

RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Submission in the Context of Gender Equality: An Obstacle to Curbing Violence against Women in Intimate Relationships

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Abstract

Despite the South African Bill of Rights, which envisages equality and protection of women against violence, discrimination and harmful practices, women in South Africa still experience a violation of their rights. Most women in intimate relationships are deprived of the right to equality with their male counterparts by virtue of their gender and the subordinate positions ascribed to them by, among others, tradition, religion, and socialisation. A critical analysis of women's subordinate positions confirms that there is an impediment in the pursuit of gender equality and transformation. This article critically analyses how these subordinate positions hinder gender equality and frustrates the transformation agenda somewhat. The article highlights the consequences of women's subordination in intimate relationships and suggests practical and ideological interventions to address the gender imbalances that perpetuate the oppression of women in South Africa.

Keywords: women subordination; women empowerment; gender equality; patriarchy

Introduction and Background

*"No nation in the world can rise to the height of glory unless women are side
by side with you." (Mukhtar and Islam, 2014: 71)*

Gender (in)equality is one of the most contentious, complex, and multi-dimensional phenomena (Shah, 2020) globally. It is likely to be conceptualised, understood, and interpreted in various ways across communities and societies. However, the United Nations Population Fund (2004) defines equality as an equal distribution of power, influence, opportunity, responsibilities and respect between men and women (Mullinax *et al.*, 2013).

Although women have made considerable strides towards asserting their equal position in society (Babtunde, 2021), particularly in the educational sphere (Homan and Burdette, 2021), much remains to be achieved. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2015) pronounced imbalances are in existence across genders, reflecting local values, social traditions, and historical gender roles. "The tools, artefacts and expression of gender inequality might have changed in certain contexts and societies, but the discriminatory practices apparently have not ended." Homan and Burdette (2021: 234) cite the World Economic Forum in 2017, which ranked the world's biggest economy, the United States of America, as (only) 49th (out of 144 countries) for gender equity. Women across the African continent are equally not immune to this global problem, where traditional norms continue to marginalise women. For example, in the eastern part of the African continent in Ethiopia, tradition is used to maintain the belief that women are "docile, submissive, patient, and tolerant of monotonous work and violence" (Wencheko and Mekonnen, 2020: 512). Therefore, gender inequality is a scourge which has total disregard for social class, economic status, or race. Hence, eliminating gender inequality has been an important priority for the global community. The 1993, the UN Declaration against Violence against Women recommended, in Article 4: "States should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition or

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religious consideration to avoid its elimination" (Koepping, 2022: 522). Despite these injunctions, the ultimate achievement of gender equality remains an elusive goal (Fieck *et al.*, 2020).

As Ambrosetti *et al.* (2013: 401) contend, "the mere existence of laws does not necessarily affect hegemonic perceptions and patriarchal norms." Power dynamics and social norms, particularly gender norms that influence men's expectations of how they should be treated, and how they expect women to conduct themselves, are critical if the world is to eradicate this monster. Gender norms are certain practices, in a given society or group, which seek to specify what is "normal" or "appropriate" behaviour for men and women (Manji *et al.*, 2020; John *et al.*, 2023). These norms are enforced through gender socialisation, which is the process of learning and internalizing gender norms or rules of a specific society (John *et al.* 2023). Understanding these gender norms is important when dealing with violence against women perpetuated mostly by men (Aloyce *et al.*, 2022). According to these authors, gender norms are internalised through social interaction and enforced through social mechanisms. In certain instances, they can be formalised in rules and laws or exist solely in individuals' consciousness.

In South Africa, the realisation of equality is one of the founding pillars of the Constitution of 1996. It affords everyone the right to equality, dignity, culture, and language (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996). In the main, equality refers to an environment where "every person is treated equally and fairly, and not discriminating unfairly against anyone based on race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, culture, language, or birth" (Freeks, 2022). It is, therefore, concerning that decades after political democracy, South Africa is still characterised by toxic environments where gender and gender roles are dictated by oppressive and conservative traditions (Mpondo *et al.*, 2019). In discussing discourses surrounding gender, violence, and sexuality, Gqola (2007) demonstrates that the prevailing gender discourses in South Africa are fundamentally flawed and conservative. The author argues that the empowerment initiatives in the country lack transformative power. Furthermore, the debate on empowerment primarily focuses on women in the public sphere, yet the domestic sphere operates under a different set of rules. South Africa, therefore, "cannot reshape patriarchy without an honest examination of society, language, and everyday practices", argues (Gqola, 2007).

