

Causes of incestuous rape in Zimbabwe: a case study of the Epworth community in Harare

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Abstract

This article¹ unveils the causes of incestuous rape in the Epworth community of Zimbabwe. It was premised on a feminist theoretical framework which was applied in light of the perspectives of African Christians, Shona indigenous religious people, and Shona culture. The research hopes to serve as a resource for victims of incestuous rape, scholars, religious leaders, community leaders, the government, those who sympathetically seek to support incestuous rape victims, and those who seek to become a voice of the voiceless to treat incestuous rape as a serious problem that needs serious attention. It addresses three major objectives: (1) to unveil how Epworth residents construe incestuous rape; (2) to expose the prevalence of incestuous rape cases in Epworth; and (3) to highlight the factors which lead to the occurrences of incestuous rape cases in Epworth. The study has established that the causes of incestuous rape in Epworth may vary, but most notably, are ascribed to some cultural and religious beliefs, practices, and perspectives.

Keywords

Incestuous rape; girl-child; women; victim; cause

¹ The article is based on a thesis titled *Socio-cultural and religious causes of rape in Zimbabwe: a case study of Epworth community*. It was submitted in August 2021 at the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology and Religion.

Introduction and background to the study

Incestuous rape is a global phenomenon that has become a cause for concern for many nations, including Zimbabwe. In modern-day Zimbabwe, it is one of the most prominent and prevalent crimes and is spreading like a malevolent cancer in communities. This is confirmed by Amos Mbodo, a magistrate of Mashonaland West Province, who expressed concern over the rise of cases of incestuous rape in Zimbabwe. Mbodo opines that “We had an increase in rape cases in the courts recently that are being perpetrated mainly by fathers who are raping their very own biological daughters.” To affirm this revelation, he laments, “This week we had two incestuous rape cases where one father raped his biological daughter, impregnated her and later raped the resultant grandchild” (*The Herald* 07/02/18). The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2020:n.p) also brings to light the fact that there are many incestuous rape cases that the Musasa Project is receiving.²

The enormity of the problem of incestuous rape in Zimbabwe is expressed by Manyonganise and Museka (2010:236), who point out that “incestuous rape has become ubiquitous to the extent of forming newspaper headlines nearly every day.” This is supported by *The Herald* (25/06/10) that a day never passes without reading about incestuous rape in Zimbabwe. Makuvaza (2014:24) echoes similar sentiments when he says that one hardly reads the Zimbabwean electronic and print newspapers without reading about incestuous rape. *The Sunday Mail* in-depth of 19–25 September 2010 also expresses the shocking magnitude of incestuous rape cases in Zimbabwe by the headline which reads: “Morals gone to the dogs: Incestuous relationships sprouting like weeds.” Although the exact statistics of incestuous rape cases in Zimbabwe eluded the researchers, these submissions are sufficient to demonstrate the gravity of the problem. This constitutes a real problem that demands urgent attention; hence, the researchers decided to conduct an academic study in the Epworth community to investigate the causes of this social ill.

² Musasa Project is a non-governmental organization in Zimbabwe which deals with issues of violence against girls and women [Online] Available: <https://www.womankind.org.uk/partners/musasa-project/> [Accessed: 22/08/22].

Problem statement

The problem identified in this study also emanated from a research on the topic “Socio-Cultural and Religious causes of rape in Zimbabwe: A case study of Epworth Community” (Chakanya 2022). This research revealed that incestuous rape has disproportionately affected the lives of the victims in Epworth to the extent that many of them had suffered or are suffering from traumatic experiences of this form of sexual abuse. These victims had no one to share their harrowing ordeals with as some of them had disclosed that their pastors had no relevant skills to deal with their experiences. After failing to get the required assistance from their pastors, a number of victims resorted to committing suicide, leaving notes which expressed the horrendous experiences which they had gone through. According to *The Herald* (04/05/18), of the numerous reported suicide cases that took place in Epworth, some are linked to sexual abuse. Likewise, because of this deficiency of the required pastoral care, some turned to prostitution, while others left their homes and became “street kids”. These observations clearly indicate that incestuous rape is a serious problem in Epworth, creating insatiable desires in the researchers’ minds to delve deeper into the root causes of this vice in this particular community of Zimbabwe. This has been realized through the following three objectives: (1) to unveil how Epworth residents construe incestuous rape; (2) to expose the prevalence of incestuous rape cases in Epworth; and (3) to highlight the factors which lead to the occurrences of incestuous rape cases in Epworth.

