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# UNHEARD VOICES OF WOMEN IN THE BIBLE, WITH IMPLICATIONS OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF TODAY'S CHURCH

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the current status of women in the church and compares this with the status of women in the Bible. The unheard voices of women in the Bible have a corrective impact on the way in which women currently deal with their social ills. This article journeys with a narrative from the New Testament that encourages deconstruction of discourses that are harmful to women and reconstruction of healthy discourses that are inclusive and do not discriminate against women on the basis of gender. As the empowerment of women is located within the discourses of gender equality, a gender lens, which is a biblical liberation hermeneutic of *vhusadzi* theology, is employed to reconstruct positive discourses regarding people's perceptions about women in societies. The researchers argue that the unheard voices of women are still an issue and that the empowerment of women still needs to be prioritised. The church can play a significant role in contributing towards the empowerment of women.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although they are a majority of the South African population, African women in South Africa remain on the periphery of the margins of our communities (Masenya 2012).

In South Africa, women are in the majority in both the country and the church, but they have no voice. Few women occupy leadership positions in the church, and the *status quo* of a boys' choir or boys' club is still intact. The researchers make use of the *vhusadzi* theology to answer the following questions: What are the unheard voices of women in the Bible? What was done to empower them? What are the challenges of today's women? In what way can the church contribute to the empowerment of women?

This article briefly explains what the *vhusadzi* theology entails. This will be followed by an outline of a narrative from the New Testament, namely John 7:53-8:11. In conversation with this narrative, observations and empowerment discourses will emerge and be commented on. Empowerment as a multidimensional concept will be examined from the perspective of the church. The role of the church can contribute significantly to the empowerment of women.

## 2. THE VHUSADZI THEOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

*Vhusadzi* is a Venda word which literally means "womanhood". As a Muvenda woman who is in the leadership of one of the Pentecostal churches in Venda, Limpopo province, the commitment to the *vhusadzi* theology was a result of seeking to expose the dilemma and reality of women's experiences pertaining to leadership in the church. While studying the role of women in the ministry in Pentecostal churches in Venda, a *vhusadzi* theology was formulated to engage critically with the role of religion, in particular the Christian religion, its sacred texts and African culture on women in ministry. African women and their community are not allowed to conduct meaningful lives, and they have no access to resources and services (LenkaBula 2006:93). *Vhusadzi* theology is an endeavour to find an African-South African voice challenging people's perceptions that are harmful to women. This theology encompasses the experiences and expectations of Vhavenda women living in the Limpopo province, in South Africa, and globally. It resuscitates and captures the reality of a Black African-South African Muvenda woman to find ways to speak about God and to describe her struggles in the church that deny her full equal human status.

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1 This theology is based on a research thesis entitled "The impact of religious and cultural discourses on the leadership development of women in the ministry: A *vhusadzi* (womanhood) perspective", submitted at the University of South Africa in 2011 under the supervision of Prof. C. Landman. It is also based on an article by Mudimeli & Landman (2014).

The *vhusadzi* theology challenges the negative impact of religious and cultural discourses that influence the role women play in the church or ministry. The *vhusadzi* theology encourages women to read the passages that are used to deny them their full status as human beings. This is done by rereading texts in the Bible from a *musadzi* (woman)'s perspective and in taking cognisance of the attitudes and perceptions that work against her. African women struggle with serious issues of injustice pertaining to institutionalised sexism, patriarchy, racism and other biases that impede their access not only to land and resources that can lead to a better livelihood, but also to leadership roles.

On the other hand, the *vhusadzi* theology upholds and promotes the religious and cultural practices that bestow value and dignity on women's lives. However, it also calls into account those who have the potential to create cultural norms that dehumanise women and label them as second-class church members and citizens. Significantly, by questioning the unquestionable and suggesting the alternatives, the *vhusadzi* theology has the potential to create a conducive environment for women to address issues that make them vulnerable to both religious and cultural dehumanising discourses, thereby finding alternatives to the treatment of women. It focuses on the following: leadership of women in the church; developing this theology in its relation to God (or teachings about God); its relation to the person of Christ (Christology); its relation to the Holy Spirit, and the church and its practices (ecclesiology).

