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**Tactical Activism**  
**Religion, Emotion, and Political Engagement in Gender Transformative**  
**Interventions**

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**Abstract**

This article examines religious leaders' engagements with gender transformative activism during prevention training workshops for sexual and gender-based violence. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in 2017 and 2018 in a South African NGO that promotes gender equality and human rights across Africa. My aim is twofold: to explore the tensions between the private and public dimensions of religious leaders' engagement with gender transformative activism; and to demonstrate how they navigate those tensions by forging an 'in-between' language and social space conforming new meanings and practices that ought to transform their gendered relations. I argue that doing so enables leaders to become tactical when engaging with gender activism in adverse religious contexts. By acting in the form of tactical activism, they establish interstices where religious and secular stances on gender can intersect whilst at the same time coping with the difficulties of inducing change in the given patriarchal structures.

**Keywords**

gender, development, social transformation, religion, activism, masculinities

## **Telling the Right Story in the Right Way**

- 'I'm here to learn how to be a man'.
- 'I am here to associate with people who are different'.
- 'I want to make a difference in people's lives, to become a better person'.
- 'I've been in the sin industry for many years. I'm here to start a new journey'.

Johannesburg, 27/06/2017

I collected the statements above during a three-day prevention training workshop for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)<sup>i</sup> at the eMseni Christian Conference Centre in Benoni, South Africa.<sup>ii</sup> A workshop held specifically for religious leaders, the event was organised by Sonke Gender Justice (SGJ), a South African-based NGO that works across the African continent to promote gender equality, prevent domestic and sexual violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS. This intervention programme followed the so-called gender transformative approach by engaging the workshop participants in individual and group exercises that seek to transform gender roles and to achieve more gender-equitable relationships and opportunities. In addition, participants were expected to become advocates for gender equality and social justice by learning how to identify and address gender inequalities in their religious communities.

Over the past two decades, development and human rights organisations, such as SGJ, have increasingly included religious actors in their strategy plans and partnerships worldwide (Petersen and Le Moigne 2016). This trend has rearranged the relationship between the secular and the religious in the public sphere, bringing forth new forms of political engagement at local and global levels (Marshall 2016; Tomalin 2015; Clarke 2007). In the recent past, these religio-secular<sup>iii</sup> partnerships on the African continent have turned their attention to the field of gender, particularly aiming at gender sensitisation and training workshops addressing SGBV. Such partnerships create the most relevant current analytical frameworks that challenge secularisation theories often limited by the North American and European debates (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012).

This chapter examines the ways in which religious leaders engage with gender activism and gender transformation during sexual and gender-based violence prevention

training workshops. My aim is twofold: firstly, to explore the tensions between the private and public dimensions of ‘gender activism’ in contexts marked by religio-secular partnerships; and secondly, to demonstrate how religious leaders navigate these tensions by co-constituting a particular language and social space that brings forth new meanings and ways to engage with gender issues. The data examined to do so comprise institutional reports as well as the protocols of my participant observations and interviews with religious leaders that were collected during training workshops and conferences implemented by Sonke in South Africa, Mozambique, and Democratic Republic of Congo. In the analysis to follow, I focus less on the subjective experiences and transformative efficacy of such activities and more on the ways in which the participants’ emotions are being mediated through specific norms of how one ought to feel (\*Author) and how one ought to engage with gender activism and gender transformation.

In the workshop interventions I observed, participants felt that, unlike other contexts in their personal lives, the ‘safe space’<sup>iv</sup> provided by these workshops allowed them to feel free to engage with gender issues in unprecedented ways. They narrated having been confronted with SGBV as a first-hand experience, or else in their function as counsellors in private and public domains. Their stories gave expression to feelings of frustration, pain, sorrow, and anger, but also exhibited a sense of hope, resilience, and perseverance. Further, in their narratives, motivational phrases such as ‘speaking up’, ‘create a safe space’, ‘making a difference’, or ‘be the change’ were intertwined with stories from the Bible and personal accounts of gender-based violence. This assemblage of emotional statements and biblical texts produced a religio-secular middle ground that united participants in the shared purpose of transforming their social realities by acting on fronts that are neither exclusively religious, nor solely political. Instead, the workshop’s call for gender transformation involved various registers of activism in an ‘overlapping and criss-crossing “network of similarities”’ (see Van Dijk, Kirsch and Duarte dos Santos *apud* Wittgenstein 1953, 67, in this Special Issue). I am concerned here with analysing these registers as a language that emerges in a specific interventionist space that holds affective, religious, and political meanings for the people taking part in it.

This context evokes Hetherington’s (1997, ix) perspective on ‘heterotopic’ spaces in the sense that these become ‘spaces of alternate social re-ordering’. Following this line, Rijk Van Dijk and Astrid Bochow (2012) have explored religious interventions

as spaces of social reordering capable of creating new moralities that shape gender roles, sexuality, and relationships. As the authors put it, ‘often the consequence of the creation of these new symbolic spaces was not only a critical engagement with the socioeconomic and political conditions in these urban areas, but a reformulation of the position of men and women and their gendered relations’ (p. 335). Along with this perspective, I take SGJ’s workshops as heterotopic spaces in which social reality is re-ordered in two ways: one that initiates a transformation of personal subjectivities, and another that expects to refashion relationships and relationality (Ibid.).

My analysis shows that the cultivation of this language/space has two interrelated effects. Firstly, it provides participants with a framework to rearrange meanings and arguments concerning the experience of SGBV distress and trauma. While people usually remain silent about such experiences in everyday life, workshop participants co-constitute a language for communication within this social space in order to emotionally relate to, hear of, talk about, understand, and analyse asymmetrical power relations. Secondly, participants and facilitators engage in discussions that run danger of de-sacralising religious leadership, institutions, and practices. To counter this, it is creating a safe space in the church that bridges religious, social, and political responses to SGBV and builds a platform for collective action and self-awareness. At the same time, the facilitators seek to make the workshop a ‘safe space’<sup>v</sup> for the participants in order to stimulate their use of an activist language of transformation. Thirdly, by learning new ways to talk about gender issues, participants also learn how to speak about their SGBV experiences in the ‘right way’ in order to henceforth tactically engage with gender activism and patriarchal religious structures. In other words, this religio-political activism allows participants to access resources (funding, emotional support, social networks, intellectual capital) when coping with gender inequalities.

### **SGBV and Religio-Secular Partnerships in (South) Africa**

From a historical perspective, the involvement of religious actors in Africa dates back to the colonial era, with most Christian missionaries coming from Northern and Western Europe. The work of Jean and John Comaroff (1997) explains how missionaries aimed at evangelising (even ‘civilising’) Africans by making strategic use of Western technologies and drawing on the notion of (Christian) modernity. Yet, the authors noted that the apparatus of evangelisation implied forms of conversion and conversation<sup>vi</sup> that blurred the unidirectional missionary enterprise revealing a mutual exchange of symbols

and practices. This is not to say that this exchange between ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’ approaches to religion and spirituality evolved without tensions. In fact, it is through these tensions that this period can be understood as a ‘historical stage for rituals of collective transformations’ (Burchardt 2009, 11; Van der Veer 1996).