Research questions

The main research question which undergirded this study was: “What are the causes of incestuous rape in the Epworth community?” while the research sub-questions were: (1) What are the circumstances and surrounding factors which lead to the commission of incestuous rape in Epworth? (2) How do people in Epworth construe incestuous rape? (3) Which gender or social status constitutes the majority of the victims of incestuous rape in Epworth? (4) Which age group is mainly affected by incestuous rape in Epworth?

Significance of the study

This study is significant in so far as it contributes to the body of knowledge by raising awareness on the problem of incestuous rape in Epworth. It is also significant because it is an invaluable resource for survivors of incestuous rape, academics, counsellors, community leaders, the government, and other people who considerately seek to support incestuous rape victims (Chakanya 2022:15). Moreover, it is important because it empowers the victims themselves with the knowledge on what constitutes incestuous rape and what to do when they have been sexually abused by their blood relatives. It also informs church leaders and pastors on how to deal with cases of incestuous rape that occur to members of their church denominations and to the community around them.

Location of the study

This study was conducted in Epworth, one of Zimbabwe's congested semi-urban informal settlements which is located 15km south-east of Harare, the capital city (Mujinga 2018; *Newsday* 16/01/13). The reason for selecting this community is that it is one of the well-known "hotspots" for many social ills, which include incestuous rape (I AM ZIMBABWE TRUST 2022; Chakanya 2018:17). According to *Zim-Metro* (04/01/22), incestuous rape cases are rampant in this community. The same source of 10 June 2016 had also reported about a 50-year-old Epworth man who had raped his biological daughter. Moreover, the *Newsday* (07/02/20) carried a story of an 11-year-old Epworth girl who was raped by her uncle. Furthermore, the *H-Metro* (23/08/22) presented a story of a 37-year-old Epworth man who had been accused of allegedly raping his 15-year-old daughter over a period of three years. In addition, Manyonganise and Museka (2010:233) bemoaned the rise of incestuous rape cases in Epworth. These few examples of incestuous rape cases occurring in this community are just the tip of the iceberg and are extremely astounding, disturbing, and horrendous.

Definition of key terms

This study considers the term "incestuous rape" as unlawful intentional sexual intercourse with one's blood relative without his or her legal or valid consent. The Shona people call it *makunakuna* (Manyonganise & Museka 2010:228). For the purposes of this study, the word "woman" refers to an adult female, while the term "girl-child" denotes a female child. Cognizant of the fact that males can also be incestuously abused, this study considers the term "victim" as a woman or a girl-child whose life has been harmed as a result of incestuous rape. The term "cause" refers to anyone or anything that acts, happens, or exists to give rise to an action, or a phenomenon, or condition.

Research methodology

The main research tools that were employed to collect data from the sources were one-to-one unstructured interviews, qualitative questionnaires (QQs), focus group discussions (FGDs), existing published or unpublished documents, and internet research engines, such as Google Scholar and *Ebscohost* (Chakanya 2022:ii). One-to-one interview sessions that were conducted with people in Epworth consisted of the following: 5 teachers, 3 pastors, 15 victims (including commercial sex workers), 5 medical practitioners, 2 social workers, 1 professional counsellor, 1 law enforcement agent, and 12 ordinary members of the Epworth community who were randomly selected. Ten QQs were utilized to collect data from those who were not comfortable to share their experiences in one-to-one interview sessions, especially the victims. 10 Epworth MCZ³ Ruwadzano⁴ members,

3 MCZ refers to Methodist Church in Zimbabwe.

4 MCZ fellowship of Christian women (MCZ Ruwadzano/Manyano Administration and Policy 2014)

10 Epworth MCZ GCU⁵ members, 6 Chizungu⁶ MCZ BCU⁷ members and 5 Chizungu MCZ MCU⁸ members participated in FGDs.

To avoid biased conclusions, the researchers intensified the principles of the phenomenological approach, such as, *epoche* and empathetic interpolation, which enabled them to draw useful information from the participants rather than imposing their own personal experiences. In the sample of incestuous rape victims, all the participants were females, and their lived experiences were detailed. The age groups of the participants ranged from 18 to 60 years. All of them were literate and could, therefore, comprehend the questionnaires. This was very necessary for this study because it facilitated the smooth gathering of the data and its categorization in the process of transcription and coding. Only twenty-five percent of the participants were gainfully employed, such as, teachers, a law enforcement agent, health practitioners, social workers, a professional counsellor, and pastors. Thirty-two percent of them were entrepreneurs or were engaged in some form of work commonly referred to as “piece jobs”. Forty-seven percent of them were unemployed. Sixty-five percent of the participants were married, while others were still single, widowed, or divorced by the time when the researchers conducted the interview sessions. Two percent of the participants indicated that they were African Traditional Religious people, while the rest claimed to belong to Christianity. This demographic information has provided a firm basis from which the necessary and valuable information regarding the causes of incestuous rape in Epworth was obtained.

