



BRILL

JOURNAL OF RELIGION IN AFRICA 49 (2019) 337–370

Journal of  
Religion in  
AFRICA

brill.com/jra

# Tactical Activism

## *Religion, Emotion, and Political Engagement in Gender Transformative Interventions*

*Rafael Cazarin*

Department of Sociology, Autonomous University of Barcelona,  
Barcelona, Spain

*rafael.cazarin@uab.cat*

### 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 co-creating an 'interstitial' language and social space that allows them to conform new emotional repertoires, 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

## 1 Introduction: 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 June 2017

I collected the above statements during a three-day prevention-training workshop for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)<sup>1</sup> at the eMseni Christian Conference Centre in Benoni, South Africa.<sup>2</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 restrictive gender roles and norms as well as 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>3</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 North American and European debates (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012).

This article examines the ways in which religious leaders engage with gender activism and the transformation of restrictive gender roles and norms during sexual and gender-based violence prevention-training workshops. My aim is twofold: first, to explore the tensions between the public and private dimensions of gender activism in contexts marked by religio-secular partnerships; and second, to demonstrate how religious leaders navigate these tensions by co-constituting a particular language and social space that brings forth new emotional repertoires, 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 that Sonke implemented 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, but mainly on the process of learning and beginning to use a language that blurs religious, political, and emotional registers of discourse. I argue that these trainings convey to the participants specific norms of how they ought to feel (Cazarin and Burchardt 2020) about gender issues and how they ought to engage with and talk about gender activism and the transformation of restrictive gender roles and norms. I show that in this process the workshop participant as 'listener becomes the speaker' (Harding 1987, 169). In the long run, this form of intervention that the NGO supports aims at embedding the discourses promoted in the workshop in the religious practices pursued by the workshop participants.

In the workshop interventions I observed, participants felt that, unlike other contexts in their personal lives, the safe space<sup>4</sup> that these workshops provided allowed them to feel free to engage with gender issues in unprecedented ways. They narrated having been confronted with SGBV as a firsthand 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 transforming restrictive gender roles and norms involved various registers of activism in an 'overlapping and criss-crossing "network of similarities"' (see Van Dijk, Kirsch, and Duarte dos Santos in 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 perspective on 'heterotopic' spaces in the sense that these become 'spaces of alternate social re-ordering' (1997, ix). Following this line, Rijk Van Dijk and Astrid Bochow (2012) explore 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' (2012, 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 (2012, 335).

My analysis shows that the cultivation of this language/space has two inter-related effects. First, 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. Second, participants and facilitators engage in discussions that run the danger of desacralising 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>5</sup> for the participants in order to stimulate their use of an activist language of transformation that is carefully curated for use in religious contexts. Third, 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, legal knowledge) when coping with gender inequalities.

## 2 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>6</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; see also 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 article in at least two ways: first, when looking at how the development apparatus<sup>7</sup> similarly brings along the idea of an (underdeveloped/old) starting point that evolves to an end line (developed/new); and second, through the evidence available on how this apparatus is contested, transformed, or reinvented by local and foreign NGO workers and participants in 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 today foreign secular and religious organisations 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 also be 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 the outcome of a given intervention should be. 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 toward 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.

A broad social science literature exists that discusses transformative gender dynamics from a socioreligious 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 article. 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 scholars to create 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, groups, and societies around the world.

The notion of multiple secularities also explores the effort in moving away from this methodological box. It 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' (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 876, emphasis in original). The multiple secularities approach embeds contexts such as the ones examined in this article. The language/space cultivated in the workshops I observed conforms to 'modern environments' (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 876) in which SGBV prevention is addressed through religious, social, and political responses. However, Marty's religio-secular concept is used throughout this article since the institutional format and rationale of the partnerships between religious and secular actors is still negotiated within this 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 players in this patchwork of partnerships concerned with gender transformative approaches includes 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>8</sup> with each section composed of a country's network of different NGOs working toward gender equality. As of 2018, MEA was present in 21 sub-Saharan

African countries. SGJ was the cofounder of MEA in 2005 and served as a global cochair 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 explored in my fieldwork.

SGJ was initially established in August 2006 as a network 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. SGJ has two main offices in South Africa, one in Johannesburg and 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 religious doctrines, cultural practices, social norms, attitudes, and beliefs that are understood to be drenched in the patriarchal value system. However, despite the growing popularity of these interventions in religious contexts there is only limited social research on the complexities and processes involved in them (Gibbs, Vaughan, and Aggleton 2015). The present article 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 helps participants to rework emotional repertoires and make sense of new meanings and practices, shaping 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 and mediating resources (funding, social networks, and academic knowledge) from religious and secular organisations.