The transformative dimension of the ‘primitive-to-modern conversion’ scheme initiated by historical Christian missionaries resonates with the present-day contexts analysed in this chapter at last in two ways. First, when looking at how the development apparatus<sup>vii</sup> similarly brings along the idea of a (underdeveloped/old) starting point that evolves to an end line (developed/new). Second, through the evidence available on how this apparatus is contested, transformed, or reinvented by local and foreign NGO workers and participants of interventions along the way. For instance, when the globally circulating notion of ‘gender equality’ is translated in local contexts, the institutionalised *modus operandi* of gender NGOs brings about a certain degree of isomorphism and adaption that mirrors Western models (Burchardt 2009). Yet, foreign secular and religious organisations nowadays are expected to work in partnership with local ones and to involve local experts and networks. This process often exacerbates tensions between culturally different ways of conceptualising and implementing development interventions and programmes. In a reverse effect, the isomorphism of Western models can be also rearranged in its ‘conversation’ with local actors.

The latter is what I observed in project meetings between programme managers of funding agencies and their local counterparts in South Africa. At times, foreign funders and local staff clashed in their respective ideas about what should be the outcome of a given intervention. International agencies were eager to have quantifiable outcomes in order to be able to monitor and evaluate how religious leaders, who had undergone training workshops, applied their newly acquired knowledge in their respective church communities. By contrast, local NGO staff voiced frustration in informal conversations with me, stressing that a change in the attitudes of women and men towards masculinity is difficult or even impossible to measure. In other words, they felt that the subjective traces of transformation in the workshop participants’ ‘gendered selves’ cannot be quantified; for this reason, information on this issue is often omitted from impact reports for funders.

There exists a broad social science literature that discusses transformative gender dynamics from a socio-religious and phenomenological perspective relating to religious institutions, leadership structures, and communities. Fewer studies have looked at the

meanings and tensions around the lived experiences of gender among religious practitioners as they emerge during secular ritual performances (cf. Turner, Abrahams, and Harris 1995), such as the workshops explored in this chapter.

However, the meanings and tensions emerging at the intersections of the religious and the secular have been examined in various forms. So far, social scientists have produced a rich literature particularly aiming at secularisation theory either as critique or presenting new evidence to support multiple perspectives (Casanova 2007; Asad 2003; Bader 2007). In this line, I use the expression ‘religio-secular’, as coined by theologian Martin Marty (2003), to avoid the religion *versus* secularism ‘methodological box’. Marty urges the scholars for a model that describes the modern world as neither exclusively secular, nor exclusively religious, but rather a complex combination of both the religious and the secular, with religious and secular phenomena occurring at the same time in individuals, in groups, and in societies around the world.

The effort in moving away from this methodological box is also explored by notion of ‘multiple secularities’, which investigates forms and arrangements of differentiation between religious and other social spheres, practices, interpretive frameworks, institutions, and discourses in different eras and regions (see Burchardt, Wohlrab-Sahr, and Middell 2015). The authors call for a reformulation of the relationship between the religious and the secular ‘within the framework of cultural sociology’ and ‘conceptualize “secularity” in terms of the *cultural meanings* underlying the differentiation between religion and non-religious spheres’. The multiple secularities approach embeds contexts such as the ones examined in this article. The language/space cultivated in the workshops I observed conforms ‘modern environments’ (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 876) in which SGBV prevention is addressed through religious, social, and political responses. Yet, Marty’s religio-secular concept is used throughout this article to describe the partnerships between religious and secular organisations in which the format and rationale of interventions is still marked by a binary framework.

In addition, when pursuing such an analysis, it is important to note that my analytical framework concerning the notion of ‘gender transformation’ is inspired by Cohen and Swift’s (1999) *Spectrum of Prevention* in that it seeks to outline ‘specific prevention strategies across micro- to macro-levels of analysis’ (Carlson et al. 2015, 1408). In this approach, the strategies are viewed not as a linear process but as something that involves contractions, resistance, and setbacks along the way.

Among several others, the major global and regional player in this patchwork of partnerships concerned with gender transformative approaches include the Men Engage Alliance (MEA) which is an international network of organisations that focuses on gender justice by actively involving men and boys in gender equality discourses. MEA is divided into seven regional sections,<sup>viii</sup> with each section being composed of a country's network of different NGOs working towards gender equality. As of 2018, MEA is present in 21 sub-Saharan African countries. SGJ was the co-founder of MEA in 2005 and served as a global co-chair of the network from the 2009 to 2016. Currently, SGJ is an active player in the MEA Africa section, providing financial support, technical guidance, and capacity-building training to member organisations. The MEA Africa offers important channels and networks for the implementation interventions I explored in my fieldwork.

SGJ was initially established as a network in August 2006 to address male violence against women, HIV/AIDS, and human rights issues in South Africa. At present, SGJ works across the African continent to strengthen government, civil society, and citizen capacities in promoting gender equality, preventing domestic and sexual violence, and reducing the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS. In South Africa, SGJ has two main offices, one in Johannesburg, the other in Cape Town. Other programme-specific temporary offices are located in townships and rural communities throughout the country. SGJ's outreach on the African continent is, for the most part, implemented through the operational channels of the MEA. In addition, it works closely with a diverse range of other organisations and individuals, including various women's rights organisations, social movements, trade unions, government departments, sports associations, faith-based organisations, media organisations, university research units, and human rights advocates.

In the cases I observed, the intervention programmes targeted small mixed-gender groups and focused on what they describe to be the 'underlying causes' of gender inequality, namely certain cultural practices, social norms, attitudes, and beliefs that are understood to be drenched in the patriarchal value systems. Yet, despite the growing popularity of these interventions, there is only limited social research on the complexities and processes involved in them (Gibbs, Vaughan, and Aggleton 2015). The present chapter seeks to fill this research lacuna.

Taking account of their diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, I am interested in how workshop participants understood, expressed themselves, and acted in



relation to a set of subjects and terms that came up during these events, such as ‘gender’, ‘violence’, ‘norms and values’, ‘religion’, and ‘masculinity’, as well as in how the latter were reworked in the course of the interventions. My research shows that the workshops established a specific language that provided participants with a framework to rearrange meanings and arguments concerned with experiences of SGBV distress and trauma. I argue that this language resonates with the participants’ emotional repertoires and shapes the ways in which the religious leaders engage with the notions of gender transformation and gender activism. At the same time, use of this language allows religious leaders to emotionally relate to, hear of, talk about, understand, and analyse patriarchal power relations in the process of learning to tell the ‘right story in the right way’. In doing so, participants tactically engage with gender activism by accessing resources (funding, social networks, and academic knowledge) from religious and secular organisations.

### **Language and emotion in social processes**

When seen as a whole, much social science research on emotions has focused on its experiential dimensions. This research has four thematic orientations: the Durkheimian perspective on the ‘effervescence’ of rituals’ with its emphasis on the social power of emotions in binding the social body together (Collins 2005); the perspective focusing on the interplay between emotions, body, mind, and cognition (Winchester 2008; Csordas 1990); the approach that understands emotions to be an integral part of social exchanges of cultural symbols and meanings (Geertz 1973; Lambek 2014); and the social constructivist approach to emotions (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Further, much discussion has been devoted to the problem of cross-cultural categorisation and culture-bound emotions (Goldie 2004; Averill 2004). In exploring these topics, researchers looked at social actions, events, and circumstances that trigger different emotional states such as fear, anxiety, or happiness (Lutz 2008; Broek, Sluis, and Dijkstra 2011). Others have addressed emotions as processes (Denzin 1984; Frijda and Mesquita 2000) that evolve in people’s reflexive and co-generative relationships with the world and operate as part of the ways in which people experience situations (Holmes 2010; Ahmed 2013).