This study was controlled mostly by four principles of ethics, namely: anonymity, privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent. For the purposes of analysing the data for this study, the researchers applied

5 MCZ Girls Christian Union [Fellowship of MCZ girls] (MCZ GCU Constitution 2014)

6 Chizungu is one of the MCZ Churches situated in one of six sections of Epworth; namely, Chiremba, Chizungu, Overspill, Domboramwari, Glenwood and Muguta.

7 MCZ Boys Christian Union [Fellowship of MCZ boys] (MCZ Boys Christian Union 2014)

8 MCU Men's Christian Union [Fellowship of MCZ men] [Online]. Available: <https://themethodistchurchinzimbabwe.wordpress.com/organizations.com/organizations/men-christian-union/>. [Accessed: 29/12/19].

thematic analysis whereby they coded and classified the responses in themes related to incestuous rape (Dawson 2002:155; Boyatzis 1998).

Considering the fact that a “theoretical framework is the *conditio sine qua non* (that without which not) of any modern research” (Gondongwe 2011:21), the theoretical framework which guided this study and provided a philosophical basis for the understanding of incestuous rape was a feminist theory. Gondongwe’s assertion is reinforced by Maluleke (2000:50), who postulated that, in any modern academic research, “to leave a theoretical framework out is like stepping into a war zone without ammunition”. According to Biri and Mapuranga (2013:6–13) and Kendall (2001:359), feminist theory was formulated as a global movement which advocates for equality between men and women in any given society (See also Brigham 1991:462; Russel & Clackson 1966:257). For Brownmiller (1975:15), this theory suggests that power and dominance are the major motives of rape; hence, it was formulated to emancipate females from that male domination. For this theory to be relevant to the needs and concerns of females in Africa, Zimbabwe in particular, this study applied this theory in the perspectives of African Christians, Shona indigenous religious people, and Shona culture with regards to the problem of incestuous rape in Epworth.

Results and discussion

Religious beliefs and practices as incubators of incestuous rape in Epworth

(a) Shona indigenous religious beliefs and practices

Interviewee 1 (12/11/21) said, “A person cannot rape his biological daughter if it is not due to magical powers (*mushonga*)”. Another victim alleged that when her grandfather was sexually abusing her, he was telling her that he was fulfilling certain religious rituals (Q1). *The Newsday* (09/04/19) supports these sentiments by claiming that incestuous rape is attributed to magical powers and religious rituals. *The Herald* (07/02/18) echoes similar sentiments by revealing that most of the incestuous rape cases reported in Zimbabwean courts are linked to witchcraft and religious rituals. Aschwanden (1989:474) and Bourdillon (1990:189) concur with this view by asserting that “incestuous rape is inextricably bound to fertility rituals

or crop enhancement ritual (*divisi* in Shona) [for communal farming or small-scale retailing] and witchcraft.” *The Herald* (22/11/06) associates the activity with *zvikwambo* (goblins). All these findings demonstrate that incestuous rape is associated with magical powers, witchcraft, or some form of religious rituals.

Six focus group participants (14/11/21) revealed that there are some bogus traditional healers (*n’anga dzenhema*) who misinform their immature, naïve and unsuspecting adherences by prescribing sexual intercourse with their virgin biological daughters for their AIDS diseases to be cured. This discovery was also echoed in the sentiments raised by the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA) spokesperson, George Kandiero, who pointed out that some bogus traditional healers have the tendency to mislead their HIV/AIDS clients to rape their biological children whom they presume to be virgins for them to be cured (*The Chronicle* 23/12/19). Manyonganise and Museka (2010:235) air similar sentiments when they state that some “bogus traditional healers are on record for prescribing sex with a virgin daughter as a curative measure for HIV and AIDS patients”. For Vickers (2006) and Kalengyo et al. (2013:70), this position is grounded on the belief that the blood that is produced in the process can cleanse the infected person’s blood from the disease. This way of thinking is also buttressed by *The Bulawayo 24 News* (22/07/20), which presents a shocking story of a 28-year-old HIV-positive Epworth man who was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison for raping his niece claiming that he did so for his AIDS disease to be cured.