### 3 Language and Emotion in Social Processes

When viewed 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; S. 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 are 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 the world, but is also able to distinguish and adjust their language repertoires to different contexts of social interaction (see also Gumperz and Hymes, 1972). In other words, to speak a

language correctly one needs to not only learn its vocabulary and grammar, but also the context-sensitive ways in which words ought to be used. My analysis in this article takes inspiration from this approach. Yet while acknowledging that language makes experiences readily transmittable into spoken words (Godbold 2014, 165 cited in Berger and Luckmann 1966), my analysis also highlights that language can be embodied in the form of gestures and performances that help to conform emotional repertoires (Cazarin and Burchardt 2020). Emotional repertoires emphasize agency and creative adaptation and performance of individuals whose courses of action are shaped by emotional regimes that transcend individuals and persist over time (cf. Riis and Woodhead 2010). For example, when workshop participants stood up to give testimonies about their experiences of violence, the other participants whispered prayers and words of support, but often also simply listened in silence or began to cry, the latter of which was part of their embodied communicative repertoire. At the same time, as Susan Harding (1987) has shown for the rhetoric of Baptist conversion, the act of ‘witnessing’ testimonies has a performative dimension. Harding notes that witnessing is ‘rhetorical in the sense that it is an argument about the transformation of self that lost souls must undergo, *and* a method of bringing about that change in those who listen to it’ (ibid.: 167; italics added). The same holds true for the workshops examined in this article.

During my fieldwork I faced the challenge of examining group interactions through the lens of individual and social forms of addressing gender activism and the transformation of restrictive gender roles and norms. 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 of finding a methodological middle ground that overcomes the dichotomised methodological challenges as the one 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’ (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’ (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) observes, 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' (2006, 461). According to de Volo, gender is a key component in contexts of collective mobilisations on the individual level, first in the form of gendered cultural expectations relating to emotions, and second 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' (2006, 463).

Another crucial aspect of my analysis concerns the relationship between emotions and the enactment of social transformation. Broadly speaking, new religious and sociopolitical 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 from 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 about participating in interventions, sentiments of hope, and indignation regarding 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 stresses 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. They are secular in that these interventions draw on sociological, historical, and psychological frameworks of conceptualisation when exploring SGBV and the transformation of restrictive gender roles and norms.

In what follows, I examine the meanings of and interventionist practices relating to the religio-secular language cultivated by activists and participants. 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.

#### 4 Doing Research on Workshop Interventions

The findings presented in this article 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>9</sup> In addition, I applied the same research methods in an international workshop seminar that gathered 20 religious leaders from thirteen African countries. In the latter two research assistants assisted in conducting 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; and 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. Eleven interviews with programme managers and workshop trainers from SGJ and partner organisations, as well as a sociodemographic survey distributed to participants of all trainings, including those that I was not able to attend, completed 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 eleven up to 30 participants.<sup>10</sup> I selected interviewees based on 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 echoes what Ghassan Hage (2005) frames as a 'single geographically discontinuous site'. Hage's critique of the concept of multisitedness in ethnography draws on his experience of studying transnationalism among families worldwide. In his view, these families of migrants shared a 'globally spread geographically noncontiguous site, but it was nevertheless one site' (Ibid., 466). In the present case, despite the various cultural backgrounds of participants the spaces that activists and religious leaders

created 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 occur, and 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 nonreligious 'foreign' activist researcher amongst NGO co-workers, the majority of whom were practitioners of Christianity. Despite initially positioning myself as someone who would watch and participate as a workshop member, co-workers increasingly encouraged me to engage in the training workshops in the role of a facilitator. However, this role was limited to activities that did not require theological knowledge on my side. In their view, this would help to build trust and openness toward me in a context where race, age, and religious or professional position are important markers of identity. My ambiguous role as researcher-facilitator-activist enabled me to openly interact in group discussions and explore the research questions discussed in this article.

Despite the fact that the concept papers and curricula for the workshops were meant to address all faith communities, the workshops were mainly attended by Christian leaders from various denominations who made up 80 percent of participants, followed by 16 percent who were part of the Islamic tradition.<sup>11</sup> Among Christians, Pentecostal-Charismatics had the largest number of attendants (34 percent). On the side of the facilitators, five were Christians and one a Muslim; three of them also had religious leadership positions that they pursued along with their NGO work. 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.