The use of cultural practices, as well as biblical scriptures to maintain women in subordinate positions, is a matter of concern. For instance, there is also a popular biblical scripture commanding wives to "submit to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians, 5: 24). Women often display this submissive behaviour, either overtly and covertly in giving in to the partner's demands, holding back their feelings, or withdrawing and disengaging from conversations related to power and authority (Pietromonaco *et al.*, 2021). According to the theory of power exchange, a submissive partner "willingly and consensually sublimates or bequeaths his or her power to a dominant partner," thus allowing "the dominant partner to take psychological or physical control" (Meeker *et al.*, 2021: 238). Disguised as culture, many women, particularly black African women, are subjected to practices which silence them and force them into submission. This article intends to assess these points later when the authors discuss how cultural practices and religion are conflated in the coercion of women into submissiveness and thus frustrating efforts to achieve gender equality. In the next segment, the theoretical lens which guided the philosophy underpinning this article is outlined.

Confronting socio-cultural and religious practices that perpetuate women's submissiveness in intimate relationships poses a significant challenge for social workers. While intimate relationships are essential to overall well-being, the inequality that often exists between men and women in these relationships can have harmful effects on women's well-being. Such practices undermine the efforts to achieve gender equality and must be addressed for the benefit of society. Research highlights that inequality is one of the most pressing challenges in social work (Leburu-Masigo, 2020; Morley and Ablett, 2016; Bywaters, 2009). The social work profession is founded on core values related to service, social justice, and respect for dignity and worth (Leburu *et al.*, 2022). To social workers, inequality is a fundamental violation of social justice (Goldberg, 2012). In their daily practice, social workers encounter and work to mitigate the impact of inequality on individuals' well-being (Goldberg, 2012). Furthermore, the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development emphasises the role of social work in promoting a fair and equitable society (Chiwara and Lombard, 2017). Despite this ethical mandate, little is known about the impact of social work's intervention efforts that curb inequality in intimate relationships (Leburu-Masigo, 2020).

This article intends to explore how the socio-cultural and religious practice of women's submissiveness negatively undermines efforts towards achieving gender equality. Based on this goal, Manji *et al.* (2020) contend that some gender norms contribute to maintaining an unequal gender system. Admittedly, not all gender norms are harmful

or oppressive. Hence, it is important for the authors to emphasise “some”, and it is those practices that this article seeks to discuss and to suggest ways to eradicate the inherent toxicity. This article focuses on the submissiveness of women.

The quest to advance gender equality, without understanding other interrelated forces, such as culture, religion, power, may not be enough to realise the goal of gender equality. Therefore, this article traces the socio-cultural and religious contexts which provide fertile grounds for the perpetuation of gender inequality. As such, the tone of this article is both practical and philosophical. Practical because it addresses day-to-day issues related to this unjust phenomenon; and philosophical because it seeks to unravel the ideological roots behind the marginalisation of women. This is realised through discussing power and its manifestation, the fetish of empowerment, feminism, and patriarchy, as well as their association with the marginalisation of women. The recommendations map a way forward on how emancipation of women could be realised with particular reference to social work practices. Following conventional practices, the article concludes with a succinct summary of gender equality and the possibilities of such equity in South Africa.

Methodology

A systematic literature review was adopted to examine the body of literature on gender (in)equality and related practices on the marginalisation of women. Knowledge production in these issues and social work is expanding rapidly while remaining fragmented and highly interdisciplinary. This requires social workers to stay updated with upcoming trends, patterns and research. As a result, the systematic literature review was deemed essential as a research method for providing a structured way to synthesise and analyse existing knowledge (Snyder, 2019; Okoli and Schabram, 2010). This systematic review also aligns seamlessly with the social work profession's commitment to evidence-based practice, social justice, and systemic advocacy, ensuring that interventions are grounded in robust and comprehensive research. Systematic literature reviews are a distinct research methodology designed to develop a comprehensive article by analysing existing literature, without requiring the collection of new empirical data. They aim to address specific research questions, often focusing on the current state of knowledge in a particular field (Kraus *et al.*, 2020). The literature review was conducted to answer the following research questions: "How do socio-cultural and religious practices perpetuating women's submissiveness undermine efforts toward achieving gender equality, and how can social work interventions be utilised to address these practices?"

