Researching Christian-Related Violence Against Women/Intimate Partner Violence in Ghana: Insider/Outsider Positionalities

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Introduction

For many years, I have worked simultaneously as a gender historian in the Department of History and Political Studies at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and as an active participant and lay leader in a Christian faith-based community. Both the church and the university have shaped my thinking and my commitment to engaging theoretically and practically with some of the challenges women face, especially in their own homes. Constantly on my mind is the sense that violence against women/intimate partner violence (VAW/IPV) is prevalent in Africa due to cultural and religious norms that firmly establish the authority of men over women as husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, and brothers-in-law, while also frowning on divorce. The hierarchical relationship between women and men, the stereotyped socialisation of boys and girls, and varying levels of discrimination are not merely societal but also religious constructs. I would argue that this emphasis on a hierarchical family structure, together with biblical texts on female submission, contributes to providing a theological basis for women's subordination and gender inequality. This, in addition to the cultural practice of payment of the bridewealth (*tiri nsa* among the Akan), weakens women's ability to leave toxic marriages or relationships.

I undertook a study with members of Christian faith communities (not my own) to begin to understand how conflicts arising from husbands' assaults on their wives are addressed within church communities. Historically, these communities have sought to manage domestic struggles through counselling structures set up by the church. Seeking resolution for IPV beyond the church community is frowned upon, and this places wives in difficult positions. It also

places huge responsibilities upon church leaders who may be unable to appease both parties and bring peace. Churches tend to prioritise harmony and social cohesion through mediation techniques, which are generally disfavourable to women's true emancipation from violence arising from misinterpretation of theological subordination.

Generally, feminist theologians interpret Christianity as an androcentric and patriarchal religion. There are varied, often complex feminist views on the implications of biblical texts for the suppression of, and violence against, women. Western feminist theologians including Mary Daly, Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Parker, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, and Rosemary Radford Ruether question the patriarchal nature of Christianity through the reconstruction of God as male (the use of androcentric language), the narrative that Jesus Christ appeared in a male form, and the maleness of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) (Ruether, 1983; Daly, 1985; Moder, 2019). Johnson (2002) notes that the sexist outlook of the Bible is foundational to the male-God/male-man superiority complex. Further, Western feminist theologians problematise the traditional formulation of atonement/redemption based on the male God as the divine, yet violent father who requires violence to facilitate forgiveness (Moder, 2019; Makhanya, 2022). African feminist theologians, however, highlight how Christianity was used as a tool to suppress Indigenous people. They advocate for liberatory theology, which would ensure women's emancipation through a reinterpretation of the Bible (Oduyoye, 1995, 2017; Mtetwa, 1998). Thistlethwaite (1981) calls for a "new hermeneutic" that challenges women's oppression. Believing that "abused women are the victims of an unjust power distribution in society" that is "contrary to the will of God," she observes that hermeneutic scrutiny of biblical texts could reveal structural inequalities that facilitate mistreatment (Thistlethwaite, 1981: 310–313). Oduyoye established the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians to address gender inequalities in the church. In interrogating the church and colonial histories, Oduyoye advocates a detachment of African women's experiences from those of Western women by using the Bible to re-establish the proper relationship between men and women (Oduyoye, 1995, 2001, 2017). This relationship includes women's independence in marriage instead of the patriarchal hegemonic relationships between men and women in homes and churches (Oduyoye, 2017). Oduyoye

(1995, 2017) uses her own life as an example of how independence in marriage can be a source of transformation of gender inequalities in the church and society. Therefore, these feminists essentially offer an emancipatory reading of biblical theology and seek the empowerment of women through the reinterpretation of biblical texts.

With this background, and drawing from my observations, I interviewed people who could be categorised into two groups: faith-based survivors of IPV and religious leaders from three different churches – Methodist, Anglican, and Assemblies of God. I also held focus groups with people in women's leadership and marriage support within the churches. My connections with the faith-based communities made it possible to engage in these conversations. Integrating this kind of research into the experiences of VAW/IPV within relatively closed communities (such as churches) is vital, given the uptake of Christianity by many women. Negotiating these challenges, I argue, takes patience and a willingness to take certain risks. These risks include raising difficult questions with people who may influence one's life and being entrusted with stories that are confidential within a close-knit community.

There are multi-layered positionalities researchers assume based on their relationship with the study population: as participants, participant observers, external participants, and nonparticipating observers. The position of the researcher on IPV raises important questions about methodological tools and ethical considerations, in addition to those posed by any research. The researcher's self-positioning as an insider and/or outsider can be a complex process with interrelated (sometimes contradictory) statuses. The boundary between the insider, who is known to share the faith of the interlocutor, and the outsider, who is asking to hear experiences and perspectives, is porous due to the participants' different identities. For a woman researcher, the negotiation of rapport, assumed knowledges, and orientation to the topic adopted for a discussion with a priest, a man with authority, would differ from what pertains in a confidential conversation with another woman about her experience of abuse.