Although the *vhusadzi* theology cannot claim total liberation of these women, it does contribute to the proper treatment of women by giving them a voice that challenges the perceptions and powerful negative discourses that are harmful to women's lives. It is, therefore, proper to mention that the *vhusadzi* theology is an African and South African voice that challenges the perceptions that have long been held by both men and women and that deny women leadership development in the ministry. It proves itself to be a life-affirming theology critically engaging the role of religion and, in particular, the Christian religion and its sacred texts, on the one hand, and culture, in particular the Vhavenda culture, on the other, in both the marginalisation and affirmation of women in the leadership of the church.

### 3. THE OUTLINE OF JOHN 7:53-8:11

This text is about an adulterous woman who has no voice. The narrative begins when Jesus is at the temple. A woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to him by the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, asking Jesus' opinion on the case (John 8:3-6). The woman was made to stand

before the group and addressed as “this woman”. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus when they said that “in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” (John 8:5). Jesus bent down and wrote something on the ground for the first time, and when they continued questioning him, he straightened up and answered them: “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone on her” (John 8:7). He stooped down again and wrote on the ground. When Jesus straightened up this time he addressed the woman about those who were accusing her: “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (John 8:10). The narrative ends with the woman’s response that no one has condemned her. Jesus responded: “Neither do I condemn you, go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11).

This text would be re-read and interpreted through a *vhusadzi* theology which critically analyses biblical texts, deconstructing the negative elements of Christian religion, patriarchal discourses and cultural discourses, thereby reconstructing the alternative discourses that give a voice to women who read the Bible and adhere to many churches (Mudimeli 2011:44). The text is read as a narrative of how Jesus, as a man in his position as a saviour, responds to the state of affairs where other men are threatening to exercise the death penalty by stoning a woman and the stoning is motivated on religious grounds (O’Sullivan 2015:2).

### 3.1 The voiceless and nameless woman

It is not uncommon in the Scriptures to have women without a name and without a voice. In most of the narratives in the sacred texts of Christians, women are seen and not heard. As is the case in a patriarchal world, women are not named by their personal names, but in terms of their relationship to their male patrons, thus victimising them even more (Masenya 2012:212). This woman was caught in the very act; that means she was seen, but never heard. She awaited her sentence amidst men, without being given a fair trial, because she was a woman. To a *vhusadzi* reader, this kind of attitude toward women is problematic, because no one can assume to know how a woman thinks and feels in any given situation, except the woman herself. Who was going to engage her in public? According to the Jews, men were not allowed to speak to women in public, because women could seduce the men and lead them into sin (Baloyi 2010:3). It is evident that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law did not engage this woman after they caught her in the act. If this incident took place among the Vhavenda people, they would have handled this differently. It is not in the culture of the Vhavenda to place a woman in this state among men. They could have gathered the elderly women, who were trusted by the

community, to handle matters of this kind. On the other hand, the men who were there were not expecting Jesus to engage her in public, or else he would have been violating the Jewish law.

When the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman who had been caught in adultery to Jesus, they dehumanized her, turning her into an object for debate and discussion (Newson & Ringe 1998:385).

The researchers opine that the silence and voicelessness of women were not by choice, but were relegated to it. This consignment where men silenced women was part of the patriarchal nature of the Jewish culture (Lungu 2016:34-37; Manus & Ukaga 2017:69).

The accused is a woman and the other characters, namely Jesus and the woman's prosecutors are all men. There is a connection in the story of this woman and the general prejudices against women in the community. As a *musadzi* (woman) reader of the Bible, in contexts where African women face issues of injustice pertaining not only to gender discrimination, but also to racism, limited land access and resources, should a woman nowadays still be quiet in the name of preserving religion or culture? Should women continue to be taught that they should be quiet and the Lord will fight for them? Or should women raise their voices and speak against the injustices, as empowered to do so by Jesus? This accused is, in fact, a "non-person" (Toensing 2003:159, 162) without a name and she is only recognised and labelled by the complaint against her. She is reduced to an offensive sexual object and treated as an inactive and submissive entity for deliberation, a public exhibition and used as an enticement to catch Jesus in a snare (Manus & Ukaga 2017:67). Indeed, when a woman is a non-person, she should die quietly for fear of defying the perceptions held against her.

In the text of John, symbolic characters are often used deliberately to increase their impact to represent collectives without losing their own particular characteristics (Schneiders 1999:189). The woman has to fend for herself, without a lawyer, amongst men with power and influence, a power that can pronounce the death penalty on women (O'Sullivan 2015:2; Manus & Ukaga 2017:66). She is part of an andro-centric and kyriarchal (where men rule as lord, owner and master [*kyrios*] over women) society (Lev. 12:1-8; Wordelman 1998:390, 396). She touches some raw nerves in this society (Lee 1996:3).