These approaches hold important methodological implications, especially regarding the techniques used for data collection on emotions. This became evident for me when, for instance, participants during interventions were uttering the terms ‘speak up’, ‘make a difference’, ‘transform’, ‘heal’, or ‘accountability’ in an emotionally

charged tone of voice, accompanied by suggestive facial expressions and hand gestures. This shows that these notions hold emotional dimensions for those uttering them that are associated with the semantic contexts to which they refer. We can therefore note that the choice and use of terms such as those above is also shaped by emotional dynamics (Galasiński 2004).

Sociolinguists Dell Hymes (1974) and John Gumperz (1968) have developed the term ‘speech community’ to describe a group of people that not only shares a language and a way of linguistically referencing to the world, but is also able to distinguish and adjust their language repertoires to different contexts of social interaction.<sup>ix</sup> In other words, to speak a language correctly one needs not only to learn its vocabulary and grammar, but also the ways in which words are used. Yet, as much as language makes experiences readily transmittable into spoken words (Godbold 2014, 165 *apud* Berger and Luckmann 1966), language is also embodied in the form of gestures and performances.

During my fieldwork, I faced the challenge of examining group interactions through the lens of individual and social forms of addressing gender activism and gender transformation. To do so, I decided to pursue an analysis that takes account of both emotions and language while, at the same time, I focused especially on the experiential and performative dimensions of interventions. I did so with the aim to find a methodological middle ground that overcomes the dichotomised methodological challenges as the one of distinguishing between the individual and the social when examining agency. In this way, I follow Natalya Godbold’s (2014) suggestion to view emotions as social processes that manifest during social interactions: ‘It is a middle ground in that the focus is neither on individuals nor on broader society. Interactions are useful for our purposes if dynamics between actors (‘the social’) might be directly observed’ (Godbold 2014, 164).

By taking this ‘middle ground approach’, Godbold moves away from the study of emotions as experienced by individuals, but also from analysing the ‘wider social discourses or structures within which they were located’ (Godbold 2014, 6). Similarly, my approach concentrates on emotions as they are evoked in *individual* accounts about gender activism and transformation during *social* interactions. Moreover, this approach requires assuming a gender perspective because, as Lorraine de Volo (2006) has observed, emotional responses are in many ways gendered. For this reason, she urges researchers to consider the gender distribution within a given social group in order to

see how ‘that composition can affect emotions as both causes and outcomes of collective identity’ (Ibid., 461). According to De Volo, gender is a key component in contexts of collective mobilisations on the individual level, firstly, in the form of gendered cultural expectations relating to emotions, and secondly, because gender impacts on who benefits emotionally from collective action. Concerning the social level, the author remarks that ‘public acceptance and support for mobilization is also mediated through gendered expectations of proper emotional response’ (Ibid., 463).

Another crucial aspect of my analysis concerns the relationship between emotions and the enactment of social transformation. Broadly speaking, new religious and socio-political movements seem to have a lot in common in the ways in which they seek to reach the public sphere and disseminate narratives of personal and social transformation. As regards the South African context, this similarity became clear in social media posts, flyers, banners, and posters by the partner organisations of SGJ. Activists engage in Twitter and Facebook posts while participating in conferences and public acts representing the organisation. These posts often highlight feelings of excitement and joy to participate in interventions, sentiments of hope, and indignation around gender justice, or allude to the courage and endurance of peers while performing their activist work. In text and images, these acts of meaning-making attribute a repertoire of emotions to activism and conjure up ideas of what it feels like when one engages in transformative action. This is reminiscent of a point made by Deborah Gould (2009), who stressed that the purposeful channelling of emotions can be decisive for the success or failure of a movement.

As stated above, the workshop interventions I studied involve both religious *and* secular understandings of transformation. They are ‘religious’ because the leaders of religious communities tend to be particularly interested in the spiritual dimension when responding to new ideas or expected behaviour, especially regarding gender roles. And they are ‘secular’ in that these interventions draw on sociological, historical, and psychological frameworks of conceptualisation when exploring SGBV and gender transformation.

In what follows, I examine the meanings of and interventionist practices relating to the religio-secular language cultivated by activists and participants. In doing so, I suggest that this language is part of a ‘stock of knowledge’ (see Schutz 1970) that equips those learning it to tactically move between religious and secular activist spaces. In short, it places participants in a ‘free floating’ interstitial space.

## **Doing Research on Workshop Interventions**

The findings presented in this chapter are the result of two years (2017-2018) of ethnographic research at SGJ in Johannesburg. During that time, I was working in a section of the organisation that conceives, coordinates, and implements gender transformative training workshops with religious leaders. I conducted participant observation and 20 semi-structured interviews with religious leaders who were among the participants of one of five training workshops, one of which took place in Goma (Democratic Republic of Congo), one in Maputo, (Mozambique), and three in South Africa (two in Durban and one in Johannesburg).<sup>x</sup> In addition, I applied the same research methods in an international workshop seminar that gathered 20 religious leaders from 13 African countries. In the latter context, I was assisted by two research assistants for semi-structured interviews and participant observation. In this workshop seminar, religious leaders presented the work they do to prevent SGBV in their churches and home countries, discussed partnerships with government, NGOs, and development agencies, as well as engaged in debates about gender. I also analysed internal documents, public reports, training manuals, and case studies elaborated by SGJ and partner organisations detailing their previous work with religious leaders. Further, 11 interviews with programme managers and workshop trainers from SGJ and partner organisations, as well as a socio-demographic survey distributed to participants of all trainings (including those that I was not able to attend) complete my data set.

The workshop interventions, which mostly took place in hotel conference halls or the facilities of a Christian organisation, differed in terms of the number of attendants and gender distribution, with groups ranging from 11 up to 30 participants.<sup>xi</sup> I selected interviewees according to aspects of their engagement with peers during the sessions, creating a balance between those who engaged more and those who engaged less. Despite the majority of male participants, I tried to have an even gender distribution in the sample. Further, I followed the strategy of triangulating methods to check the consistency of consonances and dissonances that emerged from the data collected. With this in mind, my analytical approach to these socio-spatially distant and diverse spaces in three different countries echo what Ghassan Hage (2005) framed as a ‘single geographically discontinuous site’. Hage’s critique to the concept of *multi-sitedness* in ethnography draws upon his experience of studying transnationalism among families worldwide. In his view, these families of migrants resided, they shared a ‘globally

spread geographically noncontiguous site, but it was nevertheless one site' (Ibid., 466). For the present case, despite the various cultural backgrounds of participants, the spaces created by activists and religious leaders in each intervention I attended evoked a strong sense of similarity. This can be justified, first, by the fact that all interventions follow the same agenda (explained in the following section), which is sometimes adjusted to the number of days taken for the intervention to happen. Second, due to the standardised format in which SGJ's resources are deployed in interventions: type and location of facilities, the disposition of chairs and position of activists in relation to participants, the use of NGO materials (brochures, flyers, T-shirts), and so on. Third, as I show in the following sections, most of the content discussed tended to refer to the same academic terms, religious passages, and emotive approaches to SGBV experiences.

It is important to highlight my ambiguous position as a 'foreign' activist researcher amongst NGO co-workers. Despite initially positioning myself as someone who would watch and participate as a workshop member, I was increasingly encouraged by co-workers to engage in the training workshops in the role of a facilitator. In their view, this role would help to build trust and openness in a context where race, age, and religious or professional position are important markers of identity. This 'ambiguity' of the researcher-facilitator-activist position helped me to openly interact in group discussions and explore the research questions discussed in this chapter.

