***Masihlalisane*¹ Marriages as Migrant Adolescent Girls' Survival Strategy in South Africa: An African Feminist Practical Theological Response**

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Abstract

Unaccompanied refugee minors have developed different survival strategies in South Africa. Some are liberative and some are dangerous and harmful. The focus of this article is on one particular negative survival strategy, cohabitation where in an effort to survive the stress of migration, some migrant girls secretly cohabit with adult male refugees. This kind of marriage is commonly known as *omasihlalisane* in Nguni languages and *vat-en-sit* in Afrikaans. The *masihlalisane* is assumed to be a marriage of convenience between adults, but the realities of migration have introduced cohabitation unions, where refugee minors are forced to lie about their age, in order to benefit from this kind of marriage. Cohabiting between an adult and a minor has criminal and ethical implications, particularly with regard to sexual gender-based violence. This article explores some of the findings from conversations I had with adult refugees in Johannesburg, South Africa. Informed by an African feminist practical theological approach, this study seeks to highlight a serious issue that needs to be addressed, if the church in

¹ The term '*omasihlalisane*' refers to cohabitation or '*vat-en-sit*' marital unions where two unmarried people live together and conduct their relationship like a married couple. This marital union is a reality in Southern Africa, particularly in South Africa within the migrant population from other countries. It also includes South Africans who migrate from rural areas into cities or urban areas in search of economic opportunities.

Africa wishes to contribute to achieving an ethical and moral regeneration where marriage conforms to Christian and African values and norms.

Keywords: *omasihlalisane*, cohabitation, marriage, sexual gender-based violence, statutory rape, South Africa, African feminist practical theology

Introduction

Migration is a reality that cannot be overlooked. It has destroyed children and forced most of them to grow up in child headed households or to join in migration across borders in search of better livelihoods. Migration has harsh consequences for unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs), particularly girls who experience many social ills because of their gender. The feminine body attracts perpetrators of sexual gender-based violence (SGBV), this becomes worse if the female is a minor. There are different myths about having sex with a virgin and above all, human traffickers make huge profits out of the feminine body. Marriage is one institution where females may feel safe, especially in the context of migration. The family into which they marry becomes a hopeful source of security for these females, although the statistics of femicide and gender-based violence (GBV) prove otherwise. In the African context, minors feel that they are safe, because they are surrounded by a family and a community that is believed to be source of security.

The institution of marriage is one of the most respected and treasured institutions in African traditions. It is a union between two clans who build a relationship when their adult children marry each other and start a new family, as husband and wife. Under South African law, minors are defined as individuals who are below the age of 18 years and are not allowed to get married or to engage in any form of sexual activity with an adult.² Some traditional African customs allow child marriages by marrying off their young girls below the age of 18 years, regardless of what the law says. In Africa, particularly in South Africa there are many migrant child marriages that happen under the nose of legislators, where adolescents, secretly enter into *omasihlalisane* marriages with adult men in cities. Migration makes this

² Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act Amendment Act 6 of 2012; Judicial Matters Amendment Act 42 of 2013 <http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/2007-032.pdf>

possible because there are no legal guardians to protect these unaccompanied migrant minors. According to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (2008), Protocol on Gender and Development the legal age to enter into marriage in Southern Africa is 18 years. Thus, marriage before the age of 18 is illegal. The urgency of this problem of child marriages has seen the African Union's Agenda 2063 on their 50-year vision towards the development of the continent, pledging to end the scourge of child marriages (The African Union Commission 2015).

Ending child marriages in Africa is stalled by the migration of URM, who in efforts to escape the chaos and stress of migration, cohabit with adult refugees for survival. Research conducted on child marriages among Syrian refugee girls highlights that one of the contributing factors to child marriages in a context of displacement is gender inequality, where girls marry due to insecurity and economic need (Bartels *et al.* 2018). A literature review on child migration and marriages in the Syrian refugee crisis, revealed that due to displacement, economic instability and poverty, girls as young as 14 years of age, were forced to get married (Bartels *et al.* 2018)³. Tasneem Kakal of the KIT Royal Tropical Institute argue that child migration for Ethiopian and Mali young girls is done, to escape child marriages (Kakal 2019)⁴. Thus, this suggests that migration and child marriages are connected.