## 5 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 one of the religious leaders explained, the prayer is enacted to call the Holy Ghost

and open the participants' hearts to being touched and transformed by it. This ritualistic beginning also helped to set an emotional climate of social and spiritual familiarity among participants since the majority shared the Christian background. The introductory prayer was part of the official workshop agenda, but facilitator-led prayers were also often interspersed spontaneously in the further course of the workshop. Here my previous research on emotionality in African Pentecostalism (Cazarin 2017) enabled me to understand that the religious emotions (see Riis and Woodhead 2010) that were cultivated during the workshops were just as important as secular modalities of interaction.

Facilitators tend to begin workshop interventions by assessing the emotional climate in the room, such as 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 in their personal lives and in their role as religious leaders, for example by narrating what had happened to close friends and family or members of their church, and how they themselves had been emotionally affected by it. In training manuals this exercise is described as a way to build trust and make the experience more relational for participants. Religious leaders were then asked to introduce themselves, explain what brought them to the workshop, and tell the group how they felt in that moment, as well as what they expected from the intervention. In a preacherlike 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 churchlike space with prayers and hymns to a gender seminar in which terms like 'queer' or 'gender neutral' were explained.

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 curing 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 had to go beyond social psychological, legal, or medical responses since 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, and legal information. Each workshop is founded in a common ground aiming to make a relational space to reorder 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 engaged in debates about LGBTIQA communities, women's rights, and gender equality, as well as SGBV. A typical one-day training workshop agenda is illustrated below.<sup>12</sup>

---

**Faith leaders and norm changes in support of gender transformation training**

---

|             |                                                                                                                                                                             |     |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 08:30–09:00 | <b>Registration</b>                                                                                                                                                         | All |
| 09:00–09:15 | <b>Opening multifaith devotion</b>                                                                                                                                          | All |
| 09:15–09:20 | Welcome remarks                                                                                                                                                             | SGJ |
| 09:20–09:45 | <b>Activity: Introductions</b>                                                                                                                                              | All |
|             | Objective: To assess who is in the room and the scope of work they do                                                                                                       |     |
| 09:45–10:00 | Preevaluation, objectives, expectations, and ground rules                                                                                                                   | All |
| 10:00–10:30 | <b>Presentation: Working with men and boys of faith</b>                                                                                                                     | SGJ |
|             | Objective: To provide a framework on the issues being covered in the training                                                                                               |     |
| 10:30–11:00 | <b>Tea Break</b>                                                                                                                                                            | All |
| 11:00–11:45 | <b>Activity: Learning from people of faith who have been role models</b>                                                                                                    | SGJ |
|             | Objective: To promote the notion that men can play an important role in promoting gender-equitable men who have served as role models.                                      |     |
| 11:45–13:00 | <b>Activity: Violence Against Women in Daily Life</b>                                                                                                                       | SGJ |
|             | 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 |     |
| 13:00–14:00 | <b>Lunch</b>                                                                                                                                                                | All |
| 14:00–14:45 | <b>Activity: Gender Values Clarification</b>                                                                                                                                |     |
|             | Objective: To explore participants' values and attitudes                                                                                                                    |     |
| 14:45–15:30 | <b>Discussion: Why do Men and Boys Remain Silent?</b>                                                                                                                       | SGJ |
|             | Objective: To discuss ways in which men and boys can be better role models                                                                                                  |     |
| 15:30–16:15 | <b>Organising Faith Based Movements in the Religious Sector</b>                                                                                                             | SGJ |
|             | Objective: To invite participants to explore the various interventions churches can do to work with men and boys                                                            |     |
| 16:15–16:30 | <b>Tea</b>                                                                                                                                                                  | All |
| 16:30–17:00 | <b>Activity: Action Planning</b>                                                                                                                                            | SGJ |
|             | Objective: To get participants to plan the next steps after the training                                                                                                    |     |
| 17:00–17:15 | <b>Plus and Delta: Insights and Reflections of the Day</b>                                                                                                                  |     |

---

Participants in these workshops were imams, spiritual advisors, pastors, priests, and members of other ecclesiastical status groups. They were recruited by Sonke and its extensive network of partners that included religious or faith-based organizations, NGOs, and aid and development agencies working with similar gender transformative programmes. While the leaders of some religious communities attended personally, others appointed training pastors, Bible school teachers or fellowship leaders (i.e., lay leaders) to attend in their place.

## 6 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. However, the concept also holds important spiritual meanings for the participants and FBO workers I spoke with. For example, in a workshop in Durban a representative of an international network of Christian churches and FBOs explained that ‘a safe space means that I am supported spiritually by my community in contexts of violence’. This conflation of (Christian) religious and secular understanding of safe space also appeared during the workshops when participants started to talk about their personal experiences of gender-based violence. Here the safe space was conceptualized as a place where victims would pray with religious leaders to overcome feelings of fear and insecurity after experiencing SGBV.