Despite the fact that the concept papers and curricula for the workshops were meant to address *all* 'faith communities', the workshops were mostly attended by Christian leaders from various denominations who made up 80 per cent of participants, followed by 16 per cent who were part of the Islamic tradition.<sup>xii</sup> Amongst Christians, Pentecostal-Charismatics had the largest number of attendants (34 per cent). The ethnographic data presented below refer only to those workshop interventions that I attended. Here, the Christian majority was evident, also meaning that most sessions were organised around bible-based discussions of homosexuality, women's roles in family and society, and forms of gender-based violence.

### **Defining Roles: The Making of a Relational Space**

On a typical day of training, participants and SGJ trainers would begin by gathering in a circle to pray, sing Christian hymns, and read bible passages. As explained to me by one of the religious leaders, the prayer is enacted to call the Holy Ghost and open the participants' hearts to be 'touched' and 'transformed' by it. This ritualistic beginning

also helped to set an emotional climate of social and spiritual familiarity among participants as the majority shared the Christian background.

Facilitators tend to begin workshop interventions by assessing the emotional climate in the room, for example by asking the attendants how the group is ‘doing’ or ‘how they feel’, thus treating the group as one body and person (see Ahmed 2006). This emotional assessment is usually followed by personal accounts of how the facilitators had previously dealt with cases of SGBV, for example by narrating what had happened to close friends or family members, and how they themselves had been emotionally affected by it. In training manuals, this exercise is described as a way to build trust and to make the experience more relational for participants. Then, religious leaders were asked to introduce themselves, to explain what brought them to the workshop, and to tell the group how they felt in that moment, as well as what they expected from the intervention. In a preacher-like tone, facilitators often used expressions such as ‘create safe spaces’, ‘change’, ‘speak up against SGBV’, ‘make a difference’, and ‘transform’ to describe the intended outcomes for the workshop. On several occasions during these proceedings, the atmosphere in the room would shift from a church-like space with prayers and hymns to a gender seminar in which terms like ‘queer’ or ‘gender neutral’ were explored.

During the various workshops, a handful of participants described SGBV as a societal ‘illness’ or an ‘evil’ that they expected to ‘cure’ or ‘heal’. But if ‘cure’ or ‘healing’ as a physiological response was not at stake, then what was the meaning of such notions for religious leaders? For these workshop participants, the problem of SGBV must go beyond social psychological, legal, or medical responses as spiritual healing and religious practices are equally important as ways to address this problem. From the perspective of facilitators, workshop sessions are primarily ways to address SGBV by making social psychological safe spaces within the churches in which gender transformative actions take place (including the circulation of medical, legal information). Each workshop is founded in a common ground ought to make a relational space to re-order these multiple meanings, religious and secular, into feasible gender transformative practices.

During the workshop interventions I observed, religious leaders gathered into conference rooms for one to five days, with each day divided into sessions during which participants engage in debates about LGBTIQ communities, women’s rights, and

gender equality, as well as SGBV. A typical one-day training workshop agenda is illustrated below:<sup>xiii</sup>

<b>Faith leaders one-day training agenda</b>	
8:30 – 9:00	<b>Registration</b>
9:00 – 9:15	Opening multi faith devotion
9:15 – 9:20	Welcome remarks
9:20 – 9:45	<b>Activity: Introductions</b> Objective: To assess who is in the room and the scope of work they do
9:45 – 10h	Pre-evaluation, Objectives, Expectations & Ground Rules
10h – 10:30	<b>Presentation: Working with men and boys of Faith</b> Objective: To provide a framework on the issues being covered in the training
<b>10:30-11h</b>	<b>Tea Break</b>
11h – 11:45	<b>Activity: Learning from people of faith who have been role models</b> Objective: To promote the notion that man can play an important role in promoting gender equitable men who have served as role models.
11:45 – 13h	<b>Activity: Violence Against Women in Daily Life</b> Objective: Better understand the many ways in which women's (and men's) lives are limited by male violence and/ or the threat of men's violence, especially sexual violence
13h – 14h	<b>Lunch</b>
14h – 14:45	<b>Activity: Gender Values Clarification</b> Objective: To explore participants values and attitudes
14:45 – 15:30	<b>Discussion: Why do men and boys of faith remain silent</b> Objective: To discuss ways in which men and boys can be better role models
15:30 – 16:15	<b>Power, Status and Health</b> Objective: To understand the power that different individuals and groups have in society and how this power can determine their ability to access their rights.
<b>16:15 – 16:30</b>	<b>Tea Break</b>
16:30 – 17h	<b>Activity: Action Planning</b> Objective: To get participants to plan for the next steps after the training
17h – 17:15	<b>Plus and Delta: insights and reflections of the day</b>

Participants to these workshops included pastors, reverends, priests, and members of other ecclesiastical status groups. They are recruited by SGJ and its extensive network of partners including FBOs, NGOs, aid, and development agencies that work with similar gender mainstreaming programmes. While the leaders of some religious communities were attending personally, others appointed training pastors, bible school teachers or fellowship leaders (i.e. lay leaders) to attend in their place.

### **The 'Safe Space': A Platform for Collective Action**

The concept of 'safe space' is key to the gender workshop interventions I observed. This notion is aimed at people who are affected by sexual and gender-based violence – also known as 'survivors' – and is used in many NGOs in the field of SGBV. For example, in a workshop in Durban, a representative of an international network of

Christian Churches and FBOs explained to me that ‘a safe space means that I am supported spiritually by my community in contexts of violence’.

Use of this notion in this context reminds of the attempts by social psychologists to operationalise Paulo Freire’s (1970) theory of social change by developing ‘safe social spaces’ from which, they assume, collective action can emerge (Campbell and Cornish 2010; Gibbs, Vaughan, and Aggleton 2015; Vaughan 2011). This social psychological body of work has defined a number of elements that are central for how safe social spaces are enabling change. These elements include building participants’ confidence and skills in self-reflection and communication; facilitating the dialogue required for the development of a new critical understanding of society; and expanding the social networks and social capital of participants (Campbell 2013; Vaughan 2014).

Likewise, in the gender workshop interventions I studied, the concept of safe space provided participants with a platform for collective action and self-awareness. For instance, one of the most important phases in the workshop proceedings is dedicated to encouraging religious leaders to establish support groups within their respective communities.

Moreover, the facilitators seek to make the workshop a ‘safe space’ for the participants in order to stimulate their use of an activist language of transformation. To do so, facilitators and participants at the beginning of a workshop agree to follow certain ground rules that aim at creating a trustful social environment. Among others, these rules include: allowing the religious leaders to use their native languages to express their views; ensuring the confidentiality of sensitive information disclosed; making sure that leaders listen to others without interrupting them; and respecting timeframes.