Prior research indicates that child marriages in Africa are a consequence of culture, for example *ukuthwala* in South Africa; and religion, particularly Islam and Christianity (Buddo & Ramnauth 2018: 26 - 27) where virginity is connected to purity and marriage. In Christianity, African Independent Churches (AICs) have theologies that perpetuate child marriages by monitoring and controlling adolescent girls' sexuality, particularly virginity, where virgin girls are married in heterosexual unions to older men (Sibanda

³ See also Married at 14: Syria's refugee child brides 30 June 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/inthefield/2018/06/married-14-syria-refugee-child-brides-180630102118158.html>; see also New study finds child marriage rising among most vulnerable Syrian refugees 31 January 2017. <http://www.unfpa.org/news/new-study-finds-child-marriage-rising-among-most-vulnerable-syrian-refugees#>

⁴ En-route to a better tomorrow: the connection between migration and early marriage 31 January 2019 <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/en-route-to-a-better-tomorrow-the-connection-between-migration-and-early-marriage/>

2011). Premarital sexual surveillance is for promoting patriarchy and is rife in traditional cultures and religions. Sibanda (2011:5) confirms that some AICs in Zimbabwe, particularly the African Apostolic Church Johane Marange, does not respect the rights of the children, because it promotes child marriages under the guise of heeding to the Holy Spirit. Some refugees in South Africa from Zimbabwe are members of the AICs and they may not see any crime in marrying adolescents because of the theologies promoted by their churches.

The *omasihlalisane* marriages are an ‘elephant in the room’ for the church. These marriages are increasing around the world, mainly in countries and towns that have migrants. The *omasihlalisane* marriage is one where couples stay together without following the proper process of marriage, which is either paying the traditional *lobola* (bride price) or religious matrimony. Research refers to these marriages as cohabitation unions (Mashau 2011) or *vat-en-sit* unions (Baloyi 2016). These marriages contradict the church teaching on premarital sex and abstinence, because they entail consensual premarital sex and a sense of responsibility between the couple (Schwellnus 1994: 1 - 2). Baloyi (2016) confirms that these unions increase due to migrant labour. The sad part of these unions is that migrant or refugee minors enter into them for survival purposes but end up increasing SGBV or statutory rape prevalence.

Theologically, Christian principles forbid child marriages. Although Christian principles are ambiguous on adolescent sexuality and marriage, it is clear that marriage, is between two adults. Child marriages violate the human rights of the child because it exposes the child to SGBV. Thus, the marriage of refugee minors to adults in the context of migration calls for a pastoral response. This is a moral and ethical question and cannot be ignored by churches and theologians. The aim of this article is therefore, to explore the Christian ethical and moral dilemma faced when dealing with child marriages that are promoted by child migration to Johannesburg and to offer a pastoral response to this scourge. The article is divided into four sections. Firstly, there is a discussion on the African feminist practical theology as an underlying theory of the article and the methodology used in the study. Secondly, there is a presentation of findings, using verbatim quotes from the research participants with the aim of highlighting the link between *omasihlalisane* child marriages and child migration. Thirdly there is a discussion of an African feminist practical theological response to child migration and marriages, discussing the divine praxis of normative marriages and community parenting in a context of URM. Fourthly are the concluding remarks.

African Feminist Practical Theology and Methodological Considerations

The starting point of the African feminist practical theology is the praxis of solidarity with those who are marginalised, in pain and suffering. Practical theology is an intersection of theory and practice, making it a praxis. African feminist practical theology then seeks to apply this praxis in the African context of the voiceless, vulnerable and marginalised. Ackermann writing from an African context, calls feminist practical theology, a 'feminist theology of praxis', where theologising begins with the unending, relentless quality of human suffering together with the resilient longing of the human person for wholeness (1998: 84). It seeks transformation and protection of human dignity while promoting human agency. African feminist practical theology condemns child marriages and argues that it is not the will of God for young children to be married. Compelled by the Christian teaching of valuing every human being's dignity, this theology is guided by emancipatory commitments of giving the voiceless a voice. Richard Osmer's practical theology methodology refers to this as the normative task or prophetic discernment that seeks to discern God's will for present realities (2008: 135). Normatively, children should not be someone's wives or mothers; children should be children. What is normative is to see God in every child. According to Johnson, feminist practical theology seeks to render 'a spirit-breathed hope and love and creative resistance against violence and oppression' (2018: 80). In this case, African feminist practical theology is concerned with the patriarchal dimension of child marriages that disconnect the society.