I categorise my position as an insider/outsider based on the similarities and differences between the respondents and me. Fundamentally, we have the same gender (woman) and religious belief (Christian). When women interview

other women, they tend to enjoy a greater harmonious relationship because of shared experiences of being in a subordinate position due to their gender. Additionally, women may enjoy better rapport based on affinities across other social categories such as class, age, and ethnicity. The hierarchical relations between men and women in society and in the church provided further common ground of lived experiences as Christian women that facilitated my conversations with the survivors. However, gender is not the only basis for the subordination of all women; other socio-demographic characteristics complicate this shared relationship. Women high-earners are more likely to enjoy greater independence and respect from male members of society than women with lower earnings. I was also an outsider because I did not share their traumatic experience of domestic violence. Although I identified with their experiences of cultural and religious subordination, I did not experience the verbal, economic, and physical abuse they suffered from their intimate partners. Situational and occupational identities also differed: the participants included pastors, a petty trader, a secretary, and a kitchen aide, while I am a university lecturer. This influenced the deference with which the participants treated me and may have hindered an extremely cordial relationship expected from a woman-to-woman interview. The outsider perspective also reveals itself in our different ethnicities and cultures. Whereas I am a Fante, the participants came from diverse ethnic backgrounds: Ewe, Ga-Adangbe, Fanti, and Asante. Though I used an interpreter, in some instances these differences created a sense of powerlessness for me because I could not adequately communicate in the different languages. Therefore, my power as a researcher was diminished by these perceived differentials.

As an insider, I had greater and easier access to the respondents than an outsider researcher would. My position as a Christian gave me easy access to the church leaders interviewed. My knowledge of the research setting provided a platform for breaking the initial barrier of unfamiliarity. Further, knowing the nuances of the Christian language enabled me to ask sensitive yet critical questions. There is the potential reduction of cultural shock due to similar backgrounds in the interpretation of biblical texts. Being a church leader, *asafomaame* (pastor's wife), meant it was easier to broach sensitive subjects on the interpretation of Christian texts that facilitate violence against women. I was therefore not surprised to hear participants state that God is masculine because

of the constant references to God as "Father" or "He" in biblical texts, and that Jesus Christ, who is God, came in the form of a man, not a woman. Further, in some instances, there were disagreements between the respondents and me. Most of the pastors interviewed stated clearly that they did not perceive the Bible's injunctions regarding men's authority over women as sexist, and some of the participants in the focus groups, including women, agreed with this. As a researcher accustomed to this reading, I was not surprised or taken aback by the perspective. It is part of a discourse that restricts women and justifies their subordination, and it points to wives' reluctance to speak openly about abuse from their husbands.

The power dynamics between the researcher and the participants take different forms in the negotiated research process. As a PhD holder, my educational background earned me deference, and older reverend ministers and women's groups willingly listened to my opinion. A participant referred to me as "*me doctor*" (my learned PhD holder) as an indication of his respect for me. While these identities provided me with easy access, it is possible that the deference also hindered further cordiality and prevented the participants from fully expressing their opinions. As a young woman, my age and gender placed me in a less powerful position, dissonant with my social status. Two of the interviewed pastors repeatedly referred to me as "*me ba*" and "*m'akyerɛ ba*" (my daughter in Twi and Fante, respectively) to draw attention to their age, and by extension, to indicate the wisdom in their arguments. In interpreting the micropolitics of a researcher's relationships with respondents, power or powerlessness is determined by the latter's willingness to offer information. All the pastors interviewed were unwilling to provide information about the identities of women who had previously been abused (thus adhering to the pastoral ethical code). They willingly provided an overview of the women's experiences, but not avenues for interviewing them. I, therefore, had to search for such women through the Ark Foundation.[2] While being a church leader gave me some power because it made people feel safe to talk to me, it also, paradoxically, reduced my power, as the tendency towards deference to authority made it difficult for participants, especially women, to speak freely.

My perspectives on gender and religion also posed a challenge to any notion of my neutrality concerning participants. Just as feminists argue that Christianity is a man's religion and the Bible is sexist, many Christian leaders are uncomfortable with the concept of feminism. Ghanaians have diverse perceptions of feminists, and women who ardently advocate the cause of women are usually presumed to be feminists. In Christian circles, feminists are seen to be opposed to the Christian order of creation. It was, therefore, difficult for me to identify as a feminist/gender scholar in the interviews with the pastors for fear of alienating them. I had to be subtle in broaching the subjects of feminism and equality while interviewing the Christian leaders, as well as in the focus groups.

When I began this research, I had the knowledge that Christian survivors of IPV are encouraged to find support and assistance within their church communities. While this may seem appropriate given that support for survivors always needs to be rooted in their context, the fact that biblical frameworks sanction men's authority over their wives means that such church community assistance can potentially deepen the survivor's dilemma about her marriage and her pain. More knowledge about this situation is critical, and this standpoint provides a vivid reflection of the positional complexities of my work. There is little feminist methodological reflection on how to work in ways that respect and simultaneously question the practices of church communities. There is also a great deal of wariness, both from faith-based survivors about sharing their experiences and from church authorities who do not welcome "outside" questioning about their practices. Nonetheless, entering this space, especially as a Christian, is important for understanding IPV, and this standpoint offers a way of thinking about the possibilities of ongoing research in this area. The researcher's and participants' cultural and religious beliefs, practices, and experiences are important dimensions of researching Christian-related VAW/IPV. By reflecting on the complexities of my positionalities as an insider/outsider, I argue that the power dynamics between researcher and researched are constantly negotiated, depending on shared identity with the study population.

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Notes

1. Department of History and Political Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.
2. Ark Foundation is a Christian non-governmental organisation that provides care and social action in the form of a safe shelter space, psychological counselling, medical support, legal assistance and resettlement support for survivors of gender-based violence. https://www.arkfoundationghana.org/cms/ Accessed 27 May 2023.

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