To conduct this review, the authors followed the eight steps outlined by Okoli (2015) and Xiao and Watson (2019). First, they clearly defined the purpose of the review and its objectives for social work practitioners. Next, they drafted an agreement outlining the procedure for writing the article. In the second step, documents were screened for inclusion, followed by a systematic search for relevant literature. After completing the literature screening, the authors extracted key information from the selected documents. Subsequently, they conducted a quality appraisal, establishing criteria to exclude documents that did not meet certain quality standards. The analysis phase, referred to as synthesizing studies, involved combining and interpreting the extracted data from the reviewed documents. Finally, the authors completed the process by writing the review. To achieve this, the authors only peer-reviewed articles based on the title of this article and subthemes. This systematic review included scientific research and articles from related disciplines, such as the humanities and social sciences. The researchers considered only documents written in English. We commenced the literature research with the following keywords: women submission, women empowerment, gender equality, patriarchy, and feminism. Different databases, such as Google Scholar, Sage, Elsevier, Humanities Source, APA PsycInfo, Academic Search Ultimate, CINAHLPlus (with Full Text), Medline, SocINDEX (with Full Text), Education Source and Nursing/Academic Edition were consulted. The data search was limited to articles published in the last 10 years (2011–2023), to enable us to build our argument on the most recent literature. This assisted in identifying trends and patterns on gender (in)equality over the years.

For all the documents and articles that were reviewed, we used the title to determine the relevance of the antecedent studies. The following common themes emerged after the first preliminary search with 193 sources: women submissiveness, feminism, patriarchy, gender inequality, intimate partner violence, social constructs and culture and religion. These themes guided the direction of the literature further. The two authors of this article read through all the abstracts to determine relevance. They then obtained the full texts of relevant articles for in-depth analysis. Thereafter, the articles were grouped according to themes. Thirty-five (35) articles were deemed relevant for religion and gender issues; sixteen (16) articles related to power and gender issues; eleven (11) and twenty-two (22) articles were found to be relevant for intimate partner violence (IPV) and patriarchy/feminism, respectively.

The last theme related to social and/or cultural constructs with twenty-five (25) articles. The two authors separately extracted information from these articles for cross-checking. After reviewing a few articles together, the authors reached a consensus on what to extract from the articles. Then the researchers split up the work. The authors maintained frequent communication during the data extraction process and throughout the writing of the article.

Theoretical Framework

Arguably, there is some consensus about the complexity of gender issues. Authors unanimously concede that they are multifaceted (Eriksson and Ulmestig, 2021; Marsden *et al.*, 2022). Understandably, not a single theory may be adequate to understand the complexity of gender issues. However, if there is one system or ideology that has the realistic capacity to confront patriarchy head-on it is arguably feminism. Hence, it was deemed necessary to be the guiding theoretical framework to explain how socio-cultural and religious practice of women's submissiveness seriously and negatively undermines efforts towards achieving gender equality. Feminism is an ideology that strives to understand how gender and power operate, both structurally and ideologically. Its main concern is the beliefs, norms, and values about the status and roles of women in a society (Ajayi *et al.*, 2022) as well as fundamental inequalities between men and women and the sense of patriarchy it entails (Barnett *et al.*, 2018). Feminists are concerned about the promise of "equality" for women which will bring with it three ideas. Firstly, that sexism would be challenged, secondly, that women would be recognized as complete human beings, and lastly, that social justice would be achieved (DeKeseredy, 2021).