Sonke’s use of this notion in this context reminds of social psychologists’ attempts 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 to 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 (A. 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, at the beginning of a workshop facilitators and participants 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 time frames. Using these interaction-regulating norms helps facilitators 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' (OMC, 18). It also lists a number of socioemotional 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 (ibid.).<sup>13</sup>

It is this kind of safe environment that 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 judgment and emotional constraints is the starting point for meaningful experiences of social transformation in the field of gender. In this way, once leaders return to their religious communities it is hoped they can make a safe space to assist SGBV victims, such as referring to legal, medical, and 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 also holds a spiritual dimension. Here social and psychological support, legal and medical references, and the issue of transforming restrictive gender roles and norms more generally are here not dissociated from (Christian) religious practices such as prayer and spiritual healing. This exchange of spiritual and secular gifts points to broader anthropological debates on the dividuality and spiritual agency of the Christian person within an ongoing war of good and evil (Werbner 2011; Mosko 2015).

Most participants had already taken part in similar workshops and seemed to intertwine secular and spiritual notions of safety. In this vein, some of the discussions evoked the idea that some non-Christian African cultures reinforced patriarchal norms and values that would cause SGBV. However, I could also observe moments during which it became clear that the aspired safe space was fragile and not free of tensions. For instance, when debating issues regarding LGBTIQ+ groups, participants did not always agree about the idea of divine creation of sexual diversity, often referring to these groups as

'the others'. Participants then started to mumble in disagreement, have parallel discussions, or raise religious arguments about heteronormative behaviour. On one occasion the difficulties in finding a consensus led the facilitators to move this debate around sexual rights into an informal session after the end of the official workshop schedule. In this session those religious leaders who had decided to participate were able to share their thoughts and feelings around LGBTIQ+ issues more freely. They prayed together, and some of them cried and presented personal experiences in which they had to deal with 'the others'. They thus created a safe space that could not be realised during the official session.

Here it seemed that religiously informed messages were equally important to (re-)form particular notions affecting the individual. Participants who listened, testified, and prayed over these issues did not take workshops as a separate 'community'. At the same time, the labeling of LGBTIQ+ groups as 'the others' also indicated a rationale in which participants detached themselves from another group or person whose predicaments (sinful behaviors, desires) were 'dangerously unsettling' (Werbner 2011, 180).

These tensions arising in workshops were also addressed during interviews. Some of my interlocutors reflected on whether providing space for the support of survivors of SGBV in the church community could 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 positions of power within the church could demoralise victims and find ways to silence or discredit their stories. They thus expressed sympathy with the victims and spoke out against diverse forms of retaliation, such as being ignored, ostracised, ridiculed, or stigmatised. These tensions are evident in religious leaders' personal accounts of church life, such as that of Pastor Luna.

Luna is a young lay leader from the Seventh 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 that she was glad to have a supportive male pastor in a superior position. 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 of 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. She actually 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 realised 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 to not 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 no longer be taken for granted as an extraordinary place with a higher moral ground where people related to the church are seen as better or, in this case, more peaceful and respectful than others. In this context removing the moral expectations of church people reveals how she is exposed to perpetrators' gender-based violence everywhere, including

in the workshop. Such lines of thought helped the pastor to make sense of the wrongdoings of the church while also corroborating her own observations and anxieties regarding SGBV.

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. As a Nigerian pastor put it, 'The church doesn't play its role properly. That's why there is this kind of environment all over the place'. For this reason the goal 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.

NGO facilitators also use the distinction between what is secular/human and religious/divine 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 with the victim or Bible-based counseling, are spiritual responses that must be combined with practical responses. For this reason, most sessions focus on how to access legal advice and healthcare professionals, to understand HIV/AIDS, to open a case at the police station, or which communication strategies to use when publicly protesting against SGBV. In this vein, participants and facilitators engage in discussions that appear to desacralise 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; and approach SGBV as a spiritual illness but also acknowledge the implications 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.

## 7 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 bring up the participants' spiritual resilience and strength in preparation for the envisioned healing process, here conceptualised as change for the good for oneself and others. This desire for change is illustrated by the

statements of the 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>14</sup>

Following the introductory session, the facilitators usually explain the scientific concept of gender, the different manifestations and modalities of SGBV, and its socioeconomic impact on development. 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 the facilitators are teaching to the group. These perspectives come with a vocabulary that participants progressively use when talking about gender and violence. In combination with the changing emotional dynamics in the room, this vocabulary 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.