Using these interaction-regulating norms helps facilitators to make the workshop ‘emotionally safe’ for all participants. Such ground rules are also described in SGJ facilitation manuals and workshop guides. For instance, the *One Man Can* toolkit manual, widely used by practitioners in this field of intervention, frames the role of the workshop facilitator as someone who can ‘help enhance the effectiveness of the group’, and it also lists a number of socio-emotional aims facilitators should aspire to, such as ‘create an emotionally safe setting; bring positive attitude, encourage group members to share their ideas and feelings; build on group members knowledge and experience’ and so on (OMC, 18).<sup>xiv</sup>



It is this kind of ‘safe environment’ that the religious leaders, who participate in workshops, are encouraged to reproduce in their churches. In other words, it is assumed that a social environment that is free of judgement and emotional constraints is the starting point for meaningful experiences of social transformation in the field of gender. In this way, once leaders go back to their religious communities they are hoped to make a safe space to assist SGBV victims such as referring to legal, medical, psychological support); and introduce preventive measures such as talking about gender (particularly, masculinity). As mentioned elsewhere, for religious leaders, this ‘secular’ making of a safe space in the church holds also a spiritual dimension. The social and psychological support, legal and medical references, gender transformation, are not dissociated from religious responses such as prayer and spiritual ‘healing’.

Yet, the notion of safe space is marked by tensions. Some of my interlocutors were reflecting on whether providing space for the support of survivors of SGBV in the church community can also bring negative consequences for the ‘healing’ of victims. For them, the fact that SGBV is often inflicted by members of the church community – pastors, lay leaders, other worshippers – challenged the prerogatives of a safe space in which the victim is free to share traumatic experiences. In this way, they assumed, SGBV offenders in position of power within the church would seek to demoralise victims and find ways to silence or discredit their stories. Thus, they expressed sympathy with the victims and spoke out against diverse forms of retaliation against them, such as being ignored, ostracised, ridiculed, or stigmatised. These tensions are evident in religious leaders’ personal accounts of church life, such as Pastor Luna’s.

Luna is a young lay leader from the 7th Day Adventist Church who works primarily with children. She actively participated in a three-day workshop close to Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, as did a mixed gender group of other Christian leaders of all ages. Being one of the very few females holding a leadership position in her church, she mentioned to me that she was glad to have a supportive male pastor in a superior position to hers. Nevertheless, she was critical of the patriarchy which she saw as an integral part of the general structure of the churches and of religion at large:

Researcher: ‘Which forms of violence do you see in your faith community?’

Luna: ‘What I see is a lot of emotional abuse and some of the things that happen in the name of religion. I think that the whole system itself is to suppress women. I think that Christianity is dominated by male theologians and that is why even up to now it will take a long time to penetrate their theology and their systems. But I believe that there is also physical violence, there is domestic violence in our churches that you hear so and so you hear someone is beating his wife, etc. and all those things are there. I am also worried about financial abuse since its quite an issue. Women do not have enough financial freedom’.

At the beginning of the workshop, in which Luna participated, she introduced herself by saying that this was her first workshop on gender, but that she had heard about this term before. I carried out my interview with her after the end of the workshop, that is, at a time when Luna had been exposed to the different concepts and definitions around SGBV introduced in the workshop. Actually, she used many of them in our conversation. Moreover, she expressed her frustration with an idealised notion of the church as a ‘safe environment’ in which people are intrinsically good.

Researcher: ‘What is the role of religion in contexts of violence?’

Luna: ‘I don’t know, but I think that when I was growing up I was taught that when you are in the church you are at a safe environment and that the church people are better than the people that are not in the church, but as I grow up I realise that the church is just the church and I started to see people as they are, not better. And even in the church, I have started not to feel safe. Even when I am here (in the workshop) the fact that I am with pastors, but in my mind, these are human beings and anything can happen. I think we have to first remove that notion of the church as a religious environment and just take them as human beings because they just come from the ordinary community, and as we were discussing, I realise that all the people that we discussed there they are just here. The perpetrators are in charge and the victims are here. I feel that the church is just an imaginary. I don’t know, but the nature of the church tends to show people as better whereas it’s just ordinary people. And the church itself does not want to admit that, that it’s

just ordinary people. Of course, there are spiritual things that are implicated and that is the ideal, but in reality, the church is just human beings and you can expect anything’.

For Luna, the church should not be taken from granted (anymore) as an ‘extraordinary’ place standing in a higher moral ground where people related to the church are seen as ‘better’, or, in this case, more peaceful and respectful, than others. As a grown up, the pastor realises that these church people not but ‘ordinary’ human beings. In this context, taking the moral expectations on church people aside reveals how she is exposed to perpetrators gender-based violence coming from everywhere, including those in workshop. Such lines of thought helped the pastor to make sense of the wrongdoings of the church while it also corroborated her own observations and anxieties regarding SGBV.

But Luna was not the only workshop participant to present this argument. On several occasions, either in group discussions or interviews, church leaders acknowledged the ‘human nature’ of churches. For them, churches are built and led by people and not God Himself, and this mundane (human) side is what makes religious people and institutions reproduce the violence found in secular society; or, as put by a Nigerian pastor: ‘the church doesn’t play its role properly. That’s why there is this kind of environment all over the place’. For this reason, their aspiration to prevent violence in church settings often aimed at mobilising church leaders to ‘return’ to the divine nature of churches and bridge the gap between the divine and the mundane.

The distinction between what is secular/human and religious/divine is also used by NGO facilitators to explain the different strategies through which a safe space is created in the churches to prevent as well as respond to SGBV. They emphasised that the pastors’ responses to violence, such as praying together with the victim or bible-based counselling, are spiritual responses that must be combined with ‘practical’ responses. For this reason, most sessions are about how to access legal advice and healthcare professionals, to understand HIV/AIDS, to open a case at the police station, or about communication strategies when publicly advocating against SGBV. In this vein, participants and facilitators engage in discussions that appear to ‘de-sacralise’ religious leadership, institutions, and practices. In their view, the safe space in a church must offer ‘spiritual healing’ but at the same time allow for discussions about sexual and reproductive issues and encourage certain health practices; approach SGBV as

‘spiritual illness’ but also acknowledge the implication of power relations and patriarchy in gender relationships. In other words, the forging of a safe space in both ‘spiritual’ and ‘practical’ ways should bridge religious, social, and political responses.

### **Talking as Healing**

Many workshop participants framed SGBV as a human affliction that disturbs the otherwise peaceful and loving nature of religious life. It is for this reason that the introductory sessions of the training workshops include prayers and songs that conjure up the participants’ spiritual resilience and strength in preparation for the envisioned healing process, here conceptualised as change to the good for oneself and others. This desire for change is illustrated by statements of my interlocutors such as ‘I want to make a difference in people’s lives, to become a better person’ and ‘I have been in the sin industry for many years. I’m here to start a new journey’.<sup>xv</sup>

Following the introductory session, the facilitators usually explain the scientific concept of gender, the different manifestations and modalities of SGBV, and its socio-economic impact on development. Yet, abstract as this might initially sound, these explanations are interspersed with the religious leaders’ assessment of their personal experiences with SGBV, which, at times, triggers emotional outbursts, confessions, or testimonies (see Duarte dos Santos, this volume) that are marked by sentiments of repentance or regret. In this way, the safe space created amongst facilitators and participants is also the result of new cultural, social, emotional, and religious perspectives that are being ‘taught’ to the group by the facilitators. These perspectives come with a ‘vocabulary’ that participants progressively start to use while talking about gender and violence. This vocabulary, in combination with the changing emotional dynamics in the room, often triggers spontaneous testimonies about ‘healing’ and gender transformation among workshop participants, such as that of a young male pastor during a workshop in Johannesburg in 2017:

I am a young man in a relationship with a young woman and every time she just wants to talk about stuff so I kept saying, ‘I don’t know how to talk. I’m a man.’ And sometimes she cried in front of me. I think I was an emotional abuser. This workshop benefited me personally. I believe I am leaving here a changed man.