It is beyond the scope of this article to present and argue different perspectives of feminism. It is sufficient to provide a general understanding of how feminism views IPV as a key element of the system of male dominance. It further provides an understanding of how gender and power operate, both structurally, such as women's access to and positions in social institutions and ideologically, which refers to the beliefs, norms, and values about the status and roles of women in a society (Whetmore, 2014). Furthermore, feminism argues that beliefs embedded in the teachings of wifely submission, are contributing factors to violence against women and they have become a critical weapon to enforce subordination. Different perspectives of feminism concur that women suffer different forms of subordination or oppression because of their gender and suggest different ways to overcome them. For instance, feminist theologians are particularly concerned with the ways in which God is understood and the consequences that flow from this theological conceptualisation (Ross, 2019). These religious teachings are all connected to the marginal positions of women in society. The religious gender bias becomes evident in the portrayal of females as silent embodiments of acquiescent docility or silent cooperation as commanded but misconstrued signifiers of faith (Miles-Tribble, 2021). Therefore, feminist theologians suggest an alternative theological vision of a loving triune God who affirms the full personhood and flourishing of women (Moder, 2019).

Another branch of feminism, namely radical feminism, identifies patriarchy as the root cause of IPV, whereby males exercise control over females to keep them submissive (Showalter *et al.*, 2019). This perspective argues that all other social relations, such as class, are secondary and originate from male-female relations (DeKeseredy, 2021). Koyama (2020) further contends that radical feminism in its simplest form, believes that women's oppression is the most pervasive, extreme, and fundamental of all social inequalities regardless of race, class, nationality, and other factors.

Socio-Cultural Construct and Gender Equality

Lebitla la mosadi ke bogadi (the grave of a woman is at her in-laws)

Although the definition of culture is neither universal nor rigid, the concept refers mainly to a set of behaviours, beliefs, activities, and traditions that are practiced by a particular group of people. This article intentionally chose culture to examine gender inequality because it provides insight into how people interact with each other (Gibson-McGrady and Upchurch, 2022). Therefore, understanding cultural practices and beliefs, in relation to gender relations, becomes an important factor in assessing how women are treated in a particular society. Women's "worth is reduced to just a caregiver who is expected to remain at home caring for both the husband and children" (Babtunde, 2021: 18371). These traditional gender stereotypes are responsible for the marginal position of the women in society across all spectrums. For instance, a study examining gender ideology in promoting violence against women in Nigeria associated male superiority expectations to unacceptable level of discrimination against women (Ajayi *et al.*, 2022). Another cultural patriarchal practice, which is common among many communities in Africa, is the payment of lobola (dowry) when a woman gets married (Anitha, 2019). It is important to highlight that

the cultural practice of *lobola* or bride-price varies according to locations and ethnic affiliations. In South Africa, for instance, bride price is referred to as *magadi* or *mahadi* in the Sesotho languages, and *lobola* in the Nguni languages (Bogopa, 2010). In other African countries such as Zimbabwe, the payment of *lobola* is referred to as *roora* among the Shona people (Mawere and Mawere, 2010). The equivalent of *lobola* among the Dagaaba cultural group of Ghana is *kyeuri* (Akurugu *et al.*, 2021). Some critics of the *lobola* practice argue that it symbolises a transaction where women become objects of the sale (Anitha, 2019; Kojo Oduro *et al.*, 2020). However, the commodification of women is not only restricted to black communities on the African continent. Other authors cite examples of traditional announcements of the married couple as “Mr. and Mrs. (husband’s full name)” at wedding ceremonies as one of the subtle forms of tradition that tends to trap women into perpetual property in western communities (Ozaki and Otis, 2017).

The use of proverbs during wedding ceremonies is also considered to be “patriarchal inculcation of obedience and loyalty according to which virtues of fear, compliance and guilt are instilled in women” (Moloko-Phiri *et al.*, 2016: 245). These women find themselves in a precarious position of having to conform to the values and norms of society (Moloko-Phiri *et al.*, 2016), lest they risk being deemed “incomplete” (Choudhury *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, women have a bigger price to pay in case their marriage fails. They are coerced to stay in marriages, regardless of their abusive circumstances. Even when love no longer exists, the decision to divorce is never an easy one for many women. As one survivor of domestic violence noted, “marriage is not slavery: you marry for happiness, not death” (Koepping, 2022: 528). The common thread in all the instances, is that women should behave in a manner that is respectful and submissive toward their male counterparts.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Gender (In)Equality