Rather than speaking from a place of abstract theory, African feminist practical theology speaks from lived experiences, by narrating the painful stories of women and children while acknowledging that the 'personal and political cannot be separated' (Ackermann 1998: 81). Narrating stories is a significant methodology of practical theology which is prioritised by African women theologians. Oduyoye argues that:

stories are educational, lend meaning to events in people's lives and have a cathartic effect on the painful experiences of women. Story telling can therefore be a step towards healing. Story telling has also the purpose of changing the roles of women from being observers and victims into participants and actors in history (2001: 8).

African feminist practical theology starts its praxis from storytelling and uses those stories to reimagine newly created forms of divine action. Phiri *et al.* explain that stories encourage women to do an introspection and reflection and to start hearing and understanding history in a new light and to read the present differently (2002: 6). In the absence of stories, the African feminist practical theology's praxis is weak. Stories inform praxis where a reimagination of human relationships takes a liberation approach.

Child marriages that take place as a result of migration and patriarchy, destroy the fabric of society and contradict the Christian faith. African feminist practical theology's praxis is influenced and informed by the Christian story of God's relationship with humans and all creation; above all, it is context based. According to Graham, 'feminist practical theology emerges from the encounter between faith and practice in the form of the values embodied and enacted in the diversities of pastoral responses to women's changing needs and perspectives' (1998: 129). Bons-Storm (1998: 21) puts children's plights at the centre of feminist practical theology and uses the child as a leading image by arguing that the child represents all those who do not have a voice of their own and who are marginalised and excluded from the dialogue of faith.

The place of children in African feminist practical theology is justified by confronting the gender injustice that leads the girl child to dangerous survival strategies, that harms their little bodies by breaking and polluting their sexual innocence. The sexual body of a minor cannot stand the power of an adult domineering over it. The little body then experiences a sense of helplessness, loss, vulnerability, shame, humiliation and degradation. African feminist practical theology is conscious and responsive to the challenges and lived experiences of the vulnerable particularly those of women and children, that are oppressive and perpetuated by gender injustice and patriarchy. As a praxis embedded in faith, African feminist practical theology promotes the use of lived experiences as the new departure for theology. In this case, African feminist practical theology's departure point is the child's experience of migration that forces her into early marriage. Child marriages affect the children forced to marry young, and women who are forced to see themselves in those young girls. These are the girls who are pushed by different circumstances into early marriage, before their sexual and physical bodies are able to stand the pressure of sexual dominance.

The findings of this article emerged from stories and informal conversations that led to unstructured interviews and recorded conversations

with adult refugees and URMs in Johannesburg between 2012 and 2014⁵ and a research project, conducted in Johannesburg with three Zimbabwean refugee women with disabilities from 2016 and it is ongoing⁶. Both projects were conducted with vulnerable groups, so ethical considerations were appropriately followed and ethical clearance certificates were granted by the research ethics committee⁷. The primary methods of data collection were life history narratives (stories), in-depth interviews and observations. Life history narratives were used because they are convenient for collecting data about the lives, experiences and identity construction of the participants (Diniz-Pereira 2008). A form of interview that uses the relatively unstructured, informal conversations or stories relayed between the researcher and the participant was used (Sikes *et al.* 1996). While conducting life history narratives, I requested to observe the participants' day to day living conditions and their daily routine and I was granted permission by all the participants. All observations were recorded in a diary and transcribed to form part of data.

Child Marriage as a Consequence of Migration

Child marriages are rife in rural areas, where the reach of the law is limited,

⁵ Most URMs who participated in that study are now adults, have moved from where they used to stay during data collection, and I have also lost the contact details of many of them. On a positive note, I still have contact with some participants, who update me on their progress and life in Johannesburg; some have become mothers, fathers, husbands and wives.

