at through the lens of personal history, family ambiance, economic status, socio-cultural contexts, as well as religious and traditional practices. As Heise points out, all these levels are overlapping and, therefore, difficult to compartmentalize. The deep-rooted patriarchal system victimizes and silences girls and women at all these levels. “Patriarchy naturalises and eroticises female violence” and “violation of women’s bodies” (Baloyi, 2010:3). In the words of Madipoane Masenya (2003), a professor of Old Testament Studies at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, “patriarchy continues to define and control women’s sexuality” and it is “a powerful system that continues to facilitate male violation of the bodies of women and girl children.”

At the personal level, the attitude that a person has imbibed and learned based on the early childhood experience of witnessing violence against women and the patriarchal mindset

operating in the family, as well as culture, may form a superior role in him, which in turn can objectify women. Every instance of GBV against women points to how men perceive her. As Magezi Elijah Baloyi (2009), a Professor of Practical Theology at the University of South Africa, observes,

The subjection of women has become socially accepted as a normal code of conduct. African culture does not only approve of seeing the woman as an object of sexual fulfilment, but it also has ways and means through which it instigates men to see it that way through a process of raising children, as well as treatment and rituals performed in their community. (p. 115)

In most cases, women are commodified as objects (Baloyi, 2009, p. 22) that can be used or discarded as the owner pleases. Women's sexuality is owned by men. Masenya (2012) states that ownership of women's sexuality by men is typical in the African-South African context. Obviously, the owner is entitled to do what he wishes with the property or object he owns. In the same analogy, it is evident that the object's freedom is controlled by the owner. Similarly, while a husband expects faithfulness from his wife, he can exercise the freedom to choose his sexual partner. Masenya (2012) delineates this culturally approved practice:

Once a woman is in marriage, her sexuality belongs to her husband only. Not the other way around, though. One example of such a proverb is Monna ke thaka, o a naba [A man is a pumpkin plant, he spreads]. Its tenor reveals that a married man can have other sexual partners outside his marriage. (p. 213)

Baloyi (2016) also concedes to the African traditionalist belief that "many husbands expect women to have a sense of self-control and discipline, while they themselves can live as they wish, without self-control or discipline" (p. 4). Such uneven treatment of people in a society is the result of patriarchal control. Baloyi (2009) reports that most women in South Africa suffer humiliation by men and degradation of their dignity as women in particular and as human beings in general, and he (2009) condemns the practice of preference for male children over females. Baloyi (2009) observes that even the African concept of marriage is that of the subject and object, or the owner and the property, which naturally permits the husband to abuse his wife. Objectification of women is so deep-rooted that some rapists are callous, even to the extent of mutilating the victims. Their insensitivity blinds them from regarding the victims as human beings having the same rights as themselves. Instead, they derive pleasure by inflicting pain on these hapless and silenced victims. Motsei (2007) asserts,

The escalating rate of sexual violence in South Africa is alarming. The increasing occurrence of rape is not only worrying; the fact that the assaults are also accompanied by vicious sadism and gross mutilation of women's bodies is of deep concern. Many women's organizations reveal that most incidents of sexual violence go unreported. We know from the recent 1 in 9 campaign that for every woman who reports rape, nine others are silenced by fear, shame, and guilt. (p. 19–20)

Given the fact that violence against women is rampant in South African society and the rising cases of HIV/AIDS that have become a pandemic, South African women are not safe in their homes either. Motsei's (2007) disclosure of the appalling reality of unsafe homes for these women is quite distressing:

It is in the home that some of the most brutal forms of violence and torture are perpetrated against those perceived to be weak, i.e., women and children. It is no wonder that a greater proportion of women who are raped are violated not by strangers but by someone they know and trust in the 'safety' of their own homes. Contrary to popular belief, the home is not necessarily a safe place for women and children. (p. 19)

Research by many women's organizations in South Africa reports "high levels of domestic abuse across all sectors of South African society" (Penelope, 1999, p. 445). Masenya (2005) argues, "many African women in South Africa are, mainly on account of systemic forces, trapped in poverty, abusive marriages and violent Biblical interpretations, thus becoming easy prey to the HI-virus." Baloyi (2009) identifies economic dependency on men as one of the main reasons for this alarming scenario. In addition, the "lack of economic opportunities for women" (Enaifoghe et al., 2021, p. 123) is another major factor that places women at a greater disadvantage.

A brief analysis of the GBV in South Africa throws light on the dehumanizing experiences of women and girls. The link between "gender/female powerlessness and violence against women and children" (Masenya, 2003) must be broken, and that is where *ubuntu* has to play a major role.