The case of the young pastor illustrates that many men describe themselves as carrying the burden of not being able to talk about personal issues or to give expression to their emotions because doing so is commonly classified as feminine. This assessment was shared by male and female religious leaders in all four workshops I attended: men suffer from an inherently masculine emotional handicap in that they are unable to admit any kind of personal ‘fragility’ in relationships, to show weakness in public, or to ask others for help. In the final session of a one-day intervention in Maputo in 2017, this was also addressed by a male pastor who said:

What struck me the most were the three main aspects that lead African men to die and this made me think about the position of the man facing the difficulties. Men are not superheroes but they also suffer, have their weaknesses. So, it is up to men to assume this and be honest to themselves. And there is a point where he needs to join other men or women to get out of these situations throughout his life. Between man and woman there is no more important being. We are all human beings, not animals or machines, but humans.

Another pastor said that men need to acknowledge their suffering as a first step in order to productively engage with others, for example by asking for their help or supporting their peers. As mentioned above, ‘learning how to talk’ in the workshops meant developing the readiness to express one’s feelings or experiences of suffering emotional pain. Among workshop participants, if a person does ‘not talk’, it is explained by referring to the person’s lack of capacities in expressing his or her emotions. But the process involved in talking, its motivations and constraints, had different implications for male and female workshop participants. For instance, male leaders tended not to publicly condemn SGBV due to being publicly shamed or judged by male peers as betraying manhood, being weak. In addition, it was felt that because men *do not* ‘know how to talk about their feelings’, remaining silent was not necessarily a deliberate choice by them.

Put differently, the group absolves men from taking moral responsibility when they are not talking because they are perceived as not having been socialised into talking about personal feelings, nor are they allowed to be ‘weak’. Therefore, silence is here interpreted not as an intentional behaviour, but as a result of ‘men being men’, as

one informant put it. At the same time, ‘fear’ is the word many female participants are using to explain the silence of women on cases of SGBV that are happening in their religious communities. This fear concerns two scenarios: the social stigma attached to being a victim of SGBV; and the fact that the perpetrators of violence often belong to the same social circles as the victim, where they often protected by the victims’ peers or family members. In this case, it is implied that, unlike their male peers, women *do* know how to talk about their feelings, so that their silence is framed by group members as a deliberate choice that is influenced by their personal circumstances. In this case, ‘learning how to talk’ is rather related to finding legal advice, opening a case at the police, accessing health professionals, or getting psychological support.

The sense of trust and cooperation established amongst participants during the workshops contribute to the breaking of this silence. The interventions encourage religious leaders to reflect on their biographies with a view to gender issues and socio-psychological dynamics. More particularly, they aim at making participants acknowledge the emotional side of their experiences with SGBV, thus also enabling them to develop a narrative about their ‘transformed’ self.<sup>xvi</sup> Moreover, their willingness to talk about personal issues in a safely mediated environment is expected to be a step towards their political engagement in gender issues more generally.

### **Tactical Activism: Coping with Patriarchal Structures**

More than before, one nowadays finds attempts in different parts of the world to conciliate religious belief systems with human rights and social justice. Those trying to do so face the problem that gender inequality, misogyny, the objectification of women, and homophobia are, in many cases, supported by leading political or religious actors, which, in turn, reinforces an awareness among many that there is an urgent need to protect basic rights for marginalised groups and minorities. But how can these issues be brought to the heart of religious communities? Concerning the religious leaders, who tried to apply the gender transformative approach in their churches, it seems that the actual outcomes of their efforts regarding this issue depend on whether the leader is a man or a woman. This was brought home to me during interviews with female religious leaders who voiced their frustration over the limited success of their attempts to change the ‘mindsets’ of male religious leaders in positions of institutional power.

Take the example of Pastor Mpho, who is currently a PhD student at the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa. In her home country, Swaziland, she acts

as an assistant pastor in two branches of a Pentecostal church that is led by her husband. She is also in charge of overseeing the women's fellowship of all 31 branches of the church.

During a gender workshop in Durban, I witnessed this pastor's active engagement in confronting male pastors with the problems women are facing. In an interview after the workshop, Mpho said that she would take the knowledge gained to her husband and the ministry in Swaziland, hoping to be able to make him aware of some inherent problems of masculinity. However, she also mentioned that, to implement these changes, she would need her husband's approval. In the past, her husband had shown interest in SGBV issues as a result of her raising them time and again. Yet, when they planned to organise a men's round-table discussion on marital issues, the top leaders of their church eventually blocked the initiative. Given this experience, Mpho told me that she would need to act in 'softer ways' or being more tactical with the way they introduce this subject to the church in future. She added: 'I am sure he [her husband] is going to start again and rethink and say let's find other ways, other softer ways to bring them on board, because many men still [say they] just don't have the time'.

Referring to the psychological level, Mpho noted that the workshop experience had evoked in her the memories of a SGBV experience she has had in her own life, which were traumatic experiences she suppressed because she had neither the social support, nor the skills to address the issue. She made clear in our conversation that she feels differently after the workshop because she now knows how to deal with problems like these. She explained:

The women usually come to me when they have their own problems which is why I feel like we need those skills from coalitions like this, because when they come to me sometimes I get so hurt and emotionally drained myself such that I don't even know how to deal with them, I get this anger in me when I hear the situations they go through, then I remember that I'm a Christian I'm supposed to give them a way forward but sometimes I know that I just can't.

A similar feeling of pressure was mentioned to me by other religious leaders who say that they are not prepared psychologically to deal with the many problems in their

church community. Many expressed anxieties over not knowing how to even begin approaching this task. Pastor Mpho's 'soft activism' – or 'tactical activism', as I opt to call it – was particularly widespread among female religious leaders, who are particularly committed to the gender cause. Pastor Maria, for instance, leads the youth fellowship of one of the largest Christian denominations in Southern Africa. Besides conventional prayer and biblical seminars, she has initiated 'off the grid' forms of gender intervention that are approved by the pastor supervising her work as long as they are not made public and do not discuss issues related to sexual and reproductive health.

Pastor Bonolo is another example. She participated in a conference that was organised under the umbrella of MEA and brought together religious leaders from various denominations in a conference room in Johannesburg to share and discuss their local gender intervention programmes. During this conference, a number of female pastors voiced their difficulties in applying the gender transformative discourse due to the patriarchal values embedded in their churches. Pastor Bonolo was one these voices. She is a board member for the Botswana Council of Churches (BCC) and is currently working on issues of gender and development. Further, she has been appointed Gender Commissioner of Botswana and is currently finishing a university degree in theology. As a reverend in her church, Bonolo expressed what for many female religious leaders belong to the main obstacles in implementing gender transformative measures, namely the patriarchal structure and lack of funding:

[...] the Bible looks at the men as the head, we need to deal with this first because the Bible itself is patriarchal; we need to bring in the church leaders first before we can try to go outside. There is no funding available for gender transformation to take place. Our churches are unable to secure funding and we don't have enough funding to even run our workshops.

She also expressed that education is to be seen as a key factor in changing the mindset of male religious leaders:

Researcher: 'How can we call more faith leaders or attract their attention for discussing gender issues such as SGBV and gender equality?'