This case illustrates the fact that many men describe themselves as carrying the burden of being unable to talk about personal issues or 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 to 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, a male pastor addressed this problem:

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 difficulties. Men are not superheroes but they also suffer, have their weaknesses. So it is up to men to assume this and be honest with 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 to productively engaging with others, for example by asking for 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 capacity to express his or her emotions.

However, the process involved in talking, its motivations and constraints, had different implications for male and female workshop participants. Male leaders tended to not publicly condemn SGBV for fear of being publicly shamed or judged by male peers as betraying manhood and 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. 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 interpreted here 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 use to explain the silence of women in cases of SGBV in their religious communities. This fear concerns two issues: 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 are often protected by the victim's 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 group members frame their silence as a deliberate choice that is influenced by their personal circumstances. Here 'learning how to talk' is 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 contributes to the breaking of this silence. The interventions encourage religious leaders to reflect on their lives with a view to gender issues and sociopsychological 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>15</sup> Moreover, their willingness to talk about personal issues in a safely mediated

environment is expected to be a step toward their political engagement with gender issues more generally.

## 8 Tactical Activism: Coping with Patriarchal Structures

More than before, today one 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. How can these issues be brought to the heart of religious communities? For the religious leaders who tried to apply the gender transformative approach in their churches, it seems that the actual outcomes of their efforts depended 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 led by her husband. She is also in charge of overseeing the women's fellowship in 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 face. 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 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 roundtable 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 in the way they introduced this subject to the church in the 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 traumatic memories of an SGBV experience in her own life,

which she had suppressed because she had neither the social support nor the skills to address the issue. She made it clear that she felt differently after the workshop because she now knew how to deal with such problems:

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 ... 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.

Other religious leaders mentioned similar feelings of pressure, saying that they were not psychologically prepared to deal with the many problems in their church community. Many expressed anxiety 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 committed to the gender equality 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 Johannesburg conference that was organised under the umbrella of MEA. It brought together religious leaders from various denominations 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. 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 described what for many female religious leaders are the main obstacles to 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 stated that education is a key factor in changing the mindset of male religious leaders:

Researcher: How can we call more faith leaders or attract their attention to 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.

Many male leaders share the interest of these female religious leaders in changing religious structures through education and awareness. However, 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 lives in order to identify potential or real experiences of SGBV.

The refashioning of the workshop participants' self in terms of the expression of emotions and gender roles does not always and necessarily find support in 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 their responses may not have been tactically tailored to serve a larger purpose, such as fighting against patriarchy. While activism may not always be tactical, this case indicates that it can become tactical for those who learn to speak the religio-secular language of gender activism.

## 9 A Space for Partnerships and Networks

The previous section explored the ways participants could become tactical with their activism and how these ways vary in terms of gender and hierarchy in religious structures. In these workshops the mixed-gender audience played a role in how male and female leaders emotionally responded to sessions. An all-male workshop provides more clues on gender dynamics.

In a 2017 workshop in the city of Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), 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 socioeconomic 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. However, for these groups transformative approaches to gender are a marginal rather than a central concern.

The 24 delegates attending this workshop came from different religious denominations. It was closely watched not only by the media but also by law enforcement personnel due to the security concerns of those attending it. Beyond their religious duties, some participants also held influential positions in government structures such as the army, secretariats, or university. 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, nongovernmental, 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. When asked about their expectations, participants stated that they were looking for strategies to identify SGBV in their local contexts, and also wanted information on appropriate ways of acting, places where victims could be referred, 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 the participants similar to what I had 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 the hospital or an NGO that could provide aid. This insistence (see Van Dijk and Molenaar, this volume) equated the position of a religious response to a secular response. 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 of masculinity, such as domestic work or taking care of children. Participants also mentioned that few women know men who help with work in the 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 labeled a 'houseboy' or laughed at not only by other men but also by women. While the video illustrated that some gender-related behavioural changes can be seen in the private sphere, the discussion after the screening made it clear that peer pressure in the public space is a major obstacle for men to advocate change in their society.

Also, for participants in this workshop, Christianity offered a more 'civilised' form for engaging with gender. This can be contrasted to the way they explained the high levels of SGBV in the DRC as the result of 'tribal' idiosyncrasies that come mainly from cultures in the rural areas. While these external forces were pointed to as the main causes of SGBV, religion was considered part of the problem only when participants pointed to false leaders that misinterpret scripture. In this context group members suggested that their role is to help churchgoers find the 'spiritual way' or 'the right way'. They understood this spiritual way to be a means to engage with worshippers 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 in addressing harmful traditional practices. 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 harmful traditional practice, they remain silent because of the power relations in which cultural expectations are embedded' (p. 6).

