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“There Is a Silent War Going On”—African Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Domestic Violence before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The increase in domestic violence—particularly against women—is one of the most alarming indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting countries worldwide. Following a mixed-methods approach, this paper examines religious leaders’ perspectives on and their engagement with this topic. It scrutinises the findings of the online survey Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona, conducted from 2020 to 2021 by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Most answers came from the African continent and showed that more female than male leaders perceived an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic or see the need to respond to this topic. However, both male and female participants warned that domestic violence is underreported, inter alia, because of religio-cultural norms. To illustrate how the relationship between women and men in marriage is understood and (re)interpreted and how domestic violence is addressed in individual communities, this paper additionally draws on semi-structured interviews with church leaders conducted in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda from 2017 to 2019 and in 2022. In addition to forms of support and advocacy against domestic violence, the examples also show that church leaders might call for women’s empowerment while upholding the idea of male headship.

Keywords: domestic violence; religion; Africa; COVID-19 pandemic



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In the context of violence against women, religious teachings and communities will play a role; they will never be neutral.

Fortune and Enger (2005, p. 1)

1. Introduction

Since its beginnings in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected people’s lives worldwide. Over 6 million have died, notwithstanding those suffering from the long-term effects of the disease (Statista 2023). In addition to the direct impact of the pandemic, the related prevention measures—such as social distancing, movement restrictions, and lockdowns—also severely affected people’s educational and financial situations and social relationships, as well as their psychological and physical health. The pandemic and the related measures thereby highlighted and exacerbated existing challenges, such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality. One of the most severe indirect consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic is domestic violence. Violence against women increased during the pandemic in almost all countries worldwide. United Nations Women even speaks of a “shadow pandemic” that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations Women 2021).

The influence of religious communities and the important role they play in responding to the spread of the virus and the related social, political, and economic challenges during pandemics is widely acknowledged. In May 2020, the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG), the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) “convened an

inclusive consultation” with religious leaders and actors “to explore innovative ways to partner in the response to COVID-19” (United Nations Alliance of Civilizations et al. 2021). Notwithstanding this acknowledgment as important partners to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, religious leaders, or religions as such, are often seen to play a rather ambivalent role with regard to the issues of gender equality and domestic violence (Brown 2015; Le Roux 2012). In their assessment of “Violence Against Women and the Role of Religion”, Fortune and Enger summarise: “In the context of violence against women, religious teachings and communities will play a role; they will never be neutral” (Fortune and Enger 2005, p. 1). As they point out, religion “can be misused to excuse or condone abusive behavior” (Fortune and Enger 2005, p. 1). Similarly, Brown notes that “women can be met with condemnation and punishment [...] when widely accepted religious ideas about motherhood, womanhood and sexuality are challenged” (Brown 2015, p. 300). At the same time, research has also shown that religious communities can help to reduce domestic violence when they use their influence to question existing power dynamics (Boyer et al. 2022; Le Roux and Palm 2021). Against this equivocal background and in light of the aggravations brought by the pandemic, the paper aims to provide insight into religious leaders’ own perspectives on and their engagement with this matter.

It draws on findings from the online survey Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona conducted by the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The survey was open from 2020 to 2021 and reached 1276 people from 91, mainly African, countries. In addition to questions on the most important challenges, as well as the messages and material support they provide to the community, religious leaders were asked to assess domestic violence in their communities, whether they thought it had increased, as well as whether they saw the need to respond to this issue. This paper focuses on the analysis of data concerning these latter questions collected from the African continent, where most of the answers came from and where inequality between men and women, as well as the prevalence of intimate partner violence, is especially high (World Health Organization 2022; United Nations Development Programme 2019).¹ Quantitative data from the survey are complemented with findings from qualitative, semi-structured interviews that were conducted in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda from 2017 to 2019, as well as in 2022, with leaders of African Initiated Churches, a branch of Christianity in Africa, to illustrate how individual church leaders assess and re-discuss the relationship between men and women.²

I first provide a brief introduction of the online survey and the semi-structured interview before turning to the analysis of the survey data material from the African context. It turns out that many of the, especially male, respondents assessed domestic violence as being “low” or, at least, as not having increased during the pandemic. However, several participants also described domestic violence as being underreported, inter alia, because of cultural and religious demands. In the following step, these findings are complemented by data from the interviews, which show how specific churches spread and deal with some of the demands. Rather than questioning or rejecting the teaching that the man is the head in marriage, the data suggest that some churches seem to reinterpret it. Moreover, the interviews reveal how individual churches offer support to women and use their voice to denounce domestic violence. This is not to say that all African Initiated—or other—churches combat domestic violence and teachings that might legitimate it. In fact, in some cases, calls for women’s empowerment and submission seem to go hand in hand. Yet, these forms of engagement are noteworthy given the influence of religious communities in shaping people’s worldviews and actions.

2. Methodology

2.1. Religious Leaders’ Perspectives on Corona Online Survey

Previous pandemics, like the Ebola crisis in West Africa (2014–2016), have highlighted the important role of religious actors in responding to the spread of the disease and the

related challenges. Against this background and in order to gain insight into religious leaders' reactions to and their engagement with the COVID-19 crisis and the related measures, the Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin started the online survey Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona in May 2020. The survey ran until June 2021 and reached 1256 participants from 97 countries. While the survey was open to leaders, as well as to ordinary members, from all religious communities, most of the participants identified themselves as leaders of Muslim and Christian communities, mainly from African countries. While answers also came from Europe, the Middle East, and South America, only the material from the African continent, where 747 answers came from, are analysed here.

The survey included closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions mainly consisted of multiple-choice questions, such as "Have you done any of the following?" in which participants were invited to tick the respective items, such as "praying for the end of the pandemic" and "hand out sanitizers". Additionally, some closed-ended questions were agreement statements. Here, respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with a specific statement, for example, "My country is handling the pandemic well". Open-ended questions, *inter alia*, asked about the most important message religious representatives had given to their members or government and their vision for a time after the pandemic. The survey touched on various topics, including the participants' perspectives on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the related regulations, and their own engagement with their members and the wider community. The topic of domestic violence was addressed using three questions: one open question ("What is your assessment of domestic violence in your community during the coronavirus pandemic?") and two agreement statements ("Domestic violence increased during the COVID-19 pandemic" and "Religious leaders should respond to the issue of domestic violence"). Participants were allowed to jump questions so that not all of them answered all questions. The questions under discussion received 568 and 561 (agreement statements, respectively) and 491 answers (open-ended question) from the African continent.