The Role of *Ubuntu*

Given the socioeconomic disparity, it is a herculean task to bridge the gap and work towards social justice. The task at hand is enormous, looking at the present situation. In this context, to begin with, the philosophy of *ubuntu* is a beacon of light. *Ubuntu* is a prevailing practice in African culture. It was officially recognized as one of the guiding principles of developmental social welfare policies and programs of the government in 1996 in The South African Governmental White Paper on Welfare (Republic of South Africa Government Gazette, 1996). The White Paper presents *ubuntu* as

The principle of caring for each other's well-being... and a spirit of mutual support.... Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through a recognition of the individual's humanity. *Ubuntu* means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being.

Now the question arises: if *ubuntu* includes every individual, why is there so much violence in society, particularly against women? Are these women also counted as citizens? Do these policies protect women? Since women are still victims of violence, as the discussion above suggests, the very concept of *ubuntu* must be delved into. Does the principle of *ubuntu* promote and contribute to the wellbeing of the individual and society as the constitution envisages? Does it have the emancipatory potential to break the chain of perpetuating violence? Or is it, as the South African feminist Ilze Kevy (2011) argues, as

constitutional theory on ubuntu jurisprudence obscures the fact that ubuntu is inseparable from African Religion; that it sustains a deep-seated patriarchy; discrimination, inequality, and the violation of human dignity. Neither 'African law and legal thinking' nor its basis, *ubuntu*, is in compliance with international human rights notions of equality and human dignity or the African Women's Protocol. (p. 52)

She urges the ‘social engineers and social and legal philosophers’ “to break the cult of silence and start asking probing questions regarding *ubuntu*” and asserts that *ubuntu* “is not in consonance with the values of the Constitution in general and the Bill of Rights in particular. *Ubuntu*’s shared traditional African values and beliefs trump and erode the core values of the South African Constitution” (Keevy, 2011, p. 52-53). In response to this criticism, Drucilla Cornell (2014) defends *ubuntu*:

Despite all the struggles over its political and ethical meaning, *Ubuntu* points us to a new humanism, to a new ethical notion of being human that implies a thoroughgoing philosophical, political, and ethical critique of racism [...] it is indeed an important ideal and value in the day-to-day life of South Africa, which is also precisely why it is so contested.

The second defense derives from the fact that it presents itself as a new ethical way of being human together [...] it offers us the philosophical project of solidarity [...] and [...] radical transformation. (p. 169-70)

It is important to note that Cornell posits the dynamic nature of *ubuntu*. It is open to reinterpretation and reinvention. As Cornell (2014) argues,

The question of whether the constitutionalisation of *Ubuntu* undermines its ‘subversive’ value as a form of counter hegemonic politics and legality remains. There can be no grand, sweeping answer to this question, other than in the day-to-day politics, ethics, and reinterpretation of *Ubuntu* at the level of legality and politics in South Africa (p. 173)

She reiterates that *ubuntu* does not belong to traditional elders and the living dead as part of African religious beliefs but as part of contemporary life. For Cornell, *ubuntu* is revolutionary as well as a living tradition. Moreover, Heidi Hudson (2009) argues that feminism in Africa has had to strike a balance between “universal normative principles of gender equality and traditional values such as *ubuntu* (the interconnectedness of each human being, consensus-building and social solidarity)” (p. 293). Given the context of the African continent, Hudson is aware that “using a notion of gender equality that embraces cultural difference but does not reinforce cultural subjugation,” accentuates the “communitarian rather than individualist rights and duties toward family, community, the state, and the international community.”

Siphokazi Magadla and Ezra Chitando (2014) too, differ from Keevy, and they focus on the “intersection between an *Ubuntu* ethic of care and a feminist ethic of care” (p.187). They admit,

While it is true that traditional values are routinely used to legitimate gender-based violence, we also recognise that *Ubuntu*, considered a living tradition, is a very dynamic and deeply contested construct. We therefore conclude that the emancipatory potential of *Ubuntu* is a function of this complexity, which allows it to be owned by the perpetrators of gender violence as well as advocates of gender justice (Magadla & Chitando, 2014, p. 190).

Taking cues from the exemplary leaders who practiced and lived *ubuntu* and proved its plausibility, the authors focus on the ‘emancipatory potential of *Ubuntu*.’ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who was the Chair of the South African Truth and Reconciliation

Commission, was the Apostle of *ubuntu*. Tutu was convinced that there could be ‘no future without forgiveness.’ For Tutu (1993) *ubuntu*

speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, ‘Yu, u nobuntu’; ‘Hey, so-and-so has *ubuntu*.’ Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’ It is not, ‘I think therefore I am.’ It says rather: ‘I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.’ A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are (p. 31)

His own adherence to *ubuntu* enabled Tutu to provide advice and guidance to his fellow countrymen and women during South Africa’s difficult and precarious period of transition (Murithi 2009). The example of Nelson Mandela, who followed a peaceful course of action and advocated avoiding any form of violence in the freedom struggle of South Africa, stands afresh when contemplating the emancipatory potential of *ubuntu*. For these leaders who followed the path of nonviolence, the guiding principle was *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is based on the notion that “both parties to a dispute need to be reconciled in order to re-build and maintain social trust and social cohesion, with a view to preventing the emergence and escalation of a culture of retribution among individuals, families and the society as a whole” (Murithi, 2009, p. 229).