Five focus group participants (FGDs 28/11/21) have also brought to light the fact that some of the self-proclaimed traditional healers ill-advised their ignorant followers that they can accumulate wealth or blessings through engaging in sexual intercourse with their own virgin biological daughters. *The Chronicle* (24/03/14) supports this view by mentioning that “some traditional healers take advantage of the ignorance of some unsuspecting people by ill-advising them to engage in sexual intercourse with their blood relatives to receive blessings”. *The Newsday* (23/12/19) airs similar sentiments by stating that “there is a widespread belief which is perpetuated by traditional healers who are ill-advising some fathers to become intimate with their virgin biological daughters for them to have blessings like to yield a great harvest.” *The Daily News* (10/06/16) and *The*

Zim-Metro (10/06/16) substantiate the existence of this harmful practice in Epworth by presenting a shocking story whereby a 50-year-old Epworth man was brought to the Harare Magistrate court and pleaded guilty for allegedly raping his biological daughter after having been ill-advised by a certain bogus traditional healer to engage in sexual intercourse with his own biological virgin daughter for him to become rich. These findings clearly demonstrate that many incestuous rape occurrences in Zimbabwean communities, particularly Epworth, are strongly linked to some Shona indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Also, since, according to Kambarami (2006:2), “in Shona culture, patriarchal practices shape and perpetuate gender inequality and strip women of any form of control over their sexuality”, obviously, these victims could not challenge such unscrupulous behaviours. Using feminist lenses, this confirms that incestuous rape in Epworth is engrained in patriarchy.

(b) Christian beliefs and practices as perpetrators of incestuous rape

One of the victims, Shupikai,⁹ wondered if there is any true or genuine Christian family in the world. She disclosed that she had been raised in a Christian family who regularly attended church services, and her father was known as a very committed member who was regarded as one of the significant leaders or pillars of that particular church denomination. She, however, revealed that he sexually molested her when she was eleven years old, a clear indication that church members should not be exempted from the factors which promote the occurrences of incestuous rape cases in Epworth (Q2). This insinuates that too much trust given to some individuals because of their religious backgrounds or affiliations can promote the occurrences of this particular vice. More so, it shows that incestuous rape can also occur within church-oriented homes.

Shupikai further revealed that the more she remembered what had happened to her, the more she realized that God did not care for his people at all. For her, since God is believed to be all-knowing, all-powerful and all-caring, he should have avoided all that she had encountered. She further pointed out that if there is a God who really cares then the one whom she had faith in was not the real one. Furthermore, she argued that, because

9 * “not her real name”

of what her biological father had done to her, her heart bleeds whenever she hears her fellow church members referring to God as the father. She also lamented that referring to God as a male strongly hurt her because the one who had sexually abused her was a man. She finally suggested that the sex organs of all incestuous rape perpetrators should be castrated or amputated following Jesus' teaching, which says, "And if your hand, even your right-hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" (Mt 5:30) (Q2). This participant's responses explicitly show that incestuous rape can greatly affect the victim's faith in the omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing) and omnibenevolent (all-caring) God. They also exposed the fact that some theological terms that are predominantly used in Christian circles can disproportionately affect victims of sexual abuse. Moreover, they suggested a radical deterrent measure to the problem of incestuous rape in Epworth.

Interviewees 4, 6, 7, 8 and 10 (12&14/11/21) have exposed that 80% percent of church denominations in Epworth are silent on the issue of incestuous rape. This is echoed by Dzinavane (2016:59), who points out that, in Zimbabwe, the church is often silent or does not pay attention to issues of sexual violence. The reason for this silence cited by the interviewees is the perspective or belief that the church is holy; hence, such immoral practices are not found in it. Another reason that they mentioned has to do with trying to maintain the integrity of the church as well as that of the families of the members where the abuse might have occurred. According to Hancock and Mains (2013:137), "the church must become sensitive to the fact that child molesters and incestuous fathers often are church members". Chitando and Hadebe (2009:156) and Feltoe (2019:n.p) concur with these views by mentioning that the problem that the church faces is that, in most cases, perpetrators of incestuous rape are recognized as committed, dedicated, and significant members of the church; hence, to have them brought to book is deemed as tarnishing the image of the church. This culture of silence regarding this particular social ill can also be mirrored in the book of 2 Samuel 13:22, where David resorted to silence in an effort to protect the integrity of his family after his daughter, Tamar, had been incestuously raped by her half-brother, Amnon. Obviously, failure to talk about incestuous rape in church environments can indirectly contribute to the occurrences of incestuous rape in Zimbabwean communities. It can

also result in a lack of knowledge of what constitutes it. Moreover, victims will definitely suffer or die in silence.