⁶ This study is ongoing. It received ethical clearance in 2016 and data collection is a continuous process where I visit the participants for clarifications of data. Participants for this study were three refugee women with disabilities from Zimbabwe residing in Johannesburg, although they are nomads, I try to remain in contact with them.

⁷ Both studies were commenced at the University of South Africa. The PhD was awarded in 2014 titled 'Pastoral Care with Children in a Context of HIV and AIDS: Towards a Contextual Pastoral Care Model with Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs) from Zimbabwe in the Methodist Church Community Centre in Johannesburg. The research project with refugee women with disabilities is titled: 'Gender-based violence among women and girls with disabilities in relation to Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa'.

and they have been perceived to be a consequence of culture and religion (Mwambene 2018: 529). The reach of law in urban areas and industrial towns is able to convict adults who marry children. Human rights organisations as well as communities that participate in protecting children's rights raise the alarm, when it becomes known that children's rights are violated. Social media has made this easy, as communities are now able to condemn any violation, by calling for justice through the use of social media. Although children have been protected in the urban and industrial areas, migration has made it difficult for child marriages to be detected by the community, since they do not know the age of the URM, particularly if the girl's body shows some maturity. In addition, since most of the cohabitations or *masihlalisane* marriages are not registered, there is no documentation to prove age, thus exposing the crime is difficult. Migration of URM's makes it easy for child marriages to go undetected because of the absence of birth records and any form of identification for these children. Thus, clearly child marriages are not a challenge to rural areas only, but they are also a challenge to urban and industrial areas, where in a quest for survival, children migrate in search of a better life or to work.

It emerged from both projects that adolescents who were 15 to 18 years of age and living outside the city centre, stayed with boyfriends in the informal settlements of Johannesburg. Results of both studies suggest URM girls as young as 15 years of age particularly those who arrive in townships or informal settlements get into *masihlalisane* marriages for survival.

Cohabitation as a Survival Strategy for Migrant Adolescents in South Africa

In some cases, the migrant or refugee community marry each other or marry citizens of a host country for survival. These are called marriages of convenience or fraudulent marriages if the marriage is for accessing legal documents for immigration purposes, or to access economic opportunities of a receiving country (Azer 2006). Those engaged in fraudulent marriages at times do not stay together or know each other. As a result, fraudulent marriages cannot be regarded as cohabitation marriages, since in cohabitation marriages the couple stays together. In this case, adolescent girls get into cohabitation marriages rather than fraudulent marriages. For them it is about survival in the receiving country. They are looking for a person to fill the gap of a missing

parent or caregiver from this sexual partner.

One of the refugee girls who was 20 years old during the period of data collection revealed that her first born children are 5-year-old twins meaning that she gave birth to them at the age of 15. This study refers to her as Vee. Vee was in the business of braiding hair in the streets of Johannesburg but lived in the church building with her boyfriend. She highlighted that when she came to Johannesburg at the age of 14, she stayed with her boyfriend in an informal settlement located in Tokoza township at Ekurhuleni. She said:

Before we were displaced by xenophobia in the township, I lived *lomuntu wami* (my man) who is also from Zimbabwe. I came to Johannesburg with my aunt at the age of 14 to look for domestic work, but my aunt lived with her man, so I was an inconvenience to them, that pushed me to move in with my boyfriend, who stayed alone in his shack, I was 15 years then and my boyfriend was 23 years, God blessed us with twins – a boy and girl and we sent them back to my parents when they were two years [old] ... (informal/ unstructured interview with Vee, 22 July 2012).

Another lady who also lived in the church building confirmed that URM girls get into *masihlalisane* marriages for survival, the study calls her Nee. She said:

Why are you researching on these minors in the church? You should go to the township and informal settlements, a lot of our young daughters are in *masihlalisane* marriages there. They came to South Africa looking for work, but because it is not easy to get work in this country, they end up moving in with their boyfriends for the sake of survival, they are many out there. Some of them are now young adults and they are still in *masihlalisane* marriages. *Izibeletho zabo sezasikwa, zimanxeba nxeba, sezigugile bengakabi ngogogo* (meaning their wombs are already old, exhausted with scars before they become grandmothers) (informal/ unstructured interview with Nee 22 July 2012).