2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

In order to complement the findings from the online survey, I draw on semi-structured interviews conducted within the framework of the research project Potentials of Cooperation with African Initiated Churches for Sustainable Development, between 2017 and 2019. In total, 134 interviews and 15 focus group discussions were conducted in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. I additionally refer to two interviews from 2022 in which the topic of domestic violence was explicitly addressed by the interviewees. Moreover, in some cases, it was possible to conduct more informal follow-up interviews and conversations with church leaders and members during which, especially, female interlocutors shared their perspectives on domestic violence and its causes. The focus of the interviews and focus groups was on the churches' engagement with sustainable development, their perspective on major problems in the community, and their advice for potential development cooperation (see Appendix A). However, in particular the interviews also provide important insight into the prescribed and perceived relationship between women and men in marriage and the churches' activities in this regard. Given the topic of this paper, only the relevant statements and, thus, only a small selection of interviews and findings will be discussed here. For an in-depth discussion of the project's overall findings, see [Öhlmann et al. \(2021\)](#).

3. Findings from the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona Survey

I now discuss the answers relating to domestic violence given in the Religious Leaders' Perspectives on Corona survey. The discussion starts with the overall findings before providing a more precise analysis of the answers with regard to the respondents' religious affiliation and gender.

3.1. Religious Leaders and Domestic Violence—Overall Findings

Table 1 depicts the percentages³ of participants from Africa agreeing or disagreeing that religious leaders should respond to the issue of domestic violence.

Table 1. Level of Agreement to the Statement “Religious Leaders Should Respond to the Issue of Domestic Violence”.

Religious Leaders Should Respond to the Issue of Domestic Violence	
Strongly agree	28.9%
Agree	29.4%
Undecided	16.2%
Disagree	17.1%
Strongly disagree	8.5%

With 58.3% of the respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing, the numbers suggest that a majority of religious leaders perceive domestic violence as a topic they need to address. As Table 2 shows, the picture looks slightly different with regard to the statement that domestic violence increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2. Level of Agreement to the Statement “Domestic Violence Increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic”.

Domestic Violence Increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic	
Strongly agree	17.4%
Agree	27.7%
Undecided	25.1%
Disagree	22.6%
Strongly disagree	7.2%

According to these numbers, less than half of the religious leaders (45.1%) perceived an increase in domestic violence, while one quarter (25.1%) were undecided, and nearly 30% (29.8%) did not notice any increase.

This impression is also reflected in the answers to the open question. More than half of the religious leaders from African countries qualified domestic violence as “low” or “few”. However, in several cases, the fact that respondents found that violence did not increase does not seem to necessarily mean that violence is not high. In fact, several answers to the open question on the assessment of domestic violence suggest that it was already prevalent prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. According to a female Sunni Muslim participant from Ghana, “Ghana has always been a centre of domestic violence”. Similarly, a female leader of a Pentecostal church in the Central African Republic wrote that “it’s part of us for a long time”. Other participants also found that domestic violence was “always high anyway” (male respondent, African Independent Church, Uganda) or, more drastically, “always on the increase” (female respondent, Pentecostal church, Gambia).⁴ A male representative of an Evangelical church in the Central African Republic pointedly summarised, “There is a silent war going on in my country”.

The “silence” of this “war” is echoed by other answers mentioning “lots of unrecorded cases” (male respondent, Catholic Church, Cameroon) or describing domestic violence as being “very high with low reporting” (male respondent, Muslim, Shia tradition, Ghana), “secretive” (male respondent, Protestant church, Nigeria), or “underreported” (male respondent, Christian Orthodox Church, Egypt). The fact that domestic violence was already high before the pandemic and still remains underreported might have contributed to the perception of many respondents who did not note any increase.

To further illuminate this point, it is worth taking a closer look at the answers to see who said what.

3.2. Who Said What?

Religious leaders from the African continent mainly identified as members of Christian or Muslim traditions. The following tables show the answers given by 292 Christians and 252 Muslims (Table 3), and 293 Christians and 258 Muslims (Table 4), respectively, in percentages.

Table 3. Level of Agreement to the Statement “Religious Leaders Should Respond to the Issue of Domestic Violence” Answers Given by Christians and Muslims.

Religious Leaders Should Respond to the Issue of Domestic Violence		
	Christians	Muslims
Strongly agree	33.6%	27.0%
Agree	28.1%	32.2%
Undecided	14.1%	15.5%
Disagree	16.4%	17.9%
Strongly disagree	7.9%	7.5%

Table 4. Level of Agreement to the Statement “Domestic Violence Increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic” Answers Given by Christians and Muslims.

Domestic Violence Increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic		
	Christians	Muslims
Strongly agree	21.2%	16.7%
Agree	26.6%	30.3%
Undecided	22.2%	26.0%
Disagree	23.5%	20.9%
Strongly disagree	6.5%	6.2%

It can be seen that the assessments are very similar. There is a slight difference of 2.5 percentage points between Christians (61.7%) and Muslims (59.2%), who agreed that religious leaders should respond to domestic violence, and there is nearly no difference with regard to the question of whether domestic violence increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some 47.8% of the Christian and 47.0% of the Muslim respondents shared the same perspective.

In addition to their religious affiliation and the country of residence, respondents were also asked to indicate their gender. The questions under discussion were answered by 201 women and 367 men (Table 5) and 197 women and 364 men, respectively (Table 6). While there were hardly any differences between the answers of Muslim and Christian leaders, they were more pronounced with regard to women and men.

Table 5. Level of Agreement to the Statement “Religious Leaders Should Respond to the Issue of Domestic Violence” Answers Given by Women and Men.

Religious Leaders Should Respond to the Issue of Domestic Violence		
	Women	Men
Strongly agree	36.0%	28.0%
Agree	26.9%	30.2%
Undecided	13.7%	15.7%
Disagree	14.7%	17.6%
Strongly disagree	8.6%	8.5%

Table 6. Level of Agreement to the Statement “Domestic Violence Increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic” Answers Given by Women and Men.