In a similar vein, violence against women projects society as two parties: the oppressor and the oppressed. This division is subtler and even more difficult to identify, as sometimes members of the same household are involved in the violence. Therefore, if changes have to be envisaged, they should begin with subverting the traditional beliefs and practices. Subversion becomes possible if one is convinced and if there is attitudinal change. That is where *ubuntu* must be appropriated and lived as a principle.

If society views men and women as enemies that compete against each other or use women as objects, that society is detrimental to its own progress. What we need is a society that stands for each other, irrespective of gender, so that together we can work towards the eradication of social evils. Moreover, when both men and women consider each other as having equal rights, some of these evils will naturally disappear. For this, *ubuntu* is the best guiding principle because it “forms a basis for thinking, behaving, speaking, teaching and learning, and is devoted to the advancement of human dignity and respect for all” (Cited in Masenya, 2012, p. 207).

Looking at the enormous impact the practice of *ubuntu* could bring in, especially, through the leaders of the freedom struggle, we can be assured that *ubuntu* is not an impractical philosophy of life. It is possible that adherence to *ubuntu* can transform a male-dominated society into an egalitarian one, recognizing the space of every individual. This would probably be a possible solution to the increasing violence against women and girls. If *ubuntu* begins to be practiced, the hegemonic masculinity that considers it normal for women to be treated as objects will be broken. *Ubuntu* scholar Munyaradzi Murove (2009) asserts, “Africa yet possesses in its own traditional culture the roots of an [...] ethic of an interdependence of individuals” (p. 315). Interdependence cannot be glossed over. It is not by

commodifying one section that the other section of society functions. Mindfulness of interdependence and interconnectedness is required if *ubuntu* must bear fruit.

As the United Nations recognizes, 'the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of women's full advancement' can be broken if *ubuntu* becomes a living tradition in all households. Since every action first originates in the mind, an *ubuntu*-filled mind will generate only thoughts related to justice and solidarity. The deep-rooted and deep-seated structures of patriarchy cannot be uprooted with any weaker weapons other than the stronger weapon of nonviolence that has far-reaching impacts. The all-encompassing nature of *ubuntu* has to be upheld, affirming the space of women. The only long-term way to ease the stress of those who have been dehumanized is for them to experience peaceful relationships.

It is to be noted that there is no dearth of policies and laws to curb the violence against women and girls that continues to mar the progress of society. If these laws must be effective, the foundation of society has to be strong with adequate resources. A dignified life is not possible in a lopsided society. *Ubuntu*, by its very nature, calls for sharing and caring. One's resources are shared with others in solidarity. An egalitarian society that is economically strong is possible in *the Ubuntu* philosophy. An economically sound society is possible if governments step in with a support system. Education for all with a special focus on girls and women should be the focus of a modern *ubuntu* based society. Educated women will become aware of their rights and will be able to stand for justice. Education would make them realize that some traditional customs like FGM are not a common practice. Such exposure would make them resist the attempts to control them. It is also important that education focuses on cooperation and collaboration rather than competition. Rewarding instances of upholding the worth of others, particularly girls and women, while adhering to Ubuntu principles can heighten the dynamic nature of Ubuntu. Celebrating women and womanhood locally and regionally can assist in upholding their worth. Including and involving women in governing and decision-making bodies would facilitate the space for their experiences and expectations, and this, in turn, could bridge the existing gap. Schemes for women's empowerment and committees comprising both men and women to implement them can improve the status of women on an equal footing.

Conclusion

The above discussion has analysed the prevalent VAWG, especially with reference to South Africa, within the theoretical framework of the ecological framework of abuse proposed by Heise (1998). The nature and extent of violence manifested in the alarming data provided by different researchers direct our attention toward the communitarian dimension of *ubuntu* philosophy. The authors accept its potential nature that the perpetrators of gender-based violence uphold to defend themselves as well as those that the advocates of gender justice strive for to build an egalitarian society. The authors support its potential to transform a violent society into a nonviolent one. We are hopeful that *ubuntu* is one of the most effective methods to overcome violence. As violence originates in minds at first, an attitudinal change can convert the energy to creative purposes. An *ubuntu*-filled mind is the seat of solidarity and care. This, in turn, would aid in the establishment of an egalitarian society in which dehumanized girls and women have a place and their angst is transformed into contentment and pride in being women.

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