The FGDs (24/11/21) highlighted the fact that some church members misinterpret Matthew 18:15–22 and Luke 6:27–37 which talk about Jesus encouraging his followers to unconditionally forgive those who offend them; hence, they put emphasis on the importance of forgiveness. Some participants revealed that for church members to be considered true Christians they should be able to unconditionally forgive their offenders, including those who sexually abuse them. This demonstrates that there are some biblical teachings which are being misinterpreted in order to silence the victims. It also links the theology of forgiveness with the occurrences of incestuous rape cases.

Another mainly misinterpreted text that was exposed in the discussion is 1 Corinthians 6:1–7 in which the author was discouraging Christians at Corinth from reporting their fellow Christians to secular courts. Owing to the misinterpretation of this text, the presented data reveals that some victims fail to report cases of incestuous rape to the police and resort to dealing with them at the household level or in the church (See also Chakanya 2022:108). According to Interviewee 2 [police officer] (12/11/21), because of this belief, they are very few such cases which have been reported to the police by church members. Without a doubt, this can also perpetuate incestuous rape culture in the families of church members and the community around them.

Also, the misinterpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 which reads, "Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak ... If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church" (NIV) is blamed for perpetuating rape culture in Epworth (Interviewees 21, 22 and 23). As a result of this misinterpretation, when it comes to dealing with incestuous rape cases in the church, it becomes a challenge to some victims because some church denominations do not allow them to speak in the church; hence, the social ill continues to be sustained. This exposes the continuation of male-domination in Christianity; hence, the need for feminist theologians to continue challenging African women to refuse to be silenced and to continue crying for justice.

Closely related to bogus traditional healers, as discussed in the preceding section, some focus group participants (FGDs 22/11/21) revealed that, in Epworth, there are some fake prophets who are taking advantage of ignorant unsuspecting church members by ill-advising them through fallacious prophetic dreams to indulge in sexual intercourse with their close relatives in order for them to overcome evil or receive blessings. Some of their responses are: “Some self-proclaimed prophets are misinforming their clients through fake prophetic dreams to have sex with their blood relatives for them to be protected from evil or misfortunes”; “There are some fake prophets who prescribe through dreams sex with their blood relatives in order for them to receive blessings and to acquire wealth”. Interviewee 3 (16/04/22) confirmed the existence of such religious beliefs and practices and linked them mainly to African-initiated church denominations, such as, Johanne Marange and Johanne Masowe. All these findings are a clear testimony to the fact that some ill-advice from bogus prophets is implicated in the occurrences of incestuous rape cases in Epworth.

Cultural factors

Shona cultural beliefs and practices as seedbeds of incestuous rape

Interviewees 9, 11 and 12 (26/04/21) asserted that one of the traditional Shona cultural practices which perpetuate incestuous rape culture in Epworth is *muzukuru mukadzi* (female grandchildren or nieces are playfully regarded as wives by their grandfathers or uncles, respectively). For these participants, some grandfathers and uncles take advantage of this cultural practice to sexually abuse their grandchildren and nieces, respectively. Mpofo (2002:237) confirms the existence of this practice in Shona culture by mentioning that “in the Shona traditional practice, there is the saying *muzukuru mukadzi* (your sister’s daughter is your wife)”. This practice is affirmed by the former Zimbabwean Minister of Health and Child Care, David Parirenyatwa, who said, “... some of our traditions are strong, we say, *muzukuru mukadzi’ watora kamuzukuru kogara pamakumbo ndopamakumbo ndopamakumbo, makumbo*” (“a niece or a grandchild is regarded as a wife, putting her on your lap, and the practice continues until it ends up in a sexual abuse”) (*Nehanda Radio News* 14/05/17). One victim, Nyarai*, also confirmed this by disclosing that her

uncle used to call her his “wife” and fondle her breasts, the activities which led him to rape her when she was 14 years old (Q3). These findings clearly demonstrate that the occurrences of incestuous rape cases in Zimbabwean communities, including Epworth, are linked to the manipulation of some traditional Shona cultural practices.