Domestic Violence Increased during the COVID-19 Pandemic		
	Women	Men
Strongly agree	24.8%	15.5%
Agree	27.8%	27.7%
Undecided	22.4%	25.3%
Disagree	19.9%	23.2%
Strongly disagree	5.0%	8.2%

When comparing the answers given by men and women from African countries, it was found that 5% more women (62.5%) than men (58.2%) think that religious leaders should respond to the issue of domestic violence (Table 5), and nearly 10% more women than men agreed or strongly agreed that domestic violence increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 6). A similar pattern can be discerned in the respective open-ended question. While 67.3% of the male participants qualified domestic violence as being “low”, “few”, or “moderate”, these categories were used by only 53.3% of the female respondents. Even though the numbers do not provide an explanation for this difference, it can be assumed that women have a different perspective, as they are more likely to become victims of domestic violence. This is also suggested by answers to the open questions which especially mentioned women, more specifically young or poor women and women in rural areas, as victims. However, an increase in violence against men was also noted. In addition to information on specific groups of people who are mainly affected by domestic violence or on specific forms of violence, such as rape or sexual violence, some respondents also shed light on aspects that, in their perspective, led to little or no reporting of cases of violence. As a female respondent from a Protestant church in Uganda put it, “Women are afraid of speaking out”. Another female respondent from a Protestant church in Nigeria gave a more detailed answer:

Domestic violence has sadly escalated since the beginning of the lock down. Victims had little to no safe spaces to hide away from their abusers. I can tell you so many people are living in pain and prefer to live with the shame due to cultural and religious demand to avoid divorce.

Her assessment suggests that even though domestic violence increased during the lockdown, cultural and religious norms stopped people from speaking out and reporting cases. This is supported by several studies’ finding that such norms are used to legitimate domestic violence (cf. Brown 2015; Boyer et al. 2022).⁵ The WHO’s factsheet on violence against women identifies “community norms that privilege or ascribe higher status to men and lower status to women” as one of the “[r]isk factors for both intimate partner and

sexual violence” (World Health Organization 2021). Similarly, in their research on intimate partner violence and the question how religious leaders can help to reduce it, Boyer et al. found that “[p]atriarchal norms that place men as the head of household are often to blame” for violence “committed by men against women in intimate relationships” (Boyer et al. 2022, p. 1). In order to see how the relationship between men and women is described and how the idea that the man is the head of the household is discussed in specific religious communities, the results of the online survey are now be linked to insights gained during the semi-structured interviews with leaders of African Initiated Churches.⁶

4. Findings from the Interviews—The Relationship between Men and Women in Marriage

A finding that might shed some light on the relationship between men and women is the fact that 13 out of 20 interviewees reported that a woman would follow her husband to worship in his church once they got married. Bishop Elias Mashabela of Bophelong Bible Church in South Africa explained this practice as follows:

[R]emember, normally a man feels nice when the woman follows him. But if the man would follow the woman to where the woman goes, the man feels degraded. He feels like “Am I not the head? How can I follow a woman?” (Interview 2017)

The statement exemplifies how men would “normally” see themselves as the head of the family and, therefore, as the one who is in charge of making decisions. This seems to include decisions regarding his wife. As Brown notes, “[c]ultural images, ideas, norms and stereotypes about women permeate from religious traditions and inform wider cultural practices” (Brown 2015, p. 300). In fact, even though this understanding implicitly refers to the Bible (Eph. 5:22–23), where it is said that men are the head in marriage and that women should submit to them, it is often not perceived as a specific Christian perspective on family structures but more as a reality that is assumed in society (cf. Pillay 2003). Interestingly, while this concept calls for women’s submission to their husband, it was found during the interviews that it is still interpreted and lived out in different ways in different congregations.

4.1. “The Man Is the Head”

Pastor Don Makumbani, leader and founder of Covenant House Family Church in South Africa, criticised that the idea of the man being the head has often been understood as women not having anything to say in a marriage. He would preach in his congregation that while the man is the head, the wife is the neck. According to him, the picture signifies that they are complementary and cannot do without each other. Another especially interesting example is given by the leader of a women’s group in a Pentecostal church in Ghana, which was already mentioned. She described how women should deal with this idea in order to discuss important issues or decisions:

[if] you want to table out issues or you want your husband to take something that you think is good from you, if he’s not trying to, there’s a way to do it. For instance, you bring the issue and then you may ask oh so sweet, what do you think about this, do you think it’s okay we can do that? Then the person says okay. Sometimes you let them, let the thing be as if they are bringing it on board, is not like you are imposing on them. When there’s an imposition with our men, then it becomes an issue. But as much as possible you must find a way of dialoguing and then the person will come to accept. [...] The church makes us understand that, once this is the culture, how can we manage the culture, so that we can live amicably. That is the training that we do, that’s the training. (interview 2017)

Rather than questioning or rejecting the idea of the man being the head as such, the examples suggest that individual churches promote different interpretations, as well as ways to “manage” this religio-cultural idea.

Moreover, several church leaders—male and female—would even encourage women to overcome challenges in their lives and to use their gifts of leadership while at the same time holding that the man is the head. In a public speech, Pastor Olubunmi Olushola Monye, who founded the first branch of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Uganda together with her husband and continued to lead the church after his death, called on women to believe in themselves. She emphasised that “every women has a gift” and that they should not allow anybody to bring them down. At the same time, she later reminded the audience, “No matter what it is, the husband is still the head of the woman”.⁷ Dr. Mamoruti Florence Tshabalala, the “First Lady” of Believers in Christ Church, shares a very similar message on the church’s website.

She first refers to Paul, who describes the relationship between men and women: “Paul states that a woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman (Corinthians 11:8–11) [all biblical references in the original]”. She then chronologically takes the reader through biblical statements pointing out the important role women played in the Old and New Testament:

Remember the Old Testament reflects a male dominated society; nevertheless, God has used women as Leaders of his people. Miriam the prophetess sang praises to God, teaching other woman in public praising God. [...] Deborah led Israelites judging their disputes first as other male judge had done (Judges 4:4–5). She had civil, military and religious roles. Huldah the prophetess gave authoritative message to the high Priest and saved men. (2 Kings 22:14–20)

Coming to the New Testament she, *inter alia*, highlights that “Jesus taught women (Luke 10:38–42), women were among his travelling disciples (Luke 8:1–3)” and that “Martha was given the spiritual insight to recognise Jesus as the Messiah”. As she concludes, “The list goes on”. Notwithstanding this impressive enumeration, her final statement reads as follows:

I therefore encourage all women to lead as God instructed them because we are equally blessed like men but should never forget to be submissive to God first and then to our Husbands [sic]. (Tshabalala 2017)

Following this perspective, the idea that women and men are “equally blessed”, need each other, and cannot be independent of the other and the idea that the wife has to be submissive to the husband go hand in hand. The understanding that the man is the head in marriage is not only not problematised but is also not seen as a hindrance for women to take their own decisions and to live out their full leadership potential. This might seem contradictory to some. However, similar perspectives have also been observed in other denominations (cf. van Klinken 2013; Mwaura and Parsitau 2012).