For this article, the discussion on gender-based violence is confined to those who are in intimate relationships and where the victims are women. They may be married or not married, living together, separated, or dating. Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is defined by various scholars (Alsaleh, 2022; Oluwagbemiga *et al.*, 2023;) as physical, psychological, sexual abuse directed toward spouses or domestic partners, usually violence by men against women. Undeniably, there is always an attempt to vilify gender in IPV by referring to incidents where the perpetrators are women. Scholars, such as Simonič (2021), argue that IPV is not specific to men or women and cannot be explained based on gender or gender roles. This article argues that IPV is a gendered phenomenon. This argument is further strengthened by the assertion made by other authors that gender inequities play a central role in experiences of violence, sexual and reproductive health outcomes (Closson *et al.*, 2022) particularly for young women. Furthermore, the gendered power inequities also pose a health risk among young women, by limiting their decision-making power, such as the use of condoms (Pettifor *et al.*, 2012).

Some scholars conceive IPV as a system of gender-based violence wherein one partner, in this instance men, exercise power and control over women through violence (Cornish *et al.*, 2021: 21). It is also perceived as men’s desire to control women (Sanders, 2015; Alsaleh, 2022) and perpetuate their power in the relationship (Oluwagbemiga *et al.*, 2023). IPV is, therefore, a means to an end and hardly the end itself. IPV should be understood at both the individual and structural level. At the individual level, IPV is more likely to be carried out by men who have been socialised into accepting the low status of women and still hold traditional beliefs on the subordinate roles ascribed to women. At the structural level, IPV is rooted in the patriarchal culture of male dominance, in which women are considered as subordinate and dependent (Yang *et al.* 2021) whereas it is prudent to differentiate structural from individual IPV, the two are in fact intertwined. For instance, the dominant patriarchal cultural norms, which encourage IPV, are nurtured by cultural and social expectations that underpin gender roles of men and women, which generally devalue woman (Alsaleh, 2022).

Religion and Gender (In)Equality

Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.
(Ephesians 5: 24)

Notwithstanding varying definitions of the subordination and marginality of women, religion refers to “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” and this system of beliefs and practices “unite into one single moral community called a Church” (Adjei and Mpiani, 2022: 3531). Religion is arguably the most powerful and influential mechanism in shaping the lives of people in many societies (Chernyak, 2016). Hence, authors argue that in Africa, for instance, religious and non-religious aspects are intertwined and cannot be easily distinguished

(Adjei and Mpiani, 2022). Many people resort to religion for solace when they are distressed (Zarzycka, 2019; Lipinsky and Goldner, 2022). However, religious leaders may encourage victims (women in this instance), to pray and “work things out”, rather than providing them with resources to make their own decisions (Li *et al.*, 2016: 610). Some church leaders encourage women to honour their partners and submit to them “as the Church submitted to Christ” (Davis *et al.*, 2018: 185; Williams and Jenkins, 2019). Surprisingly, authors contend that the association between religion and gender-based violence at individual and the structural levels, has largely been ignored by scholars. Some scholars do, however, dispute this association by contending that religion is unrelated to the perpetration of gender inequality. Those who subscribe to this assertion suggest that religion provides a congenial and supportive environment for healthy family life (Ghafournia, 2017; Takyi and Lamptey, 2020). Similarly, Davis and Jonson-Reid (2020) support this assertion by arguing that religion only becomes a protective factor when it encourages loving behaviour and anti-oppression.

Although religion provides guidelines for moral behaviour, it can (in)advertently foster gender inequality in ways that may undermine a third of the eight United Nation Development Program Millennium Development Goals, namely the promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment (Mullinax *et al.*, 2013). Different accounts have been provided for this situation. Duff (2016) refers to the creation of man in Genesis to explain the church’s understanding, or according to the authors of this article, the “misunderstanding” of male and female roles, and how they should relate. Moder (2019: 85) contends that the “patriarchal theological interpretations that have depicted God as a dominant male figure that subjects women to a male hierarchy as a subordinate” is the underlying reason for this gender inequality. Other authors also argue that religious beliefs also shape unequal gender attitudes and social interactions. The underlying argument is that religious beliefs subscribe to the idea that the man is the head of the family and, therefore, has greater control and decision-making powers (Ajayi *et al.*, 2022).