### 3.2 The accusers of the woman

The woman's accusers, namely the scribes and the Pharisees, belong to secular and sacred groups that practised the exclusion of women (Lungu 2016:36; Manus & Ukaga 2017:66). The temple area is probably the

court that women could visit. The inferior position of women in religion was expressed and confirmed outside the temple building (Witherington 1990:8). The section of the temple from which women were excluded during their menstruation period and after they gave birth could also be the scene. This dominant patriarchal scenario had to contribute to the panic, shame and humiliation that this woman had to experience (Lungu 2016:37; Manus & Ukaga 2017:66). When the woman was caught on the spot committing adultery, she was possibly naked and appeared naked in public for all to see. This would have further humiliated her.

The scribes and Pharisees probably interrupted Jesus' teaching by both making a loud noise and acting with authority. The accusation against the woman, according to them, was very grave and severe. They showed the sense of their inherited religious justice. According to Baker (2002:322-326), they probably knew the theme that is founded in prophets such as Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, where the symbol of adultery is used to describe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as a relationship between faithful spouse and an adulterous wife. God commanded that Israel should be killed because of her unfaithfulness and as a warning to all women (Ezek. 23:46-49). Adultery was a very strong metaphor for apostasy and idolatry. This woman was a real or potential image of Israel's unfaithfulness to God who had to be punished for her adultery. The cultural understanding of male honour and the view that women are the possessions of men might also play a role in this instance (Kiambi 2012:7-10).

There is no mention in the text of the man caught in adultery (Kinukawa 1995:90), despite Deuteronomy prescribing that the man caught in adultery must also be killed (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22-29; Reinhartz 2000:455). In patriarchal societies, this kind of prejudice is maintained in public structures that only serve men, namely the church, communities and the home. The conventional death penalty was, as a rule, stoning for all forms of adultery (Ezek. 16:38-40) and was still practised in Jesus' time (Brown 1966:333). In this story, double standards are applied where only the woman is accused and not the man (Creegan 2002:41-42). The church should discourage the use of double standards when it comes to the treatment of women and men.

It is likely that the Pharisees and scholars perceived themselves as righteous and devoted men who lived out their sacred obligation given by God to kill this woman, but their most important goal was to ensnare Jesus (Manus & Ukaga 2017:67). They did so within the context and vicinity of the temple, in order to enhance the religious character of their attack on Jesus (Schussler Fiorenza 1983:140-143).

### 3.3 The role of Jesus in the story

Society viewed Jesus as a teacher with authority who could express a valid opinion on religious matters. The scribes and the Pharisees were conscious of Jesus' open-minded opinion and way of thinking about women (Saunders 1996:83). They wanted to test Jesus to see if he would contravene the Law of Moses, in this instance, which prescribed that a woman caught in adultery should receive the death penalty. Jesus reinterprets this in the story (O'Sullivan 2015:3; Manus & Ukaga 2017:66, 70).

The author of the story gives Jesus' reaction insightfully. Jesus is tasked with meeting the responsibilities of God, Scripture and the people around him in this context where the woman faces the death penalty (Schottroff 1995:184).

Jesus reverses the situation that illustrates the value of his salvation from God who sent him to save those in need and in sin. Jesus shifts from the worldview of and identification with the righteous male authority to a worldview of salvation towards a woman offender (Lee 1996:12). He confronts the male accusers (scribes and Pharisees) with his redeeming worldview. The men face their own sinfulness and leave the scene without saying a word (Manus & Ukaga 2017:67). Jesus does not condemn the woman; he sends her away with salvation and empowerment from her death-threatening situation (Manus & Ukaga 2017:73-74).

Jesus is the revelation of God's salvation and saves the woman from a violent death. Jesus moved away from the religious community where women experienced violence, sanctified by religion and which was part of Jesus' own sacred customs (Schneiders 2000:101). Jesus' religious viewpoint means that he also rejected other elements where death is part of the culture and history of society (O'Sullivan 2015:4; Manus & Ukaga 2017:70). God's righteousness reconciles the relationship between women and men. There is a new order of salvation that has implications for the relationship between women and men, for religious cultural values and norms, and for social and church structures and institutions of all ages (Lungu 2016:38).