4.2. The Case of Widows

In some cases, an unequal power balance between men and women becomes especially visible when the husband dies. Widows often face financial problems, as they may not inherit anything from their deceased husbands. In some cases, they may even lose the money and property they themselves worked for and might be subjected to practices such as widow inheritance or violent so-called cleansing rituals (Kapuma 2012). In her research on sexual violence (SV), Le Roux reports that widow inheritance (i.e., the custom of widows having to marry the brother of their deceased husband) was named one of the “culturally ordained practices conducive to SV” by both male and female informants (Le Roux 2012, p. 54). Moreover, widows and elderly women are often accused of being witches (Beck 2020; Kapuma 2012; Federici 2010). One church representative from Ghana explained why they established a specific counsel for elderly people in their church:

Because over here in Africa and in Ghana, once you are grown old, especially with the women, any bad thing, any misfortune that occurs, like untimely death [...] they associate it with a witch in the family and mostly they look at the women, the old, elderly women. We have some who have [been] sacked from

[their] home, some who have been banished from their communities, some who have been physically abused because they believe that the poverty in the home or they believe that other mishaps in the family are due to these elderly women. (interview 2017)

Not only in Ghana, but also in Burkina Faso, Uganda, Kenya, Nigeria, and Tanzania, interviewees explicitly mentioned widows as people they offer support to, as they are seen to be one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Support ranges from visiting widows and praying for them to skills training to enable them, as well as other women, to become financially independent.

4.3. *The Need for New Perspectives and Education*

The most drastic assessment of the relationship between men and women in marriage was given by the bishop of a Pentecostal church in Ghana. Asked for his view on human rights, he pointed out:

Women have their rights trampled upon and there is still a lot of inequality in that area. Especially husband and wife they come to you and you realise that the woman is a slave as it were in marriage. It is very rampant in our part of the society where women are subjected to a lot of control by their husbands. That's for me the number one challenge in terms of human rights. [...] It is the number one problem we have in our part of the world. Some of the women are fighting it because of education. Most of the women now are enlightened, so they come to marriage and say "No, no you can't treat me like that" you know. And some of the men don't understand why you are telling them "you can't treat me like that". So, it becomes one of the issues we have to address. (interview 2017)

It is striking to see him using the term "slave" to describe the inequality of women in marriage and describing this situation as "very rampant". At the same time, it is noteworthy that, in his opinion, the situation is slowly changing because of education and that he sees it as a duty of the church to become active in this regard. He explained that his church would offer regular counselling sessions for couples before and after they get married in order to respond to problems and resolve conflicts. While the findings do not say anything about the type of discussed solutions and how they might emphasise submission or equality, it is worth noting that this is a very common practice also in other churches (Öhlmann et al. 2021).

According to the bishop the "understanding for us about how to treat women has been a carry-over from our fore fathers and parents [it] is that women didn't need to go to school". Given the fact that he finds this understanding to be challenged and sees the need to react to it as a church, his assessment is an interesting example of how a church might act as mediator between perspectives of the "fore fathers" and newer approaches to the relationship between women and men.

During the interviews, other church leaders also highlighted the importance of education. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, "Quality Education", was ranked as the second most important goal after SDG 1, "No Poverty", regardless of the country (Öhlmann et al. 2021). The interviewees were asked to choose the five most important goals out of the 17 SDGs. They were also free to give more than one of their five "votes" to the same goal. In addition to receiving the second most votes in general, SDG 4 was the only goal to receive all five votes from one interviewee. Pastor Makumbani explained his choice as follows:

Because all this is due to lack of training. If we had our people trained we wouldn't have all these problems. If we had our people educated hunger would not be a problem. The use of resources would not be, inequality, we would not even talk about gender inequality if all people were well educated. And so it's lack of education that brings all this. (interview 2017)

Accordingly, he started to build a school at the same time he started to build his church.

While it is important to note that interviewees link gender equality to education, it should also be mentioned that SDG 5, Gender Equality, itself got much fewer votes. Several even see this concept very critically. Yet, the fact that churches do not prioritise or openly support gender equality as such does not mean that they do not support women to become independent and speak out against gender-based violence.

5. The Churches' Engagement with Women

During the interviews, church leaders were asked how they support their members and the wider community (Öhlmann et al. 2021). Churches offer different forms of material and spiritual support, congregational activities, counselling, and training that are open to everyone. As the last examples mentioned above show, some activities specifically respond to the situation of women. In addition to the reinterpretation of certain doctrines or the mediation of different perspectives on gender relationships, which could be interpreted as engagement for women, more explicit or visible church activities in this regard mainly involve skills training and acts of advocacy.

5.1. Skills Training

In particular, skills training like sewing, baking, or soap- or jewellery-making are often offered by women for women. The importance of supporting women's financial independence was perceptible among the different interviews. Interviewees from Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa highlighted that the unemployment of the husband and the financial challenges often led to conflicts and, sometimes, even to violence in the marriage. One female interviewee, thus, concluded: "So it is very important for a woman to be empowered financially" (interview 2018). A women's group leader from Uganda, working as manager for a company that arranges skills training for women, also linked income to health security and explained:

[W]hat causes people to acquire HIV, in most cases it is poverty. [...] [E]specially girls, once they are vulnerable they are more exposed to acquiring HIV because they will not have any bargaining power as compared to those who are independent and can be able to take care of themselves. (interview 2018)

Against this background, it is important to note that both unemployment and poverty were most often named the biggest problems during the COVID-19 pandemic by participants from the African continent in the online survey (see Appendix B).⁸ Hence, this type of support might have become even more important in recent years.

5.2. Advocacy

In addition to forms of practical support, church leaders also use their authority to speak out against gender-based violence. Already in the past, some (female) church leaders openly criticised practices that are harmful to women. As Mwaura notes, the Lumpa Church, which was founded by Alice Lenshina in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) in the 1950s,⁹ was particularly attractive to women because the founder openly denounced "widow inheritance and other practices that were inimical to women's wellbeing" (Mwaura 2007, p. 426). Hastings even describes her church as "a feminist church", because it was "not only led by a woman but expressing feminine aspirations, a woman's view of the ideal society" (Hastings 1996, p. 525). In Kenya, Gaudencia Aoko, who cofounded the Legio Maria, in 1963, demanded the "liberation of women from repressive structures and practices" (Hackett 1995, p. 265). According to Mwaura, "[h]er example inspired Luo women by introducing the possibility of freedom from the domination of their husbands and in-laws" (Mwaura 2007, p. 427).