It was clear that adult refugee women were concerned about minors who end up in *masihlalisane* marriages at a young age. Another lady called

Lee in the study confirmed that for URM girls who do not have families in South Africa, the only way to survive is to look for an adult man who will marry her. She said:

Life in South Africa is difficult for us adult female migrants, we struggle to pay rent and provide for the family back in Zimbabwe, thus why we end up cohabitating with men to share rent. This is worse for these young girls, some of them did not finish primary school, they came to South Africa to fend for their families. So, the only option they have is to get married or cohabit. Please go to the townships and ask for their ages, you will be surprised. Most of them still smell breast milk from their mothers and they have themselves become wives and mothers in South Africa (informal/ unstructured interview with Lee, 22 July 2012).

Kee, who participated in a research project with Zimbabwean refugee women with disabilities, also highlighted that her young sister, who is 16 years old stays with her boyfriend in Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg. She said:

My young sister who is 16 years, used to help me with other things, she did not like sharing a room with me and my husband, so she moved in with her boyfriend in Alex and they have a child already. I begged her to stay because she is just too young and immature, her body is very young to carry a baby, but she was stubborn I sometimes help her, they are struggling financial, the boyfriend struggles to get jobs to support his family. So, we provide for them too. I am her elder sister; I need to do what any elder sister should do ... mothering your siblings. (In-depth interview with Kee, 19 February 2017).

In agreement an adult refugee in Johannesburg identified as as Dee said:

There are many young girls, some of them I don't think they have even reached the age of 16, they stay with adult men as wives, hey in Mzansi we see abnormal things I tell you, these young girls do not even know how a wife should treat herself when she is in menstruation [menstruating], after giving birth or breastfeeding, I wonder what these

old men want from young children who still smell breastmilk (informal/ unstructured interview with Dee, 22 July 2012).

Cohabitation/*omasihlalisane* marriages have become a safe space for child marriages in the migrant community residing in South Africa. Empirical evidence suggests that adolescents resort to cohabitation for different reasons and some of the reasons seem to be survival, security, independence and belonging. Although reasons for entering into *omasihlalisane* marriages vary, the main motive for these marriages for URM is survival. However, this survival has moral and ethical consequences. These consequences include criminal elements of SGBV and statutory rape because the marriages take place between an adult and a minor.

In my personal visits to Tokoza, visiting family and friends, I visited the informal settlement to observe the community. On my visits to the informal settlement, I noticed young girls from Zimbabwe with babies. I had informal conversations with them and yes, they were cohabitating with their fellow adult Zimbabwean men. I knew some of these young girls because they come from my neighbourhood in Matetsi rural area near West Nicholson in Zimbabwe. I was surprised to see them with babies and confirming that they stay with husbands. This for me disrupts the prophetic discernment of marriage that normatively should be between adults, who partner in the blessing for the creation and nurturing of their children in a Godly way.

Lost Childhood in the Midst of Child Migration and *Omasihlalisane* Marriages

It is clear that child marriage is a consequence of child migration and child migration is a consequence of suffering and pain. Suffering and pain is a consequence of injustice and inequality perpetuated by the sin of patriarchy. In the midst of campaigns for ending gender injustice and inequality, children are included, however they are forgotten when they are in cohabitation marriages. Emerging voices and politics of resistance in marriage are those of adult women, who are in marriage because they believe that they ought to be married. The child who is not supposed to be married in the first place is voiceless and invisible. In addition to survival, children on the move or migrating alone get into marriage to conform to the cultural heteronormative that says the only place for a woman is marriage.

Denouncing Omasihlalisane Marriages in the Face of Child Migration

What came out strongly from adult refugee women was their disapproval of *omasihlalisane* marriages that promoted URM's to get into child marriages. They wanted these marriages to be exposed. Refugee women's words of concern as they motivated me to go and see/witness child marriages at the townships suggests that they condemn these unions and wish them to be urgently addressed. The voices of these women as they speak for URM's caught in *omasihlalisane* marriages symbolise the role of women in fighting for children's justice. Feminist practical theologians such as Ackermann (1991) reject the oppression of the voiceless. Mercer (2005) campaigns for theology to equally liberate the oppressed, by rejecting a theology that empowers one group whilst oppressing another.