Jesus looks towards, and not down on the woman (Malone 1985:34). For her sake, Jesus re-interpreted the Law of Moses (Thistlewaite 1989:307). The way in which Jesus talks to the woman as a person reflects his humanity and spirituality. Jesus empowers the woman and her unheard voice so that she can be heard in the story. Jesus talks and listens to her. He treats her with empowerment, care and dignity, as befits a human being. The treatment contradicts the actions of the scribes and the Pharisees who demonstrate their dominance. Jesus responds to her traumatic experience

of shock, trembling, feelings, and speech loss (O'Sullivan 2015:4). This action confirms that Jesus is truly the Saviour (Manus & Ukaga 2017).

### 3.4 The implications of Jesus' actions

Not only is the shocking violence against women addressed, but the other dimensions of female suppression and oppression in society are also rejected. The new era of salvation and deliverance by Jesus is confirmed and women are treated with respect, because Jesus also communicates with the woman. This brings to an end the viewpoint that women should regard suffering as an ordeal, a tribulation or a chastisement by God to make them commendable for deliverance and eternal life after death (O'Sullivan 2010:139-154).

This narrative creates a scriptural foundation for, and comprehension of the link between deliverance and the context of patriarchal aggression against women during the time of Jesus. This story disapproves of some biblical texts that often fail to assist women to be free. The *Vhusadzi* theology encourages women to study the Bible and deliberately use texts that empower them. Often, Biblical texts demonise women, humiliate their sexuality, and remove them from the history of salvation (Schneiders 1999:182). If the Bible can be used as a weapon to disempower women, it can also be used to empower them. This only depends on in whose hands it is.

### 3.5 The current relevance of the story

According to Schneiders (1999:147, 173), the passage is not only a narrative about ancient times; it is also relevant to the contemporary reader. Schneider describes her context as confronted and changed by the principles of God's salvation. The text paves the way for interpreters towards beauty, comprehension, honesty, kindness and affection regarding the Saviour and the scenario of patriarchic aggression against women (O'Sullivan 2015:5; Lungu 2016:40; Manus & Ukaga 2017:75).

This text and other contemporary emerging feminist perspectives and the empowerment of the Bible in Christianity influences today's women who read this text with, for example, cracked bones, a black eye and a bloody nose, due to aggression by men, in contrast with their perception of their circumstances. By observing the *vhusadzi* theology, women are encouraged to speak and to voice the discriminations and exploitations against them, causing the walls of patriarchy in our societies to crumble down. Even if we cannot fight patriarchy in one day, women can still raise their voices higher and fight it:

Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst (John 8:9).

In this story Jesus intervened against men with power and prevented the woman from being executed. She recovered from her shock and ordeal. This story can speak to women: instead of believing that God somehow brings violence against them, they can believe that Jesus also wants to empower them. Jesus emphasised that God's order of salvation also puts an end to current aggression towards women and to powers in public and sacred spheres that cause violence. Jesus wants to promote kind, considerate and thoughtful relationships of equality between men and women in church and society (O'Sullivan 2015:6).

Jesus is not only a character in the text and story, but he is also the Risen Christ who has a continuing concern to end violence against women in the world and bring about transformation in society (Schneiders 1999:106). Jesus acts with confidence in his own religious experience and interpretation of the religious tradition of his people to function with authority in relation to the religious and cultural significance of the situation with which he was confronted in this story. Jesus empowers the woman to be empowered (O'Sullivan 2015:6). This text empowers Jesus' followers to address male violence against women in contemporary contexts. The unheard voice of a woman has been heard. In Jesus' time, women in Jewish culture were not educated; their husbands were responsible for their salvation (Gennrich 2008:42). Jesus publicly spoke to a woman and waited for her response. Jesus' response empowers the woman. He told a great deal about the status and circumstances of women in his days.

On the basis of the above text and rereading it through a *vhusadzi* theology, the following facts emerge: Women had no names and no voice; their status was within the periphery of their communities; they were vulnerable to social ills; their lives were characterised by discrimination and exploitation; their societies were patriarchal and double standards were mostly preferred; there was an interplay between negative religious and cultural discourses, and women were victims of violence.

On reading these narratives, the question arises as to what the church is doing to prioritise the protection of women against all contemporary social ills. Is the church pursuing patriarchal attitudes towards women or is the church, as the church of Jesus Christ, responding positively to women?

#### 4. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The head of the church is Christ:

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy (Col. 1:18).