More recent examples show how religious leaders not only use their individual voice but form or join organisations to raise awareness. Apostle Siboniso Ngobese, founder and leader of Gilgal Bible Church in South Africa, who joined an existing network, explains:

I'm working with one of the organisations called SANARELA [South African Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV & AIDS] it deals with HIV issues and GBV [gender-based violence]. [...] We're doing programmes whereby we train our community. We do dialogues about gender-based violence and HIV and AIDS and TB, you know, health issues. We talk about health issues. (interview 2022)

Some other, especially bigger, churches also form their own organisations or NGOs. Salem Evangelical Church of Christ in Nigeria, for example, registered the Salem Welfare Outreach of Nigeria (SWON) as an NGO. According to the founding members, it provides financial and educational support to families in need, as well as legal advice and support, inter alia, in cases of domestic violence. Some members of SWON are also active in Goshen House for Women, a place where women can stay for a while and join different skills training on offer. One of the members explained that they plan to open their own house "because we have a lot, a lot of displaced women, of battered women in Nigeria" (interview 2017).

Reverend Malachi Ochieng Ochido, founder and leader of the Barut Pentecostal Church in Ronda, Nakuru in Kenya, similarly founded a local organisation. Here, leaders from different religious communities come together. In his opinion, it is the duty of churches and other religious communities to raise awareness.

So that is our role as religious group [...] to make the community aware. Because people are using traditional means. In our area, people use to beat women and wives like tradition [...] In tradition you may beat your wife [...]. They must know how they can live with their wife peacefully. So that is a very big problem in this area. (interview 2022)

According to Ochido, many women would not report violence, even though it is forbidden by law, because both men and women sometimes see domestic violence as "normal". In his perspective, this is because of traditional understandings of how women and men should relate to each other. He, therefore, sees it as especially important to educate women about their rights.

An example at the international level is Rev. Father Joseph Mutie, Chairman of the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya (IRCK) and General Secretary of the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC). During the interview he emphasised the need for leaders from different religions to come together.

[W]hen we are talking of gender-based violence; we have areas where it is dominant. It is neither the Muslims nor the Christians who claim to be clean. You will find the Muslims mistreating their wives, Christians are mistreating their wives. [...] We join forces and speak out together as interfaith. (interview 2018)

He further identified the "issues of early marriages, early pregnancies" and the "HIV and AIDS epidemic" as "key areas where we need to join forces and fight together". The OAIC also used its voice and reach during the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, the organisation addressed all their member churches in a letter titled "From Despair to Engagement", highlighting that social distancing "has resulted in the disruption of life". In addition to "rising unemployment" and the "exclusion of most children from learning because of limited access to the internet", the institution identified the "reported increase in domestic violence" as a major problem and specified that "[w]omen and children are the main sufferers of this violence" ([Organization of African Instituted Churches 2020](#), p. 2). Consequently, one of the points the OAIC called on its members to bring forward to their governments was to "[m]onitor and deal with all forms of violence" ([Organization of African Instituted Churches 2020](#), p. 3).

6. Discussion

When discussing the findings presented above, it should be mentioned that neither the online survey nor the interviews were conducted with an explicit focus on the relationship

between women and men or domestic violence. The assessment of domestic violence, its increase, and the need for religious leaders to engage with it was one of several topics the survey touched upon. Similarly, the interviews mainly focused on the churches' engagement in and understanding of sustainable development. Perspectives on gender relations were only occasionally mentioned. Moreover, interviews were only conducted with leaders of African Initiated Churches and not with representatives of other Christian branches or of other religious communities.

Nevertheless, both sources provide first-hand insight into African religious leaders' perspectives on domestic violence and, more generally, on the relationship between women and men in marriage before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey data show that fewer than half of the religious leaders from the African continent noticed an increase in domestic violence during the course of the pandemic, and many described domestic violence as being low. This is striking, as the World Health Organization (WHO) finds that the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse is highest in Africa ([World Health Organization 2022](#)), and studies in different African countries attest to an increase in domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic (cf. [Barasa et al. 2021](#); [Tesfaw et al. 2021](#)). At the same time, the fact that this form of violence remains underreported, *inter alia*, because of fear and religio-cultural understandings that keep the ongoing "war" "silent" was clearly problematised by several (female and male) participants, and more than half of the religious leaders see the need to respond to this issue. This is noteworthy as, according to Neuger, churches themselves play an important role in the "silencing of domestic violence victims", *inter alia*, through "theological justifications" of this silence in order not to touch on the "sanctity of the family" ([Neuger 2004](#), p. 95; cf. [Westenberg 2017](#)).

The combination of qualitative and quantitative data allows for drawing a more detailed picture—at least with regard to African Initiated Church leaders—as the interviews showcase examples of existing engagement with this topic on the ground. Churches provide counselling for couples and emotional and educational support for widows and women in general. In particular, skills training is seen as an important form of support, as financial independence might directly increase women's health and social security. In fact, studies have not only found that there was an increase in unemployment during the pandemic but that there is also an interrelation between job loss and domestic violence (cf. [Bhalotra et al. 2021](#); [Clerici and Tripodi 2021](#)). In their study of domestic violence in major cities in Ethiopia, Tesfaw et al. conclude that not only the "[s]ex of participants" but also "their monthly income were significantly associated with increase in sexual violence during COVID-19" ([Tesfaw et al. 2021](#), p. 3563). Thus, support in skills training might have become even more relevant in the light of the pandemic.