In African contexts, women are always the first whistle blowers for any unethical and immoral behaviour. The five adult refugees' statements highlight that women are concerned about the injustices that take place in society, including forcing and allowing young children to get into marriage. African women theologians working with the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter Circle) participate in exposing the oppression of women and other marginalised groups, particularly the most at-risk populations (MARPs). They develop theories that are relevant to the African world views such as African feminist cultural hermeneutics (Oduyoye 2001; Kanyoro 2002); *bosadi* theology (Masenya 1997) and other African women theologies speaking to the diversity of African culture. Masenya, in explaining the *bosadi* theology discusses 'the expectations of society concerning the roles which women are expected to play in order to qualify as worthy women in their communities' (2010: 256). Although the worth of women in African communities is based on marriage and bearing children, women outlive this role, by becoming mothers of all children, even those that do not come from their wombs. They take up leadership roles in communities even if they are not elected to do so. They are often the backbone of communities and families. From a feminist practical theological perspective, women engage in performative action that is recorded in Acts 2, where Peter and his fellow disciples in a continued action of God, preached and prayed in a way that converted many people.

Child Innocence Disrupted

The concerns of adult refugee women were that the young girls' innocence is stolen by the men who marry them. Them entering into *masihlalisane* marriages consensually is not the case, but the case is that an adult man ignores her childhood by entering into such a union. This man is guilty of committing a sexual offence. According to the Department of Justice, Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007 in South Africa, an adult or person over the age of 18 who has sex with a person under the age of 16 years can be charged with the crime of sexual penetration [statutory rape], regardless of the consent. This act condemns *masihlalisane* marriages between an adult and a minor. According to the SADC (2008) Protocol on Gender and Development, marriage for children under the age of 18 is unlawful. This is regarded as child marriage.

Child marriage disrupts the innocence of a child. To explain their young age and naivety, the following phrase is commonly used: '*you still smell breast milk from your mother*'. In African traditional contexts a young person is said to still smell breast milk because she or he is too young. This innocence is disrupted when a minor becomes someone's wife or mother. The juxtaposition of the smelling of breastmilk from their mothers and becoming a wife and mother to someone else contradicts the norm of childhood in Africa. The term 'smelling of breastmilk' means that the child is not able to survive without a mother or guardian. Someone who 'smells breast milk' is not yet mature to be considered an adult, the child is naïve and therefore vulnerable.

Children are dependents, they exist as dependents who can only survive in a context that is sensitive to their age and situation. Jensen confirms that every child is unique and she or he is born dependent on others for biological survival and consequent development (2005: 32). Every human being has a right to survival, but survival does not mean compromising one's dignity in order to survive. Feminist practical theology is not afraid to be critical, persuasive, interventionist and at times coercive, for the sake of justice (Ackermann 2008: 115). Migration disrupts children's innocence by exposing them to the risks of child marriages, rape, SGBV, human trafficking and all other ills children are exposed to in the absence of a caring society. They continue in a state of suffering for the rest of their lives, because of the permanent invisible scars that are in their wombs and their minds. They continue serving their so-called husbands who continue demanding them to

play wifely duties without properly marrying them.

The disruption of child innocence by putting scars on their wombs and emotions before they reach the age of maturity, through pregnancy, reveals that girls are disadvantaged by immigration more than boys. Girls often can lack physical maturity for childbirth if they are minors and can be left with injuries in the process. The stripping of their innocence does not only affect their dignity, but it also affects their health, as they may be prone to feminine and gynaecological health risks such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) some of which may later cause cancer. They are also vulnerable to HIV infections as they are not able to negotiate safe sex practices due to the age gap between them and their husbands. According to West and Haddad, age-disparate relationships expose young girls and women who have sexual relationships with older men to HIV infections (2016: 142). African women theologians have long conscientised churches, theologians, interdisciplinary scholars and policy makers on the vulnerability of the girl child to HIV infection (Dube 2002; James 2008). Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele) & Mtshiselwa argue that 'HIV and AIDS carries a feminine face' (2016:2). It emerges from the narratives of adult women refugees, that these young girls are powerless in their marriages, thus their husbands can expose them to STIs, including HIV.