Everything that is done in the church should resemble both the mind and the purpose of Jesus Christ. Anything in the church that does not contribute to the understanding that Jesus has and wants us to have about the church is not from him. Jesus' view of women is evident throughout the Gospels. In defying the patriarchal view of the world Jesus in the Gospels spoke to women in public and risked public disgrace; had women as close friends, discussed theology with them, and even trusted women with the news of his resurrection. He also affirmed the courage of a woman with a menstrual disorder for breaking a taboo and coming out in public in the hope of being healed, and he challenged women's traditional service role when he told Martha that Mary had the right idea when she preferred to sit and talk with him and learn from him rather than doing housework (Gennrich 2008:30).

The church should first and foremost – and by all means – make it a priority to regain the lost dignity of women (Baloyi 2010:6).

If one could ask today's church how many voices in the church are still silenced, the response would indicate that there are still many voices that are silenced within the church, not counting voices outside it. Most of these silenced voices are those of women. Women's voices are silenced in the leadership positions of the church:

Even though women were very active in the early missionary activity of the church, they were gradually excluded from leadership positions ... Reasons given were that women were sexually impure, intellectually limited and passive. Even today, some churches say that women are psychologically unsuited to be ordained. The church has also insisted that women should focus on the home because of their natural roles as caregivers, since they give birth (Gennrich 2008:31).

It would be different if the church, as the body of Christ, could be obedient and learn from his example. If today's church could learn from Jesus, it would not use the Bible as an enemy against women.

It is a travesty of women's rights that the Bible has been misinterpreted and abused to embellish, formalise and legalise societal values and norms which subject women to abuse by men (Baloyi 2010:6).

Rather, if the church learns from Jesus, it could understand that

there are substantial portions of the Bible which describe a world where the oppressed are liberated; the last becomes first; the humbled are uplifted; the despised are preferred; those who have been rejected are welcome; the long-suffering are rewarded; the dispossessed are repossessed; and the arrogant are prostrated (Masenya 1999:232).

The church has a vital function to fulfil in the empowerment of women. The *Vhusadzi* theology raises its voice, this time not to stand against, but to applaud all the churches (in some where women are pastors) that encourage women to study theology and allow them to serve in leadership positions, not only as leaders of other women or as pastors to the children, but also as pastors to the church. As a pastor, I have taken it upon myself to raise my voice along with many other voices in the churches that are united and encourage the churches' decision to empower women. The church could also sponsor women's economic projects so that women can be economically viable. Many churches have preaching themes for a whole quarter or for a year; the church could deliberately choose a theme on women empowerment in order to address women's issues in the church. For example:

the God proclaimed in the Bible identifies with those humanity despises – women, the physically challenged, Blacks and the poor (to name but a few categories of disenfranchised peoples) (Masenya 1999:236).

It would be remarkable if the church could challenge its own

language in the church liturgy and official pronouncements that refers to God's people as male ("sons of God", "all men"), and when women are no longer sexually violated or abused by the priests or ministers, or when the church challenge sexual abuse of women by their members and in society (Gennrich 2008:32).

With respect to the current treatment of women and on the basis of the above text, including many other texts that are read only with the intention to strengthen women's inferior position, not only in society but also in the church, the *vhusadzi* theology suggests the following to the church and its leadership (see also Mudimeli 2011:183): Courses should be designed with women leadership in mind; intentional pastoral

and leadership trainings should be geared for women; as Scriptures are used to strengthen women's inferior position, they should also be used to strengthen women's leadership roles in the church; the church should encourage more women to study, teach and do research in theology, and women should be exposed to different fields such as gender studies, human behavioural sciences, and ethical leadership that add value to their work in the church.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The researchers have re-read the narrative from John 7:53-8:11 from the perspective of a *vhusadzi* theology. Throughout this article, this theology has attempted to give a voice to voiceless women by encouraging them to use the Bible in order to question the injustices against them. The unheard voices of women in the Bible somehow have a corrective impact on the way in which the church should treat women nowadays. The article also made suggestions as to how best the church can contribute to women empowerment, as one of the issues that need to be prioritised in the church.

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John 7:53-8:11

*Vhusadzi* (womanhood) theology

Women empowerment

Gender equality in the church

**Trefwoorde**

Johannes 7:53-8:11

*Vhusadzi* (vrouwees)-benadering

Bemagtiging van vroue

Geslagsgelykheid in die kerk