On an ideological level, some churches act as mediators when understandings taken over from the "fore-fathers" collide with newer perspectives on relationships in marriage and they use their influence to speak out against domestic violence. Again, this is not to say that all churches do so. As Neuger points out, churches might often not be willing to advocate for victims of domestic violence, "especially since it is often the perpetrators who have the power and authority within local churches" ([Neuger 2004](#), p. 95). She refers both to active, well-established male church members, as well as to pastors as perpetrators. Nevertheless, the interview material suggests that some church leaders openly denounce domestic violence and try to raise awareness in their communities. Moreover, at least in some churches, a reinterpretation of the understanding that the man is leading in marriage takes place. At the same time, also a simultaneity of a call for women empowerment and for the submission of a wife to her husband can be noticed in several denominations. Soothill finds that some women, especially wives of prominent church leaders, use a submissive rhetoric as a "rhetorical device" to maintain their own status in the church ([Soothill 2015](#), p. 213). While this might be true in some cases, the variety of examples suggests that it would be too easy to dismiss all of them as pure rhetoric. Similar to the cases mentioned in this paper, Mwaura and Parsitau refer to a male pastor of a Pentecostal church in Kenya who, like Pastor Makumbani, describes the relationship between men and women in

marriage by saying “men are the heads and women are the neck” (Mwaura and Parsitau 2012, p. 179). Following their account, the pastor

explained that the head cannot stand without the neck neither can the neck stand on its own without the head. Both need each other and complement each other, but the man remains the head [. . .] At the same time, he said, if you are in this church and you still beat up your wife, shame on you! You cannot be born again and hit your wife. Men, you must love your wives as the Lord loved the church. Women must respect their husbands as the Lord decreed it. (Mwaura and Parsitau 2012, pp. 179–80)

The pastor emphasises that men and women need each other and explicitly condemns domestic violence while also calling women to submit to their husbands. According to Mwaura and Parsitau his “message is both contradictory and ambiguous” (Mwaura and Parsitau 2012, p. 180). Interestingly, van Klinken detects an opportunity for creativity and new perspectives in this moment of ambiguity. He retells the case of a male Pentecostal preacher in Zambia who speaks about “the ‘fundamental biblical principle of male–female equality’” and attempts “to ‘reconcile’ and ‘balance’” it with “yet another principle he also considered to be biblical, the idea of male headship” (van Klinken 2013, p. 241). Van Klinken concludes:

What may seem contradictory and illogical to the feminist or gender-critical scholar, apparently makes sense in the worldview of this Pentecostal preacher. This illustrates the Pentecostal gender paradox par excellence. The creative space opened up in this paradox can be used in different ways, emphasising different sides of the paradox, but is used by Banda [the respective Pentecostal preacher] primarily to redefine male headship so that it “domesticates” men and allows for women’s social empowerment. (van Klinken 2013, p. 252)

One could argue that also in the case brought forward by Mwaura and Parsitau, the pastor used this “creative space” to redefine male headship in a way that discourages domestic violence. In any case, van Klinken’s assessment supports the idea that, at least in some churches, the persistence of the perceived gender paradox might not necessarily mean that no reconsideration or redefinition of existing (biblical) principles takes place. New interpretations that “allow for” women’s empowerment might be spread within the paradox itself. One might question whether this is enough to defuse the inherent potential for female oppression of certain teachings, but as van Klinken emphasises, this form of promoting new perspectives should not be overlooked.¹⁰

By pointing to the creative space which can, as we have seen, “be used in different ways” to allow for empowerment or to foster oppression, van Klinken also implicitly highlights the power of the individual preachers and church leaders to (re)define understandings of male headship in marriage and male and female relations as such. While the demand for submission is also brought forward by women, it is noteworthy that the survey data showed a difference in the answers of men and women regarding the topic of domestic violence. More women than men found that violence had increased during the pandemic and that religious leaders should respond to this issue. Moreover, categories describing domestic violence as “low” or “few” were much less frequently used by women than by men. At the same time, most churches—as well as other religious communities (Pew Research Centre 2016)—are led by men. While we have seen that women do not necessarily reject the idea of male headship and might even see domestic violence as culturally justified in some cases, the survey findings indicate that women’s perspectives and experiences need to be given more attention in order to raise awareness and combat domestic violence.

7. Conclusions

Coming back to Fortune and Enger’s (2005, p. 1) assessment that “religious teachings and communities [. . .] will never be neutral” with regard to violence against women, the discussion has highlighted that, following the online survey, more than half of the

participants from religious communities on the African continent see the need to respond to the issue of domestic violence. The interview material elucidates how African Initiated Churches become active in this regard. Churches in different African countries provide emotional and educational support for couples, widows, and women in need and, maybe most importantly, some of them mediate between or reinterpret existing perspectives on the relationship of men and women in marriage or even openly denounce domestic violence. At the same time, the presented statements also confirm that religio-cultural teachings, and especially the understanding of the man as being the head in marriage, are still used to legitimate claims for women's submission to men (not only in marriage). It is important to note that Fortune and Enger's statement even remains relevant when religious leaders do not explicitly engage with teachings that give preference and power to men over women. A lack of reflection on and discussion of religio-cultural teachings that foster the idea of male superiority and that can be used to legitimate domestic violence might be interpreted as (silent) acceptance and can, thus, contribute to the perpetuation of these understandings. In the light of this thought it is noteworthy that, while the underreportedness of domestic violence was problematised both by men and women, more women than men were concerned about the level of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic and see the need for religious leaders to respond to this topic. Thus, the findings underline that not only religious teachings but also the involvement of women's perspectives and experiences in religious communities play an important role in the context of domestic violence. Yet, leaders of religious communities, those who decide about the topics that are addressed and the teachings that are propagated with regard to the relationship between men and women, as well as the preferable interpretations of these teachings, are mainly men. More research will be needed to examine how the inclusion of female perspectives and the (implicit) reinterpretation—or open rejection—of specific teachings will evolve in the future and what impact this might have on violence against women and open discussions of this topic.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at University of Pretoria (name of the project was used for record keeping, date of approval: 14 November 2018).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

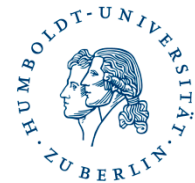
Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Interview Guideline

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN



Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development
Research project “Potentials of Cooperation with African Initiated Churches for Sustainable Development”

Prof. Wilhelm Gräb | Philipp Öhlmann, M.Sc. | Marie-Luise Frost, M.A.