Biblical texts and verses have also been deliberately and conveniently distorted to justify male dominance and the subordination of women. One such verse is the chapter in the book of Ephesians (Chapter 5 verse 24) which commands wives to “submit to their husbands in everything”. Some of the gendered interpretations of verses include 1 Corinthians (Chapter 14 verse 34) and Timothy (Chapter 2 verses 11 and 12) which are used to justify the exclusion of women from church leadership positions (Homan and Burdette, 2021). The scripture in 1 Corinthians purports that women should remain silent in church. Women are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. The scripture in Timothy says: “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” According to these scriptures, a woman does not have her own volition and freedom to decide or choose – she should follow her husband’s directions and do his will. Therefore, the woman’s primary and only obligation is to obey her husband who is her lord and master (Chernyak, 2016: 302). As in the previous section, the common denominator in all these religious doctrines is the emphasis on male supremacy and female subservience.

Patriarchy and Gender (In)Equality

Patriarchy is arguably at the very centre of the marginalisation of women (Simonič, 2021). With respect to diverging and converging definitions, patriarchy is generally defined as “the manifestation and institutionalisation of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general” (Ozaki and Otis, 2017: 1077). Simply put, patriarchy is a “system of male domination and female subordination” (Whetmore, 2014: 468; Ajayi *et al.*, 2022: 468). Although men and women have equal human rights, patriarchal societies treat women like second-class citizens with limited or no rights at all (Sahu, 2015). In retrospect, men continue to benefit from patriarchal systems that perpetuate an unequal gender order. Men still enjoy the position of the “stronger” sex, who has the right (and duty) to lead, decide, care, and manage things on their own, while the women are relegated to subordinate positions (Simonič, 2021). For instance, women hardly exercise reproductive rights due to their limited power in decision-making. Their male counterparts take decisions regarding reproductive choices.

Patriarchy can be conceptualised as both structural and ideological (DeKeseredy, 2021). Structurally, patriarchy denotes hierarchical organisation of social institutions and social relationships that allows men to maintain positions of power, privilege, and leadership in society. As an ideology, the patriarchy rationalises itself by creating acceptance of subordination, not only by those who benefit from such actions, but also by those who are placed in such subordinate positions by society. A more relevant example is religion which is prevalently influential, social,

and cultural in many societies that promotes hierarchy and patriarchy. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that religion would likely be a strong predictor of rape myth acceptance (Barnett *et al.*, 2018).

Implications for Social Work Practice and Recommendations

Quagliariello *et al.* (2015: 261) argue that "identifying the obstacles and the reasons behind marginalisation of women is an essential step, but the important step that should be followed is how these obstacles could be removed". These authors emphasise that there is a need for appropriate institutional arrangements and reporting mechanisms, training and development of capacity and expertise in gender mainstreaming, and to ensure women's empowerment towards gender equality. This study has far-reaching implications for religion, social institutions, culture and Social Work practices. The implications are outlined below.

Awareness programmes

To confront patriarchal beliefs about women's submission, it is seminal to consider community-based educational programmes, such as raising public awareness and implementing educational campaigns that aim to challenge these beliefs among society, particularly for the ultimate liberation of women. These public education programmes should include more egalitarian gender roles and promote the idea that men and women are born *equal* with *equal* human rights. We also suggest a two-pronged strategy that could involve both males and females. The understanding is that educating women shifts the gender balance of power. Male involvement, may, however, lead to a change of attitude towards women and foster more positive interaction. However, due to their marginalised position in society, women may fail to realize that they have some rights. Even when women realize their power, they often fail to exercise that power in terms of rights (Sahu, 2015). Power, or powerlessness, is the capacity or incapacity of an individual to influence another individual to behave in a particular way. The other person may, or may not, be conscious of this influence/coercion on her/his behaviour. Arguably, women may not even consider their marginalised position as a violation of their human rights. Homan and Burdette (2021) ascribe this attitude to "natural results of inherent gender differences" whereas other authors refer to history and culture where women generally accept men's superior positions (Atteraya *et al.*, 2015). The next point seeks to elaborate on this phenomenon.