Interviewee 13 revealed that, in the Shona culture, fathers address their daughters as “mothers-in-law” (*vanaambhuya*), parents address their sons as “fathers-in-law” (*vanaatezvava*), and brothers address their sisters as “mothers-in-law”. The existence of this traditional Shona cultural practice is also confirmed by Manyonganise and Museka (2010:227), Chakanya (2022:211), and Makaudze (2015:147). For Chakanya and Makaudze, in the Shona culture, mothers-in-law and fathers-in-law are highly revered and respected people to their sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, respectively, to the extent that, in some instances, some sons-in-law are not allowed to have any physical contact with their mothers-in-law, including shaking of hands. Accordingly, regarding one’s sister or daughter as *ambhuya* (mother-in-law) clearly defines the distant association that should be between the two (*H-Metro* 21/09/21). As noted by Chakanya (2022:100), this situation minimizes the chances of their much interaction, which can be a breeding ground for incestuous activities; hence, not all Shona cultural beliefs and practices should be painted with a black brush (Kalengyo et al. 2013:106) since there are some which can be beneficial in curbing the occurrences of incestuous rape cases. Be that as it may, in a way, the practice reinforces the harmful cultural practice of *muzukuru mukadzi*, which the preceding paragraph has referred to as a hatching ground for incestuous rape.

Interviewees 14 and 15 (12/11/21) exposed yet another traditional Shona cultural practice of *muzukuru mudonzvo wasekuru wenzimbe wekuti kana vakanzwa nzara vanotyora vodya* (“a female grandchild or niece is playfully regarded as grandfather or uncle’s walking stick of sugarcane which he can peel and eat when he feels hungry”). According to these participants, under the guise of this traditional Shona cultural practice, some unscrupulous men go to the extreme and end up raping their female grandchildren or nieces. This insinuates that this particular cultural practice gives men every liberty to indulge in sexual intercourse with their granddaughters or nieces should they wish to do so. The existence of this practice in Shona societies is confirmed by Mpofo (2002:237), who also mentions that *muzukuru*

mudonzvo wenzimbe, ukanzwa nzara unomenya uchidya is one of the traditional Shona cultural practices in Zimbabwe. These findings explicitly show that some traditional Shona cultural practices are very harmful because they foment incestuous rape. To substantiate the existence of this harmful traditional Shona cultural practice in Epworth, one of the victims alleged that she had been raped under the guise of this practice by her late mother's blood brother when she was twelve years old (Q4).

Interviewee 16 [a parent] (28/05/21) revealed, "My daughter was sexually abused by my blood brother whom we were staying with." Another victim, Tamburai* had this to say, "When my mother passed on in 2016, I was left under the custody of my maternal grandmother who resides here in Epworth, where I was sexually molested by my uncle who happens to be a biological brother to my late mother" (Q5). Interviewee 17 [a nurse] (06/04/21) revealed that rape at the hands of grandfathers and other relatives is one of the major causes of pregnancies in girls who are between 13 and 17 years of age. These findings have exposed the extended family concept which is ingrained in Shona culture as one of the perpetrators of rape in Epworth. Since, according to Amos (2013:n.p) and Chitando and Hadebe (2009:149), an African family is identified by the extended family concept; after the death of parents, some relatives, such as, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, take the orphans into their custody. Chitando and Hadebe further point out that, in Shona culture, "in the event of the death of a parent, children are taken by the relatives of the deceased and incorporated into their families as part of their own children." Obviously, in such a situation, with the limited accommodation in Epworth where parents and children sleep in one room or in a room that is demarcated by a curtain, as revealed by Chakanya (2022:238), some unscrupulous men end up sexually abusing those female orphans who are under their custody. This is a situation whereby those who are expected to protect female orphans become their sexual predators.