Interview guide: Interviews with church leaders

I Introduction

[I.1 Personal introduction]

(15')

- Introduction of the researchers (be open for personal questions)
- Give the interviewees an opportunity to introduce themselves

Note : Words in *italic* are remarks for the researcher

[I.2 Description of the project]

(10')

- Project title: “Potentials of cooperation with African Initiated Churches for sustainable development”
- Research project of the Faculty of Theology at Humboldt-University Berlin
- Collaboration with
 - *for West Africa*: Pentecostal Theological Seminary (Dr. Emmanuel Anim), Trinity Theological Seminary (Prof. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu), Redeemed Christian Bible College (Dr. Babatunde Adedibu), University of Lagos (Prof. Olufunke Adeboye).
 - *for South Africa*: University of Pretoria (Prof. Cas Wepener), University of the Western Cape (Prof. Ignatius Swart).
 - *for East Africa*: Organization of African Instituted Churches.
- Research is funded by **German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development**, i.e., the department within the German government responsible for international development cooperation.
- **Background**: recent interest in religious actors by German development cooperation; BMZ strategy on partnering with religious communities in development cooperation; previous research project “Are African churches potential partners for future development cooperation?” conducted in 2016.
- The **aim of the project** is to evaluate whether and in what way a fruitful cooperation between African Initiated Churches (Independent Churches and Pentecostal/Charismatic Charismatic) and German (and/or other) development agencies could be possible.
- We see it as highly important to include your **perspective** on
 - Major problems in people’s lives and what is needed for a good life.
 - Organizational structures and activities in your church, their goals and impacts.
 - Possible areas for cooperation.
 - The conditions under which a cooperation can be fruitful.
- We will **present our findings** to the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in a report.
- We have **no influence** on what the ministry will do with our findings at the end of the three-year period.

- The findings could have **policy relevance**; African churches in general could at a later stage potentially profit through the provision of expertise by professionals and/or finances, but this is outside our influence. It is important to note that there is no automatic link between the churches that are taking part in the research and projects and/or funding by the German Development Ministry.

[I.3 Consent]

(5')

- We would greatly appreciate to include your **expertise** and your **insight** in our assessment.
- We estimate the interview to take up to **two hours**.
- Your participation is entirely **voluntary**. The interview can be stopped at any time and you are free to refuse to answer any of the questions asked.
- There is **no immediate benefit** for you or your church because of the participation.
- The **information** provided will be solely used for the purposes of academic research. Your statements can be anonymized if you wish.
- If you are interested we can provide copies of the **transcripts** of the interview with you and the **publications** resulting from the project.
- Do you have any questions on the above?
- Do you agree to this interview? (*If yes, continue—if no, don't*)
- Would it be ok to **record the interview**? We would be happy to provide a copy of the transcription (*If not, ask for permission to take notes*).

II Introduction of the church

(30')

- We kindly ask you to briefly describe your church in general. What is specific about your church, and how is it different from other churches?
 - *Optional*: Why do people join your church?
 - What are the (five) fundamental values of your church?
 - What are the most important rules (or norms) for daily life you teach in your church?

[II.1 Structures]

Now we come to the structure of your church.

- How is the church structured, how is it governed?
 - How is the leadership appointed?
 - Does the church have written regulations?
 - Does your church have any of the following? (*Mention only those not already mentioned*: constitution, confessions, mission statement, written financial regulations)

[II.2 Relations with other churches and other religions]

Now we come to your church's relations with other churches.

- What is your relationship with other churches? Do you cooperate with them? If yes, in what ways?
 - How does your church relate to other churches and groups of churches (*for Nigeria*: e.g., other groups under CAN)?
- How would you describe your relations with other religions, e.g., Muslim communities?

[II.3 Relations of men and women]

Now we have a few questions on the relations of women and men in your church.

- Are there specific positions in the church only women or only men can have? Can women become pastors or bishops? Can the church leader be a woman? (*Probe for different positions of men and women and the reasons for that*)
- Do pastors have to be married? (*Optional*: Why?)

- Are there specific dress codes for men and women? (*Optional: Why?*)
- Do women and men sit separately in the church service? (*Optional: Why?*)
- What is your church's opinion on inter-confessional marriage? Would that be alright from the perspective of your church? What about inter-religious marriages?

We would now like to jump topics again. There is one question about same-sex relationships. Different churches have different stances towards homosexuality.

- In your view, how should the church deal with homosexuality?

III Understanding of development (15')

We now come to an entirely different topic.

- In your perspective, what is a good life?
 - *Optional: And how does one get there?*
- In your perspective, what are the major problems in people's lives?
 - Who is responsible for these problems?
 - (*If not mentioned: for many people poverty is a major problem*) In your view: What needs to be done to overcome poverty?
- What is your understanding of the concept of development?
- What would be the most important development programmes in your context?

IV Activities (30')

The next section is focused on your church's activities.

- How does your church support the community?
 - *If only spiritual support is mentioned ask for support in a material sense and give examples (e.g., education, health, economic empowerment, humanitarian services).*
- What structures do you have in place to organize/administer your social work? *E.g., how do these activities work, who runs them? (Ask for all social activities mentioned)*
- What is the target group of the activities? Are the activities open to non-members?
- How do you know that you achieve something with your activities/programmes (e.g., outcome monitoring)?
- In your church's activities, how do you ensure that all money is spent according to its purpose?
 - *Optional: How does your church administer its finances?*
- How are your activities different from the programmes of other churches (e.g., mainline churches) and NGOs?
- With whom do you cooperate in your programmes?
 - Would it be possible for you to cooperate with other religious communities, e.g., Islamic communities?
- How are the church's spiritual and ministry work and the church's social work inter-related? Is this interrelation important? Why?
- *Differentiate activities of the church and informal support among the membership: Aside from the activities run by your church, do members at your church support each other? How?*

V Possible cooperation with official development cooperation

[V.1 Churches' view on development cooperation] (15')

- In general, what is your view on the cooperation with international development agencies? Would you be interested in cooperation with international development agencies?
- From your perspective, do you see any points where cooperation with German development agencies would be possible and fruitful?

- What would be your priorities in case support became available? What would you do first?
- Would you be willing to adapt your structures if necessary?
 - *Only if not mentioned earlier:* Would you accept external auditing of your finances?

[V.2 SDGs and human rights]

(15')

Now we would like to talk about the **Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs). They are the continuation of the Millennium Development Goals and list 17 goals and 169 specific targets.

- Have you heard about them?
- We would like to know your opinion about those areas. Could you perhaps point out the five goals you would consider most important?

Show sheet with SDGs, go through the list and explain where necessary.

Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.

Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.

Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries.

Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

The Sustainable Development Goals are a very important basis for international development cooperation. Another important basis is human rights.

- What is your church's take on human rights?
 - *Optional:* How do you see human rights in relation to biblical scripture?

[V.3 Structural conditions]

(15')

- It is a characteristic of German public development cooperation with religious actors that development activities have to be separated from spiritual/ministry work. What is your perspective on this?
 - Would this be possible in your church's activities?