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 humanitarian response, somewhat of a spiritual humanitarianism. The word 'spiritual' here is understood as going beyond its religious connotations, and also holding 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, was not part of the discussion at the workshop in Goma. Instead, participants demonstrated their knowledge about gender inequalities

by 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 fellowship groups.

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 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 ... so often ... there'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 workshop, which 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 in order for male religious leaders to engage with the religio-secular partnerships associated with the workshop. Although I can only speculate why this happened, one can assume that the contributing factors were 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 such as the chaplain and police.

## 10 Conclusion

This article looked at the ways religious leaders engage with the notion of gender activism and gender transformation during sexual and gender-based violence prevention training workshops. In doing so, I explored the tensions between the public and private dimensions of gender activism in religio-secular partnerships and showed how religious leaders navigate these tensions co-creating a particular language and social space. This language/space allows them to refashion emotional repertoires and make sense of new meanings and practices around the transformation of gender roles and norms. Moreover, this article explored how religious leaders use this language when narrating about their engagements with restrictive gender roles and norms in private and public spheres of social life.

My analysis shows that the cultivation of this language/space has three interrelated effects. First, it gives participants a framework to rearrange meanings and arguments in relation to experiences of distress and trauma caused by SGBV. Although 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. Second, participants and facilitators engage in discussions that seem to desacralise 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 participants' self-awareness and collective action. At the same time, the facilitators seek to make the workshop a safe space for participants in order to stimulate their use of an activist language of transformation. Third, by learning to speak about their own SGBV experiences and those of others 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, churchgoers, and partners to discuss gender; and acquire certified knowledge. In other words, activism becomes tactical as participants develop skills to position themselves in between religious and secular circles.

Yet this tactical approach is marked by gender dynamics. 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 keeping silent about SGBV since they are perceived as not having been socialised into talking about personal feelings, nor are they allowed to be 'weak'. Instead, the exclusively male workshop in Goma focused on reinforcing the position of these leaders in religio-secular partnerships. This workshop focused on establishing

networks of collaboration, discussing access to funding, and sharing gender-related institutional practices, paying little attention on the transformation of personal subjectivity observed in other experiences.

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' (Merrill and West 2009, 1), 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' (ibid.). 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. This process is 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 competence after having learned 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. Further, it helps them cope with patriarchal structures and gender inequalities without necessarily leading to collective activist initiatives.

### Acknowledgement

This research was funded by the Department of Science Policy of the Government of the Basque Country/*Eusko Jaurlaritza* through the postdoctoral fellowship scheme 2017–2020 (Ref.: POS\_2016\_01\_0022). I am especially grateful to Angelica Pino, Mpho Mabhena and Joy Dlamini for their support and insightful remarks throughout the fieldwork in South Africa. I also would like to thank the editors of this special issue for their accurate feedbacks across the various drafts of this article.