Bonolo: 'By conducting workshops on capacity building and educating them slowly, bring awareness. We need to note that some of the church leaders do not know that it is wrong to abuse a woman or they think that



only men should be in higher positions and women's role is to sing in the church while men preach and make all the decisions'.

The interest of these female religious leaders in changing religious structures through education and awareness is shared by many male leaders. Yet, the workshop sessions that particularly triggered emotional outbursts and oral interventions of male religious leaders were those in which participants had to engage in a self-analysis of their biographies in order to identify (potential or real) experiences of SGBV.

However, the refashioning of the workshop participants' self in terms of the expression of emotions and gender roles do not always and necessarily find the support by religious structures that are historically occupied by men. Against this backdrop, the 'soft' ways of enacting change in patriarchal religious structures, as pursued by the abovementioned female pastors, appears to be the most feasible option. Still, this is not to say that, in the first place, their responses may not have been tactically tailored to serve a large purpose such as fighting against patriarchy. Yet, while activism may not be always tactical, this case indicates how it can become tactical for those who learn to speak the religio-secular language of gender activism.

### **A Space for Partnerships and Networks**

In the previous section, I explored the ways participants might become tactical with their activism and how these ways vary in terms of gender and hierarchy in religious structures. For these workshops, the mixed gender audience played a role in how male and female leaders emotionally respond to sessions, an all-male workshop can give more clues on gender dynamics as such.

In a workshop in the city of Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2017 a social dynamic developed that was different from the other workshop interventions I observed. The region around Goma has experienced violent conflicts over the past two decades, which have aggravated the already precarious socio-economic living conditions in the Kivu provinces. It is only in recent years that the region has been experiencing a period of relative peace. Given this situation, the Kivu region, and especially the city of Goma, is presently the arena of many different humanitarian interventions that are carried out by international development organisations and intergovernmental agencies, for whom, however, transformative approaches to gender are a marginal rather than a central concern.

The 24 delegates attending this workshop came from different religious confessions. It was closely watched not only by the media, but also by law enforcement personnel due to the security concerns of those attending it. Some participants also held influential positions in government structures (army, secretariats, university, etc.) beyond their religious duties. This influence became more evident when each participant had to stand up and introduce themselves to the rest of the audience. Their credentials included previous engagements with a range of intergovernmental, human rights, non-governmental, and humanitarian organisations.

The format of the workshop followed the familiar structure and entailed explanations concerning the concept of gender as well as debates about gender inequalities, religious norms and values that are harmful for women, etc. When asked about their expectations, participants said that they were looking for strategies to identify SGBV in their local contexts, while they also wanted information on appropriate ways of acting, places where victims can be referred to, and which people one should engage with once a SGBV case is identified. They also sought to understand the concept of gender through religious lenses.

The concept of 'safe space', as introduced in the workshop, and the discussion of the different forms of SGBV, generated curiosity among them that was similar to the one I had previously observed in other workshops. When asked by the facilitators about how they would respond to a case of rape, the attending religious leaders said they would first hide the news to avoid public exposure of the person, and then insisted on the importance of praying with the victim and taking them to hospital or an NGO that can provide aid. This insistence (see Van Dijk and Molenaar, this volume) equated the position of religious to secular responses. In this way, they framed the religio-secular partnership between NGOs, governmental structures, and religious stakeholders as some form of joint venture.

One of the workshop sessions included a presentation and an open discussion forum relating to a video of a local NGO showing the 'before and after' of a gender transformative workshop intervention with religious leaders in the Kivu region. The video depicted the story of a Muslim and a Christian leader who were engaged in domestic work, describing how these two had realised that beating their wives was wrong. The (exclusively male) group responded to the video screening by pointing out the difficulties women have in challenging certain stereotypes around masculinity such as domestic work or taking care of their children. Participants also mentioned that few

women recognise that they know men who do work at home, such as cooking or cleaning. Still, according to them, these atypical cases are hidden from the public because of men's fears of being labelled a 'houseboy' or giggled at not only by other men but also by women. In sum, while the video illustrated that some gender-related behavioural change can be seen in the private sphere, the discussion after the screening made clear that peer pressure in public space is a major obstacle for men to advocate change in their society.

Also, for participants in this workshop, Christianity offers a more 'civilised' form for engaging with gender. This can be contrasted by the way they explained the high levels of SGBV in the DRC as the result of 'tribal' idiosyncrasies that come mainly from cultures of the rural areas. While these external forces were pointed as the main causes of SGBV, religion was only considered part of the problem when participants pointed to false leaders that misinterpret scriptures. In this context, group members suggested that their role is to help church goers find the 'spiritual way' or 'the right way'. They understood this 'spiritual way' to be a means to engage with worshipers and condemn violence. For them, this spiritual form of engaging with the community runs counter to SGBV stemming from cultural practices. Perceptions like these are also expressed in scholarly debates about the tensions between 'religion' and 'culture' in the development sector. For example, Elisabet Le Roux and Brenda Bartelink (2017) discuss the engagement of religious leaders to address 'harmful traditional practices' (HTP). Their findings suggest that religion is used in various ways to mediate the tensions in cultural beliefs and practices. They conclude that 'while faith leaders may be aware that their particular faith does not condone or demand a certain HTPs, they remain silent because of the power relations in which cultural expectations are embedded' (p. 6).

In addition, as was the case in other workshops I observed, praying here functioned as a powerful means to emotionally and cognitively support others and to demonstrate one's caring attitude toward individuals and the group as a whole. What was evoked through these prayers was a kind of humanitarian response, a somewhat 'spiritual humanitarianism'. The word 'spiritual' here is understood as going beyond its religious connotations, holding also emotional and social implications. However, the notion of 'spiritual help', which in other workshop interventions had triggered religious leaders to share their personal experiences with SGBV, were not part of the discussion at the workshop in Goma. Instead, participants demonstrated their knowledge about

gender inequalities discussing, for instance, that women are only seen in religious communities as those in charge of cleaning the church or organising side events, or women's fellowships.

In this workshop, there were no testimonies, confessions, or emotional 'outbursts' related to SGBV experiences. Interactions thus took a different course in terms of group dynamics, participants' interests, and responses to facilitators. With this experience in mind, I asked facilitators about the key strategies they use in order to emotionally affect religious leaders. A programme developer of Congo's Men Network (COMEN), the local partner of SGJ in the region, explained to me that the presence of female leadership or survivors of SGBV are essential for reaching participants on a personal level:

I worked in HIV for a long time, [...] the most meaningful things about our response was the role that people with HIV played. They were instrumental in turning the tide, they were instrumental in advocating for, they were instrumental in shifting people's attitudes. So, having come from that and learned from that, there was no way I was going to do anything without survivors of sexual violence themselves. So, it has been our most powerful way of doing things, where, you know, so often [...] you know, it's a difference when I speak and then they speak. If I speak to a leader or anyone in the government, it's not going to have the same emotional impact or personal impact. I talk a lot about personal encounters being the most powerful ways of ending any harmful thing, be it racism, be it ignorance, be it stigma and discrimination.

Following this line of thought, it can be argued that the gender composition in this particular workshop, that was restricted to male participants holding formal positions of power, created difficulties in forging a 'safe space'. In other words, this context seems to have prevented participants from engaging emotionally with the intervention.

This case demonstrates that the envisioned refashioning of gendered emotions is not always successful. Here, the interventions failed to produce 'moments of social connectivity'. Put differently, transformed masculinity was not experienced as a healing process for the refashioning of the self, but primarily employed on the discursive level

by male religious leaders in order for them to be able to engage with the religio-secular partnerships associated with the workshop.