Women empowerment

The concept "empowerment" is understood differently by scholars in literature on gender (in)equality. This conceptualization generally encompasses a process of change, in which an individual acquires both resources and agency to make and act on decisions that affect her well-being or that of others (Jennings *et al.*, 2014). In the context of this discussion, women empowerment entails various life domains, be it economic, socio-cultural, familial, interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological. In this instance, empowerment should strive to achieve greater independence of control from oppressive practices. In line with the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), we recommend an increase in programmes which intend to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls as one of the key steps towards achieving inclusive and sustainable development by 2030 (Cornish *et al.*, 2021). Women empowerment is often construed, or even misconstrued, as being equivalent to economic independence. However, this is far from what previous evidence suggests. Financial independence alone is insufficient to realise women's emancipation. Theoretically, there is often a misplaced view that the financial independence of women equates to diminished or reduced violence which is far from the truth. The financial independence of women often attracts a backlash from the (male) partner who may want to reclaim their status of dominance (Kavakli, 2022). Admittedly, one way of maintaining male power in a relationship is to retain control over financial resources. However, despite being economically empowered, men may use their power against their spouse when household roles are conditioned by traditional gender norms in a specific social context. Social justice, for instance, is another important aspect of human welfare that should be pursued in empowering women. Challenging and ending systemic gender-based power imbalance, is critical to understanding and ending the marginalised position of women in society. Quagliariello *et al.* (2015) point out, and we also recommend, that this feat can be achieved through resources, namely education, employment, and political participation. These three pillars are essential to the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment. Each of these resources has the potential to bring about positive changes in women's lives.

Religious intervention

Fortune (2021) contends that most churches can no longer claim ignorance of the phenomenon of exploiting vulnerable people to justify their failure to act. Similarly, Williams and Jenkins (2019) argue that the church should be involved in intervention and prevention, but they are concerned about the church's preparedness to address the issue. The church's inability to provide helpful responses to victims of IPV, may increase the exposure of women to risk: when women go to their houses of worship for support in addressing domestic violence and get a lukewarm response, the delay in getting meaningful help may result in higher rates of serious injury or death. Therefore, social workers need a better understanding of the powerful, yet complex, role that religion plays in the continuous marginalisation of women. Researchers and scholars claim that social workers, who have more knowledge in this area, may be more comfortable in engaging in discussions that foster positive change or challenge the misuse of religion (Davis and Jonson-Reid, 2020). This knowledge allows social workers to partner with, and train, religious leaders about this scourge and most importantly how to eliminate it. Obviously, social workers who hold religious values have the added advantage of being able to relate to this phenomenon, but equally, social workers who are not affiliated to any religious denomination should be sensitive enough to provide services to women who are functioning in a religious environment. Some authors have also highlighted the dearth of empirical knowledge, in social work education, on the marginalisation of women in various religious denominations (Hohn *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, we argue that incorporating religion into social work education could assist social workers to understand the oppression and marginalisation of women much better. In the meantime, religious leaders should use their influence to openly denounce any behaviour that perpetuates the oppression of women, both in the church and the community. Interpretation of biblical verses, which encourage subordination of women and domination of men, should be interpreted with sensitivity to the context in the religious community.

Conclusion

This article set out to highlight the plight of women's marginalised position and submissive behaviour in many communities. Although equality is a basic human right, which is enshrined in many Constitutions across the globe, women in intimate relationships continue to be victims of unjust and oppressive behaviour at the hands of their partners. Dominant religious and cultural practices, across many communities, are contributory factors to this sad situation. Toxic masculinity and patriarchy, which promote male domination and female subordination, are still a reality for women in intimate relationships. The authors recommend practical measures to curb and eradicate the marginalisation of women. Chief among those recommendations is the urgency to empower women and launch a community-based education programme highlighting the effect of this destructive behaviour towards women.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This article draws perspectives from gender studies, social work, religious studies, and cultural anthropology to critically analyse how socio-cultural and religious norms perpetuate the subordination of women in intimate relationships. The article offers practical implications for social work practice and policy, while engaging with theological interpretations and cultural norms that influence gendered power dynamics.

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