### References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2013. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Taylor & Francis. <https://books.google.es/books?id=QT8YAgAAQBAJ>.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Averill, James R. 2004. 'Everyday Emotions: Let Me Count the Ways'. *Social Science Information* 43.4, 571–580. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018404047703>.
- Bader, Veit-Michael. 2007. *Secularism or Democracy? Associational Governance of Religious Diversity*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books New York.
- Bochow, Astrid, and Rijk van Dijk. 2012. 'Christian Creations of New Spaces of Sexuality, Reproduction, and Relationships in Africa: Exploring Faith and Religious Heterotopia'. *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42.4, 325–344. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/15700666-12341235>.
- Broek, Egon van den, Frans van der Sluis, and Ton Dijkstra. 2011. 'Telling the story and re-living the past: How speech analysis can reveal emotions in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) patients'. *Sensing Emotions: The impact of context on experience measurements*, August, 153–180. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-3258-4\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-3258-4_10).
- Burchardt, Marian. 2009. 'Subjects of Counselling: Religion, HIV/AIDS and the Management of Everyday Life in South Africa'. In Felicitas Becker and Wenzel Geissler (eds.), *AIDS and Religious Practice in Africa*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004164000.i-410.110>.
- Burchardt, Marian, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, and Matthias Middell. 2015. *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- Campbell, Arthur. 2013. 'Word-of-Mouth Communication and Percolation in Social Networks'. *The American Economic Review* 103.6, 2466–2498.
- Campbell, Catherine, and Flora Cornish. 2010. 'Towards a "Fourth Generation" of Approaches to HIV/AIDS Management: Creating Contexts for Effective Community Mobilisation'. *AIDS Care* 22.2, 1569–1579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540121.2010.525812>.
- Carlson, Juliana, Erin Casey, Jeffrey L. Edleson, Richard M. Tolman, Tova B. Neugut, and Ericka Kimball. 2015. 'Strategies to Engage Men and Boys in Violence Prevention: A Global Organizational Perspective'. *Violence against Women* 21.11, 1406–1425.
- Casanova, José. 2007. 'Reconsiderar La Secularización: Una Perspectiva Comparada Mundial'. *Revista Académica de Relaciones Internacionales* 7. [www.relacionesinternacionales.info](http://www.relacionesinternacionales.info).
- Cazarin, Rafael. 2017. 'Emotions and Spiritual Knowledge: Navigating (In)Stabilities in Migrant Initiated Churches'. In *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill) doi: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004344181\\_010](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004344181_010).
- Cazarin, Rafael, and Marian Burchardt. 2020. 'Learning How to Feel: Emotional Repertoires of Nigerian and Congolese Pentecostal Pastors in the Diaspora'. In Hansjörg Dilger, Astrid Bochow, Marian Burchardt, Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon (eds.), *Affective Trajectories in Religious African Cityscapes*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Clarke, Gerard. 2007. 'Agents of Transformation? Donors, Faith-Based Organisations and International Development'. *Third World Quarterly* 28.1, 77–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590601081880>.
- Collins, Randall. 2005. *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Comaroff, Jean, and John L. Comaroff. 2008. *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Csordas, Thomas. 1990. 'Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology'. *Ethos* 18.1, 5–47.
- Denzin, Norman. 1984. *On Understanding Emotion*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. A Continuum Book. Herder and Herder. <https://books.google.es/books?id=8pxQAAAAMAAJ>.
- Frijda, Nico H., and Batja Mesquita. 2000. 'Beliefs through Emotions'. In Nico H. Frijda, Antony S.R. Manstead, Sacha Bem (eds.), *Emotions and Belief: How Feelings Influence Thoughts*. Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction. New York: Cambridge University Press, 45–77. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511659904.003>.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. 'Religion as a Cultural System'. In Clifford Geertz (ed.), *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gibbs, Andrew, Cathy Vaughan, and Peter Aggleton. 2015. 'Beyond "Working with Men and Boys": (Re)Defining, Challenging and Transforming Masculinities in Sexuality and Health Programmes and Policy'. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17.2, 85–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1092260>.
- Godbold, Natalya. 2014. 'Researching Emotions in Interactions: Seeing and Analysing Live Processes'. *Emotion Review*, November. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073914554779>.
- Goldie, Peter. 2004. 'Emotion, Feeling, and Knowledge of the World'. In Robert C. Solomon (ed.), *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions*. Series in Affective Science. New York: Oxford University Press, 91–106.
- Gould, Deborah B. 2009. *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. <https://books.google.es/books?id=2FBkJEVLio8C>.
- Gumperz, John. 1968. 'The Speech Community: A Reader'. In Alessandro Duranti (ed.), *Linguistic Anthropology: A Reader*, 66–73. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gumperz, John, and Dell Hymes (eds). 1972. *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Hage, Ghassan. 2005. 'A Not so Multi-Sited Ethnography of a Not so Imagined Community'. *Anthropological Theory* 5.4, 463–475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499605059232>.
- Harding, Susan F. 1987. 'Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion'. *American Ethnologist* 14.1, 167–181.

- Hetherington, Kevin. 1997. *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering*. London: Psychology Press.
- Holmes, Mary. 2010. 'The Emotionalization of Reflexivity'. *Sociology* 44.1, 139–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509351616>.
- Hymes, Dell. 1974. *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*. Communications, Linguistics, Anthropology. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc. <https://books.google.co.za/books?id=B3NIAeabrHwC>.
- Lambek, Michael. 2014. 'The Interpretation of Lives or Life as Interpretation: Cohabiting with Spirits in the Malagasy World'. *American Ethnologist* 41.3, 491–503. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12089>.
- Le Roux, Elisabet, and Brenda Bartelink. 2017. 'No More "Harmful Traditional Practices": Working Effectively with Faith Leaders'. Tearfund. <http://gender-based-violence.jliflc.com/http-study>.
- Luhrmann, Tanya. 2004. 'Metakinesis: How God Becomes Intimate in Contemporary U.S. Christianity'. *American Anthropologist* 106.3, 518–528.
- Lutz, Catherine. 2008. 'Engendered Emotion: Gender, Power, and the Rhetoric of Emotional Control in American Discourse'. In Monica Greco and Paul Stenner (eds.), *Emotions: A Social Science Reader*. London: Routledge, 63–70.
- Marshall, Katherine. 2016. 'Engaging on Global Issues in a UN Setting: Religious Actors'. *Religion, State and the United Nations*. July 22, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315675572-7>.
- Marty, Martin E. 2003. 'Our Religio-Secular World'. *Daedalus* 132.3, 42–48.
- Merrill, B., and L. West. 2009. *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Mosko, Mark S. 2015. 'Unbecoming individuals: The partible character of the Christian person'. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5.1, 361–393. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau5.1.017>.
- Petersen, Marie Juul, and Jannie Le Moigne. 2016. 'Donor Engagement with Religion and Faith-Based Organizations in Development Cooperation: A Brief Overview'. *The Ecumenical Review* 68.4, 387–397. <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12243>.
- Riis, Ole, and Linda Woodhead. 2010. *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*. Oxford University Press.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1970. *Alfred Schutz on Phenomenology and Social Relations*, edited by H.R. Wagner. Heritage of Sociology Series. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=L\\_E5ooryv-cC](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=L_E5ooryv-cC).
- Tomalin, Emma. 2015. *The Routledge Handbook of Religions and Global Development*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Turner, Victor W., Roger D. Abrahams, and Alfred Harris. 1995. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, first edition. New York: Aldine Transaction.
- Van der Veer, Peter (ed.). 1996. *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalisation of Christianity*. New York: Routledge.