An African Feminist Practical Theological Response to Child Migration and Marriages

The URM's enter into *omasihlalisane* marriages for survival and to fill the void of an absent and caring parent. The concern by women refugees highlight that motherhood is communal in African contexts. According to the Sexual Offences and Related Matters, Amendment Act 32 of 2007, the men who marry URM's are committing statutory rape and yet nothing is done to protect these girls. While many may be aware of what is happening to URM's in South Africa, very little appears to be done to prevent or stop it. The concern by adult refugee women is an instinctive intuition of women, who in the midst of hopelessness try to create hope. An African feminist practical theological response is an activity of faith carried out by concerned African women. It takes a stand against child migration and marriages by using their faith to campaign and promote total transformation of society. Their faith informs their hope and divine action, and it is also sensitive to the African context.

Divine Action in Child Brokenness through Fostering Normative Marriages

The African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' informs African feminists' practical theologians' praxis on issues that affect children. Adults, the church, community and governments are responsible for children. If children are not protected, then the world is at risk of immorality and brokenness. A broken world is painful to live in because the cracks of brokenness keep cutting and hurting the human beings who live in it. People who live in the cracks of a broken world continue to bleed and the bleeding destroys human relationships. It is difficult to find peace in a broken world, because everyone and everything seems broken and hurting, thus no one is at liberty to check how hurt others are. Some women, particularly adult refugee women who show serious concern about the state of URM's in South Africa, ignore their own suffering and attend to others. Henri Nouwen (1979) has coined the term 'wounded healers' to describe those who are concerned about the broken souls of others, whilst also experiencing brokenness themselves. Women experience their own brokenness and pain of discrimination, marginalisation and all evils, while taking action to promote the dignity of all by giving the world a normative footing. Hewitt says a wounded healer experiences a state of brokenness and yet seeks to serve others with a deep humility that recognises its own vulnerabilities (2017: 2). African women theologians such as Mwaura (2015: 98) assert that the struggle for the liberation of women is for everyone's benefit, including children, women, men and all creation. This notion is strongly confirmed by the participants in this study, as they shared stories of URM's who enter into *omasihlalisane* marriages for their survival. The stories of the suffering of weak and vulnerable children requires the divine action of taking Jesus's approach by condemning evil and by warning those who perpetrate these abominable acts against causing the children to sin.

In the Bible⁸, children and women are often silenced, but Jesus gives them a voice by making a child a model of the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 19: 14; Mk 10: 14; Lk 18: 16) and women become the first disciples to witness Christ's resurrection (Mt 28: 1-10; Mk 16: 1-8; Lk 24: 1-24; Jn 20: 1-18).

⁸ All Bible Verses used in this article are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Normative marriage is between two adults who love each other; not an adult and a child. Migration is a sin if it forces the innocent children to enter into marriages for the sake of survival. Jesus warned his disciples not to cause children to sin for they will be harshly punished if they did so (Mt 18: 6; Mk 9: 42; Lk 17: 2). The voice that Jesus gives to children in the Gospels reminds the world of their significance. Jesus also reminds the world that raising a child is a communal responsibility where everyone should raise the alarm if the children's rights are violated.

The communal principle is emphasised by African women theologians because of African women's sense of responsibility for the extended family and the respect accorded to ancestors (Kasomo & Maseno 2011: 158). Thus, African women refuse to be passive about the ills of child marriages, due to their communal responsibility, informed particularly by *ubuntu* that focuses on the moral and ethical dimension of existence. Theologically, *ubuntu* is often linked to Mbiti's philosophy of humanness and existence, 'I am because we are and since we are, therefore, I am' (Mbiti 1969:108-109). The concept of *ubuntu* places the responsibility of caring, nurturing and protecting the vulnerable, on every community member's shoulders, men and women alike. The *omasihlalisane* marriages that involve a partnership between URM, and adult men or refugees contradict the concept of *ubuntu* that African women value in their praxis.