Though I can only speculate why this happened, one can assume that the following factors contributed to it: the language barrier between facilitators and participants; the absence of female religious leaders in the group; and the presence of law enforcement representatives and members of the superordinate religious leadership (for instance, chaplain and police).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined the ways in which religious leaders engage with the notion of gender activism and gender transformation during sexual and gender-based violence prevention training workshops. My aim was twofold: firstly, to explore the tensions between the private and public dimensions of ‘gender activism’ in religio-secular contexts; and secondly, to demonstrate how religious leaders navigate these tensions by co-constituting a particular language and social space that allows the creation of new meanings and practices to cope with strict religious structures. Moreover, this article explored how religious leaders use this language when narrating about their personal gender transformation in private and public spheres of social life.

My analysis shows that the cultivation of this language/space has three interrelated effects. Firstly, it gives participants a framework to rearrange meanings and arguments in relation to experiences of distress and trauma caused by SGBV. Though people usually remain silent about such experiences in everyday life, workshop participants employ this religio-activist language in order to relate emotionally to, hear and talk about, understand, and analyse asymmetrical power relations within their social contexts. Secondly, participants and facilitators engage in discussions that seem to de-sacralise religious leadership, institutions, and practices. In doing so, a safe space is created in a church that brings together religious, social, and political responses to SGBV to allow for the participants’ self-awareness and collective action. At the same time, the facilitators seek to make the workshop a ‘safe space’ for the participants in order to stimulate their use of an activist language of transformation. Thirdly, by learning to speak about (theirs and others) SGBV experiences in the ‘right way’, religious leaders learn how to (re-)act in everyday situations where gender inequalities and patriarchy are made real. They access funds and create networks to run workshops, persuade (male) pastors, church goers and partners to discuss gender,

acquire(certified) knowledge. In other words, activism becomes tactical as participants develop skills to position themselves in-between religious and secular circles.

Yet, after becoming tactical, their responses varied according to their gender. When it comes to keeping the silence against SGBV, 'fear' is the word many female participants use to explain the silence of women on cases of SGBV that are happening in their religious communities. In this case, it is implied that women know how to talk about their feelings, so that their silence is framed by group members as a deliberate choice that is influenced by their personal circumstances. Female religious leaders tend to employ 'soft' strategies when engaging with the gender transformative approach in their respective religious communities. In contrast, group members absolve men from taking moral responsibility and keep silent about SGBV as they are perceived as not having been socialised into talking about personal feelings, nor are they allowed to be 'weak'. Moreover, the workshop in Goma attended exclusively male had little to do with the transformation of personal subjectivity observed in other experiences. They focused on building up coalitions, networks among themselves, and external organisations to reinforce religio-secular partnerships as such. Their explanation for SGBV referred to external forces such as 'tribal' practices, the cultures of rural DRC, and the misinterpretation of religious texts.

Scholars in the field of biographical research often describe biographies as the 'dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other', an interpretation that is based on a view of 'human beings as active agents in making their lives rather than being simply determined by historical and social forces' (Merrill and West 2009, 1). Similarly, as I have demonstrated above, workshop participants' engagement in gender activism evolves in a process that is 'individually apprehended and socially pervaded' (Luhrmann 2004, 3) through a language that is primarily enacted in these workshops. The latter are about becoming a certain person, that is, 'a knower in a context where what it means to know is negotiated with respect to the regime of competence of a community' (Wenger 1998, 3). The workshop participants' *persona* emerges from this regime of competences after having learnt a language that blurs religious, emotional, and political discourses. This language becomes readily accessible as a 'stock of knowledge' (see Schutz 1970) that equips individuals to tactically move in between religious and secular activist spaces. It places the workshop participants in a 'free floating' interstitial space. Further, it helps them to cope with patriarchal structures without necessarily leading to collective activist initiatives.

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<sup>i</sup> The acronym ‘SGBV’ will be used throughout the body of text as consistently used amongst stakeholders in documents, conversations, and events.

<sup>ii</sup> Only a select number of views were captured since full transcriptions were not available.

<sup>iii</sup> This concept is going to be defined in the following section.

<sup>iv</sup> In this article, the notion of ‘safe space’ is based in two interrelated definitions: one extracted from the curriculum that guides SGJ’s workshops, and the scholarly definition from which the curriculum alludes to which is rooted in an interdisciplinary approach to social change. The latter being a compendium of psychological and social elements that shape group interactions in a relational space, enabling change (Campbell 2013; Vaughan 2014). These elements are discussed in a specific section of this article.

<sup>v</sup> A specific section in this article will be dedicated to coin a more precise definition of this concept.

<sup>vi</sup> As put by the authors: ‘This conversation had two faces. Its overt content, what the parties most often talked about, was dominated by the substantive message of the mission and was conveyed in sermons and services, in lessons and didactic dialogues. As we shall see, the gospel, delivered thus, made little sense along the South African frontier in the first half of the nineteenth century. More often than not, it was ignominiously ignored or rudely rejected. But, within and alongside these exchanges, there occurred another kind of exchange: an often quiet, occasionally strident struggle between the Europeans and the Africans to gain mastery over the terms of the encounter. The earliest objects of this struggle were the forms that the churchmen sought to impose on the conversation itself: among others, linguistic forms, spatial forms, the forms of rational argument and positive knowledge.’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997, 198).

<sup>vii</sup> The term apparatus used here refers to development actors such as NGOs, intergovernmental agencies and the infrastructure, material and knowledge production involved in this sector.

<sup>viii</sup> The regional segments currently are: Africa, Caribbean, Middle East & North Africa, North America, Latin America, South Asia and Europe. For more information see [mengage.org](http://mengage.org).

<sup>ix</sup> See also Gumperz and Hymes (1972).

<sup>x</sup> In addition to these five workshops, three other workshops were developed in Abuja (Nigeria), Harare (Zimbabwe) and Sierra Leone, which I was unable to attend. In these cases, I was assisted by an NGO practitioner who reported back with recorded sessions, interviews, and questionnaires. For this paper, I will only refer to the cases in which I was personally able to attend.

<sup>xi</sup> 30 participants (18 males) in Durban; 29 participants (12 males) in Johannesburg; 12 participants (7 male) at the Symposium in Johannesburg; 11 participants (8 male) in Maputo; 19 male participants in Goma.

<sup>xii</sup> With participants from the following denominations: Adventists, Anglicans, Baptists, Zionist, Pentecostal-Charismatics, Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists.

<sup>xiii</sup> One-day training agenda adapted by Sonke Gender justice from the One Man Can training manual, the author selected specific activities to illustrate the scope of sessions carried out during interventions.

<sup>xiv</sup> ‘Working with Men and Boys: Gender and Sexual & Reproductive Health Manual.’; this workshop manual is just one of several different tools available.

<sup>xv</sup> These statements are from a participant observation report of the introductory session of a workshop in which participants were asked about their expectations.

<sup>xvi</sup> I learnt through informal conversations with facilitators and female participants that they knew of instances where male religious leaders were merely simulating to have become a ‘transformed person’ during a workshop. Doing so allowed these men benefit from the social networks amongst workshop participants but also from certain material resources that come along with participation in these workshops, such as travel expenses, food, and accommodation. And of course, since for most participants, the workshops are once-off events, I was not able to gather information on whether they had ‘transformed’ themselves after a workshop had ended.