One victim [A sex worker] disclosed, "I resorted to sex work because my oldest blood brother, who was taking care of us after the death of our parents, had sexually abused me" (Q6). Another victim also revealed, "Although I am now married, when I was twelve years old, I was sexually abused by my sibling who was taking care of us after our remaining parent had gone to Australia to look for greener pastures" (Q7). These findings show

that the child-headed family concept is also attributed to the occurrences of incestuous rape in Epworth. This Shona cultural concept entails the unavailability of parents or guardians due to various reasons leaving no one to take care of their children (Justice for Children Trust 2012:n.p). Some parents might have gone abroad to search for greener pastures, as claimed by Q7, while others might have passed on, as stated by Q6. Some may be alive and also be in the country but spend much of their time at their workplaces, leaving their children under the custody of the housemaids who may not be able to inculcate proper moral values in them (*The Newsday* 26/08/11; *The Sunday Mail* 30/04/17). The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the significance of the extended family concept has ceased to be as functional as it had been in the pre-colonial era in Zimbabwe (Manyonganise and Museka 2010:227). This non-functionality owes to various factors, which include the influence of modernity, globalization, and other cultures and religions (Ringson & Chereni 2020:106; Gwakwa 2020:361). As stated by Mujinga (2018:8), Epworth is a multicultural and multi-faith-densely populated suburb. Inevitably, some orphans end up taking care of their siblings, better known as child-headed families, which is also a good recipe for incestuous rape.

The focus group participants revealed that some Shona cultural practices promote the culture of silence regarding incestuous rape (FGDs 24/11/21).¹⁰ For them, this is evidenced by some Shona proverbs which are inculcated in children from a very tender age, such as: *chakafukidza dzimba matenga* (homes are covered by roofs), implying that every family has its secrets or challenges which should be concealed in the family-fold; *usafukure hapwa* (do not open your armpits in public) which means that people should not reveal their secrets to the public; and *usavhiire chidembo paruzhinji* (Do not skin a civet cat in public) meaning that people should deal with their problems in the privacy of their homes. For this reason, if there is anything for the Shona family to be shared with "outsiders"¹¹ it is the father who should be the spokesperson, a clear testimony of the patriarchal mentality which gives men power to control women (Chirongoma 2006). This demonstrates that the culture of silence that is ingrained in patriarchy is a

¹⁰ See also Rutsate (2018:n.p.)

¹¹ Those who are not members of that particular family.

very powerful tool which oppresses women and girls who may be sexually abused by their male relatives. Obviously, because of this culture of silence, most victims find it suffocating to speak out or report to the police about their experiences; hence, incestuous rape cases are perpetuated.

Interviewees 18, 19 and 20 noted that, in Shona culture, children are taught to respect and obey adults. This shows that, because of this culture, children are not empowered to challenge or question bad things which their elders do; hence, many children are easily manipulated psychologically or physically. According to Dzinavane (2016:59), some adults take advantage of this respect and obedience to instill fear in girl children, thereby strengthening patriarchy which Brownmillar (1975:15) blames as the major cause of sexual abuse of women and girls. One of the victims had this to say, “When my father sexually abused me, he used to tell me not to worry about it because *ihuku yakadya mazai ayo* (it is a hen which ate its own eggs)” (Q8). This insinuates that the fact that the victim was his biological child gave him every right to do to her whatever he wished. Surprisingly, such fathers just decide to turn a blind eye to a Shona proverb which says, *mbeva yemumusha haidyiwe nekuti igonzo* (a mouse that is found at where people reside should not be eaten because it is a rat), which implies that one should not engage in sexual intercourse with his or her blood relative. This victim further revealed that, owing to this “self-proclaimed right”, her father (the perpetrator) also used to tell her that once she disclosed the abuse to anyone bad things would happen to her.

Research findings

Utilizing a feminist theoretical framework, this study has interrogated several factors which perpetuate incestuous rape culture in the Epworth community. It has been established that the causes of this vice in this community may vary, but most notably are ascribed to some cultural and religious beliefs, practices, and perspectives. It has been established that the sanity and purity of the sexual lives of women and girls are sacrificed on altars of religious and cultural male bigots. Those revealed as religious factors to the occurrences of incestuous rape cases are divided into categories, namely, Shona indigenous religious factors and Christian factors. Shona indigenous factors have been exposed as (1) magical powers,

(2) witchcraft, (3) some form of rituals, (4) bogus traditional healers who have the habit of prescribing sexual intercourse with one’s virgin biological daughter as a curative measure for HIV/AIDS patients, and (5) fake traditional healers who ill-advise their ignorant clients that they can accumulate wealth or blessings through engaging in sexual intercourse with their own biological virgin daughters.