Divine Action towards Unaccompanied Child Migrants by Fostering Community Parenting

The URM reveals the status quo of the current world. The absence of an adult care giver exposes children to threats and dangers. In cases where URM is an adolescent, they are often looking for a means to survive, some like those in this study, get into cohabitation unions with adult men and some unwittingly fall in the nets of human traffickers, who traffic them for prostitution. These are some but not all the evils children who migrate without a guardian or adult, are vulnerable to. The communitarian principle emerges as a solution to the challenges faced by URM. Concerted action towards ending child marriages requires the community of stakeholders, including the church and civil society, to work together in fostering community parenting. The absence of a biological parent or legal guardian does not mean that a child should be ignored, because the African communitarian principle promotes communitarian parenting.

According to Chisale (2018), African women defend their role of motherhood and link it to a sense of social, biological and cultural responsibility, and they expect everyone to participate in communal parenting, because it is the right thing to do.

The communitarian principle, as advocated by African women theologians, enables MARPs, including children, to experience love and care as an integral part of the community. Community parenting is a strong resource any country or community can invest in, because it fosters a moral and ethical society. Every adult in a community is a father and mother to all children. Parenthood is not biological, rather it is a social responsibility, where everyone in the community participates. Thus, the African feminist practical theology praxis is informed by the communal God, who creates and sustains creation from a communal approach.

Communal parenting does not depend on the extended family to raise the child, but it depends on every community member. This system of parenting has proven to have raised responsible, ethical and moral children, because everyone is concerned about the future of the child. However, communal parenting is eroding and disappearing due to infiltration by other cultures, that introduce foreign values to the African culture. Amos (2013: 74) confirms that African communal parenting values are influenced by external systems and forces which have diluted the African culture's wealth of communal values. Magezi (2018: 5) also noted that the communitarian values once enjoyed by Africans, have vanished and been replaced by new life standards that focus on employment, income and economic value. African women theologians through their theories of *bosadi* (Masenya 1997) and African feminist cultural hermeneutics (Oduyoye 2001; Kanyoro 2002) have the aim of resuscitating and promoting the vanished life-affirming African values that encourage human beings to flourish. If the church can mobilise families or communities in receiving countries to adopt at least one or two URM's or street children and take them through to school and tertiary education, the world will be a safer place to live in, with responsible adults.

African feminist practical theology, like African women theologians takes seriously African world views in their praxis. Their praxis aims at building more inclusive communities where the MARPs, particularly children can feel welcomed, respected and safe. In inclusive communities there is interdependence, which Miller-McLemore (1996) a feminist practical theologian refers to as a 'living human web', arguing that life is interconnected.

The suffering of adolescent URM girls who end up in *omasihlalisane* marriages with adult men, disrupts the living human web that prematurely breaks and hurts society, as a result of the pain experienced by these children. Adolescent URM girls in these marriages are victims of SGBV. Community parenthood is able to protect children by identifying *omasihlalisane* marriages where adolescent children are wives and mothers, and free them, by notifying law enforcement agents to take action. This requires communities in receiving countries including the church, to resuscitate the communal values in contexts where children are away from their families and communities. Wherever a child goes, she or he should be welcomed and treated as a child, rather than an independent being. Adults of the receiving countries and communities should be willing to employ the communal parenting values by monitoring URM girls even if they do not stay with them.

Conclusion

African culture is rich with parenting values that can protect adolescent URM girls from entering into *omasihlalisane* marriages. It is clear from findings presented in this article that adult women do not condone *omasihlalisane* marriages involving children. This highlights that African women, regardless of their struggles, usually invoke their maternal instincts where a child is concerned. Some may disagree with this assertion, because of the worrying statistics of mothers abandoning their children, baby dumping, evil stepmothers and all the other negative characteristics perpetrated by some African women. The answer to this is that the wealth of African values has been destroyed by foreign cultures. As a result, the argument of this article is that normatively, African and Christian values do not accept child marriages. Building from this standpoint the article argues that normatively, women are concerned about the suffering of children and they are trying to correct this. In the case of this study, the five women wanted the story of URM girls in *omasihlalisane* marriages to be heard and addressed.

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