- Vaughan, Cathy. 2011. 'Dialogue, Critical Consciousness, and Praxis'. In Derek Hook, Bradley Franks, Martin W. Bauer (eds.), *The Social Psychology of Communication*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 46–66. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230297616\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230297616_3).
- Vaughan, Cathy. 2014. 'Participatory Research with Youth: Idealising Safe Social Spaces or Building Transformative Links in Difficult Environments?' *Journal of Health Psychology* 19.1, 184–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105313500258>.
- Volo, Lorraine de. 2006. 'The Dynamics of Emotion and Activism: Grief, Gender, and Collective Identity in Revolutionary Nicaragua'. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 11.4, 461–474. <https://doi.org/10.17813/mai.11.4.q21r343256121t7>.
- Wenger, Etienne. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Werbner, Richard. 2011. *Holy Hustlers, Schism, and Prophecy. Apostolic Reformation in Botswana*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Winchester, Daniel. 2008. 'Embodying the Faith: Religious Practice and the Making of a Muslim Moral Habitus'. *Social Forces* 86.4, 1753–1780.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. London: Macmillan.
- Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika, and Marian Burchardt. 2012. 'Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities'. *Comparative Sociology* 11.6, 875–909. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691330-12341249>.

## Notes

- 1 The acronym 'SGBV' is used throughout the text since it is consistently used by stakeholders in documents, conversations, and events.
- 2 Only a select number of views were captured since full transcriptions were not available.
- 3 This concept is defined in the following section.
- 4 In this article the notion of safe space is based on three interrelated definitions: one extracted from the curriculum that guides Sonke's workshops, and the scholarly definition to which the curriculum alludes that is rooted in an interdisciplinary approach to social change. The latter is a compendium of psychological and social elements that shape group interactions in a relational space and thus enables change (Campbell 2013; Vaughan 2014). A third element refers to the emic understanding of safe space that points to (Christian) spiritual and religious meanings attributed to a safe space, which appeared in different occasions throughout the fieldwork. The intersections of these elements are addressed in one of the sections of this article.
- 5 A specific section in this article is dedicated to coining a more precise definition of this concept.
- 6 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).

- 7 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.
- 8 The regional segments currently are Africa, Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, North America, Latin America, South Asia, and Europe. For more information see [men-gage.org](http://men-gage.org).
- 9 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 an NGO practitioner attended and reported back with recorded sessions, interviews, and questionnaires. In this paper I only refer to the cases that I was personally able to attend.
- 10 There were thirty participants (18 males) in Durban; 29 participants (twelve males) in Johannesburg; twelve participants (seven males) at the Symposium in Johannesburg; eleven participants (eight males) in Maputo; 19 male participants in Goma.
- 11 Participants came from the following denominations: Adventists, Anglicans, Baptists, Zionist, Pentecostal-Charismatics, Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists.
- 12 A 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.
- 13 The workshop manual 'Working with Men and Boys: Gender and Sexual & Reproductive Health Manual' is just one of several tools available.
- 14 These statements are from a participant observation report of the introductory session of a workshop in which participants were asked about their expectations.
- 15 Through informal conversations with facilitators and female participants, I learned that they knew of instances where male religious leaders were merely pretending to have become a transformed person during a workshop. Doing so allowed these men to benefit from the social networks amongst workshop participants, but also from certain material resources that come with participation such as travel expenses, food, and accommodations. Since for most participants the workshops are one-off events, I was not able to gather information on whether they had transformed themselves after a workshop had ended.