Those revealed as Christian factors to the problem of incestuous rape are: (1) trying to exempt church claiming that such immoral practices cannot be found in it because it is perceived as holy, (2) too much trust given to some individuals because of their religious backgrounds or affiliations, (3) the church’s silence on the problem, (4) misinterpretation of some Biblical texts which results in the perpetuation of incestuous rape occurrences, (5) failure of some church members to report cases of incest to the police and resort to deal with them at the household level or in the church a situation which perpetuates their occurrences, and (6) some fake prophets who are taking advantage of ignorant unsuspecting church members by ill-advising them to indulge in sexual intercourse with their close relatives in order for them to overcome evil or receive blessings. These Shona indigenous religious factors and Christian factors clearly demonstrate that this study is grounded in religious studies. They also show that religion has been contaminated by oppressive and inhuman patriarchal philosophies which have nothing to do with God.

Those relating to Shona cultural beliefs and practices are: (1) manipulation of some Shona practices, sayings, and proverbs (2) negative effects of extended family concept (3) child-headed family environments, (4) failure to report incestuous rape to the law enforcement agents, and (5) a patriarchal mentality.

This study has also highlighted that the main perpetrators in the majority of incestuous rape cases are male adults, and most often, the victims are girl-children whose age groups are between 7 and 17 years. Moreover, it has demonstrated that many females have once experienced incestuous abuse in one way or another. It has further demystified the widespread

myths or misconceptions that rape can only be perpetrated by strangers.¹² Furthermore, it has exposed that, although the main victims of incestuous rape are poor people, the social ill cuts across ethnic, class and social boundaries. In addition, it has revealed that gone are the days when male relatives, such as, grandfathers, uncles, brothers and even fathers, are considered fully trusted custodians of girl-children.

In view of the fact that it is pointless to identify a problem and fail to proffer solutions to it, the researchers made the following recommendations or suggestions:

7. Distress call lines, emergency telephone helplines, and rape helplines should be established in complex communities like Epworth in order to empower victims of incestuous rape.
8. Victims should also utilize available social media platforms to report all sexual abuses.
9. All cultural and religious beliefs and practices which lead to incestuous rape need serious interrogation.
10. All cultural and religious norms and values that have trodden on the rights of women should be blotted out and obliterated. This should begin in the church and then spread throughout the world.
11. There should be a serious detoxification of scriptures through progressive and transformational exegesis to highlight the shortcomings of some texts and doctrines which regard women as inferior.
12. There is a need for feminist theologians to scale up their efforts in dismantling patriarchal mentality in both religious and cultural circles. Men should also be involved in this struggle.
13. Tougher and deterrent sentences should be given to perpetrators of incestuous rape. In one of the questionnaires, the victim suggested that the perpetrators' sex organs should be castrated or amputated (Q2), a suggestion which sounds to be very radical. Be that as it may,

¹² See <https://www.acesdv.org/about-sexual-domestic-violence/sexual-violence-myths-misconceptions/>

this proposal can be a very useful deterrent measure to the problem of incestuous rape in Epworth.

14. Girl-children must be educated and sensitized about their sexual rights and what sexual abuse entails. In the process, they should be encouraged to report any form of sexual abuse they encounter, even if it is being perpetrated by their close relatives.
15. Shelter should be provided for victims of rape so that those who have been sexually abused by their close relatives do not return to the same environments in which they had been abused. Also, if children are assured of their safety and protection, they cannot hesitate to report the abuses they encounter. Moreover, this avoids victimization of the victims by their perpetrators and protects them from further abuses.

Conclusion

The study has provided the necessary firewood for the research: the *sitz im leben* (context), the significance, and the purpose of the research. The geographical, religious, and socio-cultural descriptions of the location of the study have been presented. Scientific bedrock for the study has been provided, such as, a research theory and methods and tools that had been employed to gather data. Both data presentation and data analysis have been done. The results of the study have indicated that incestuous rape is indeed a serious and pervasive crime in Epworth and that some cultural and religious beliefs and practices perpetuate its occurrences in this particular community. They have also revealed that incestuous rape is strictly forbidden and considered immoral in both Christianity and Shona traditional religions as well as in Shona culture. Moreover, they have exposed the fact that incestuous rape continues to be sustained through patriarchy. Notwithstanding the fact that this study aimed to unveil the root causes of this problem in Epworth, some measures that can be taken to address this have also been proposed. With the information presented in this research, the researchers want to encourage the communities, community leaders and government agencies, feminist theologians, church leaders and pastors to peruse this data in order to establish fundamental principles to address the scourge of incestuous rape. It is important to note

that although this study's focus was on Epworth, its findings may also have relevance to other parts of Zimbabwe or the global society.

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