- Another characteristic is that the activities in general cannot be limited to a specific religious community. Would you be willing to open your activities to non-members (even members of other religions)?
- If German development agencies wanted to cooperate with you, what would be needed for a fruitful cooperation from your point of view?
 - What conditions would need to be in place on the side of the German development agencies for such cooperation to be fruitful?
 - What would be possible challenges?
- What advice would you give to international development agencies wanting to cooperate with African churches?

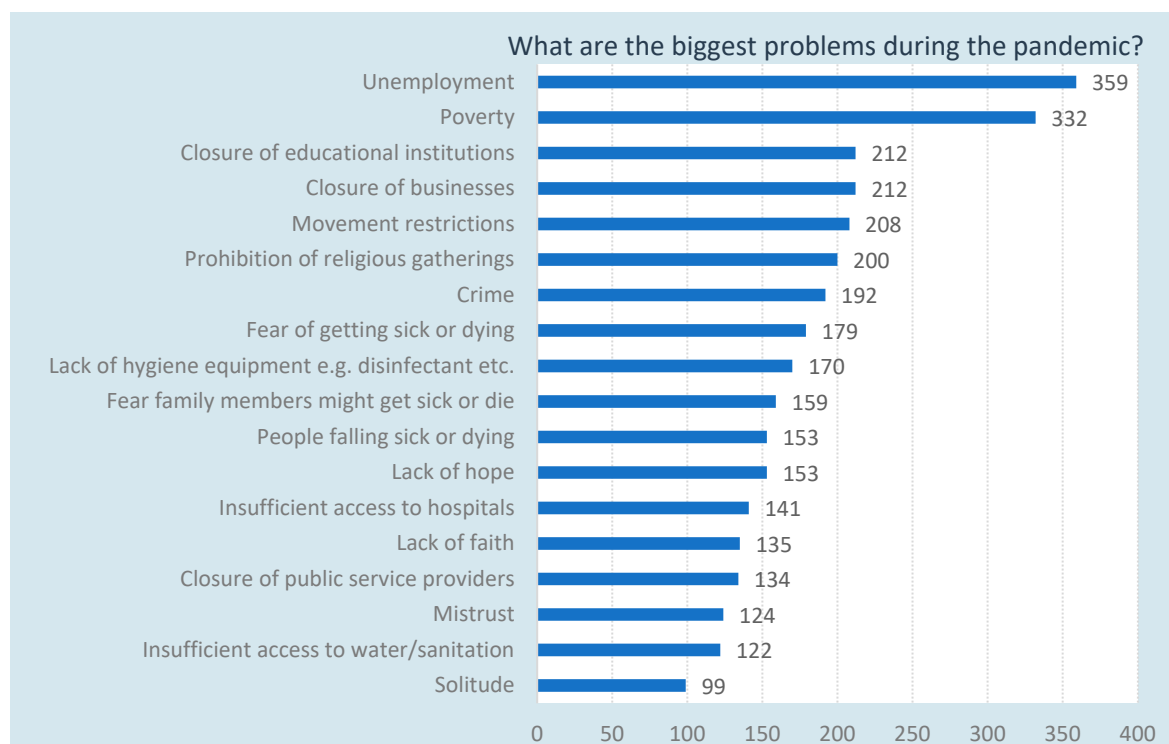
VI Conclusion

(5')

- Do you have any further questions or comments?
- **Will it be ok to quote you by name or should we rather quote you anonymously (e.g., a church leader said ...)**

Thank you for the interview

Appendix B. Answers from the African Continent to the Question “What Are the Biggest Problems during the Pandemic?”



Notes

- ¹ According to the WHO's information on intimate partner violence, the African region has the highest median prevalence of physical and sexual abuse compared to the Americas, Europe, Eastern Mediterranean, South East Asia, and Western Pacific region (<https://apps.who.int/violence-info/intimate-partner-violence/> accessed on 8 March 2023). The United Nations Development Programme (2019) Human Development Report finds that sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of inequality between women and men compared to Arab States, East Asia and the Pacific, Central and South Asia, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean.
- ² African Initiated Churches are churches that have been founded in Africa by Africans without direct links to mission-initiated churches. For an in-depth discussion of the term and its use, see Öhlmann et al. (2020).
- ³ Numbers after a decimal point are rounded for reasons of readability.

- 4 Interestingly, another female respondent from a Protestant church in Cameroon used almost exactly the same words to describe the situation: “It has always increased”.
- 5 On its blog, the Borgen Project, an American NGO fighting poverty, even points out that, in some cases, countries have “criminalize[d] violence against women in domestic violence laws. However”, according to the Borgen Project, “there is a low circumstance in enforcing and implementing these policies due to cultural traditions” (The Borgen Project 2020). See <https://borgenproject.org/violence-against-women-in-africa/> (accessed on 8 March 2023).
- 6 In the online survey, representatives of African Initiated Churches made up one-third of the Christian respondents from the African continent. They are a heterogeneous group and, like other religious leaders, many of them described domestic violence as being “low” or “medium”. They are not chosen as case studies here because the numbers suggest that they are more or less aware of or engaged in this topic than other Christian communities or religions. Rather, the interview material provides first-hand insight into existing perspectives and new interpretations and activities on this matter in individual churches in different African countries.
- 7 Lecture Series “African Independent and Pentecostal Churches’ Approaches to Theology” at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 2019 (Research Programme on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development 2019). Recording available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koy5l-DOLmk> (accessed on 21 November 2022).
- 8 Respondents were presented with a list of items including aspects such as “fear of getting sick or dying”, “solitude”, “movement restrictions”, and “prohibition of religious gatherings”. Multiple choice was possible.
- 9 Different dates are reported in the respective literature. According to Hinfelaar the movement “established itself as an independent Church” within “the time-span of two years” after Lenshina’s first vision in 1953 (Hinfelaar 1991, p. 99). Similarly, Hackett (1995) gives 1954 as the year of foundation. However, in a later publication Hackett notes that “the movement assumed independent status in 1959” (Hackett 2017, p. 247).
- 10 Interestingly, van Klinken’s description and interpretation seems to resonate with Nnaemeka’s concept of nego-feminism, a form of African feminism which, according to Nnaemeka, “knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts” (Nnaemeka 2004, p. 378). Following van Klinken’s interpretation, one could argue that the church leader “negotiates” around the concept of male headship to make space for women’s empowerment.

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