Theology and Women's Agency in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence in Ghana

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SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a growing problem in sub-Saharan Africa that limits women's agency. Various studies have found that cultural norms and religion sustain women's experiences of IPV, inspiring various theories among feminist scholars and within religion on women's agency. This study determines whether and how theology contributes to the agency of IPV survivors. I draw upon constructivist grounded theory to inductively analyze the stories of thirteen abused Christian women in a mainline church in southern Ghana. My findings indicate that multiple systems, including informal social support networks, constrain survivors while simultaneously serving as conditions for their personal faith and individually constructed theologies. Indeed, these serve as catalysts to their self-enactments and emerging agency. These findings provide nuance to existing (and contested) conceptions of agency.

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a growing concern in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), inspiring debate on the controversial role of religion in the region. For example, Nyambura Jane Njoroge maintains that patriarchal theologies restrict women from active participation in the home and church and perpetuate their experiences of IPV.[1] This controversy has inspired discourse among feminist scholars on the significance of religion in relation to women's agency in the context of IPV. Drawing on interviews with Christian female survivors of IPV in a mainline Protestant church in Ghana, this paper explores the nature of the agency that emerges from the meanings that abused Christian women conceive of their experiences with IPV and church theology. Adopting a constructivist grounded theory (CGT)

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1   Nyambura J. Njoroge, "The Missing Voice: African Women Doing Theology," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997): 81–82.

approach, I analyze survivors' experiences and responses to partner violence and church theologies with the aim of providing nuance to the existing discourse on agency among IPV survivors in religious contexts. I briefly review the most relevant research in the Ghanaian context and then position my research in relation to theoretical feminist arguments regarding the intersection of religion/theology, agency, and violence. Subsequently, I describe the methods of empirical study used, present the empirical results, and analyze the connections among them before offering conclusions.

1. IPV in Ghana

IPV is a social scourge with dehumanizing effects on women's health, rights, and development.[2] The World Health Organization (WHO) conceptualizes IPV as any act of domination or aggression against women or other persons by their partners or ex-partners that results in economic, sexual, physical, verbal, or psychological harm.[3] In SSA, 44% of women experience IPV.[4] Statistics in Ghana indicate that 28% and 20% of women and men, respectively, experience some form of domestic violence nationwide.[5] Furthermore, gendered inequity is endemic in all structures of Ghanaian society despite the Affirmative Action Plan of 1998,[6] meaning that relatively few women are represented in public office or in decision-making roles. Ghana's 1992 constitution and the country's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provide policies and institutional frameworks for reporting abuse, such as the Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit, yet studies report that sociocultural norms stigmatize women and men who speak out.[7]

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[2]   Janet Henshall Momsen, *Gender and Development*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2010).
[3]   World Health Organization*, Responding to Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Violence against Women: WHO Clinical and Policy Guidelines* (Geneva, 2013), vii.
[4]   Muluken D. Muluneh et al., "Gender Based Violence against Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Cross-Sectional Studies," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, 903 (2020): 1, 15.
[5]   Ghana Statistical Service (GSS), Ghana Health Service (GHS), and ICF International, *Ghana Demographic and Health Survey 2014* (Maryland: GSS, 2015).
[6]   Dodzi Tsikata, *Affirmative Action and the Prospects for Gender Equality in Ghanaian Politics* (Accra: Abantu, Women in Broadcasting and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2009), http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ghana/10484.pdf.
[7]   Margaret Ivy Amoakohene, "Violence against Women in Ghana: A Look at Women's Perceptions and Review of Policy and Social Responses," *Social Science & Medicine* 59,

A plethora of research considers the interconnections between agency, gender, IPV, and religion. Evidence from the legal disciplines, for example, shows that factors such as the traditional norms of marital privacy, as well as rigid gender roles (including women's economic dependence on men), contribute to IPV and inhibit the enforcement of human rights.[8] Social policy studies have determined that, despite existing government initiatives, strong cultural and religious beliefs and practices support patriarchy, silence women, and perpetuate IPV.[9] However, few studies have considered the interconnection of IPV and religion in Ghana as found in other countries in the field of sociology.[10]

The few existing findings on religion's role in IPV in Ghana are contradictory. For example, one study based on three strands of the Ghana Demographic Health Survey documents religion's role in reducing cultural practices such as polygamy, thus, transforming the family structure and effectively reducing violence.[11] Another survey reports variations in IPV between women of various religious denominations.[12] As shown in the field of theology,[13] Christian churches in several parts of SSA are particularly adamant and inadequate in their responses to IPV due to patriarchy, cultural norms, and

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no. 11 (2004): 2373–2385; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 109–30, 136–7.

8   Nancy Cantalupo et al., "Domestic Violence in Ghana: The Open Secret," *Georgetown Journal of Gender and the Law* 7, no. 3 (2006): 531.

9   Dora A. Owusu, "Mute in Pain: The Power of Silence in Triggering Domestic Violence in Ghana," *Social Alternatives* 35, no. 1 (2016): 26–32, https://doi.org/10.3316/ielapa.243661809369078; Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 10, 151.

10   Nancy Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 46, 103.

11   Tim B. Heaton and Akosua Darkwah, "Religious Differences in Modernization of the Family," *Journal of Family Issues* 32, no. 12 (2011): 1576–96.

12   Baffour K. Takyi and Enoch Lamptey, "Faith and Marital Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: Exploring the Links between Religious Affiliation and Intimate Partner Violence among Women in Ghana," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 35, no. 1–2 (2020): 36–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516676476.

13   For example, Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale, "Domestic Abuse in Marriage and Self-Silencing: Pastoral Care in a Context of Self-Silencing," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 74, no. 2 (2018): 6–7, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-ec6377adb; Jillian E. H. Damron and Andy J. Johnson, "Violence against Women in Religious Communities: An Introduction," in *Religion and Men's Violence against Women,* ed. Andy J. Johnson (NY: Springer, 2015), 4–6.

untrained clergy that contribute to multiple kinds of abuse towards women,[14] including female ritual servitude (in which women are enslaved in indigenous shrines).[15] While faith leaders are well equipped to deal with violence,[16] churches' complicity perpetuates IPV through naïve scripture interpretations, practices, and theologies.[17]

The findings of the above-mentioned studies suggest that women are silenced and compelled to comply,[18] potentially implying that even more women than indicated in statistics experience various forms of partner abuse with health implications and limited possibilities to act.[19] While most studies focus on how religion tolerates gender violence, there is a lack of studies examining how religion can contribute to addressing and resisting IPV in Ghana. The few existing studies on women's agency in Ghana conceptualize agency as a negotiated act between survivors and their extended families[20] or as a lack of choice and participation in economic and social productivity.[21] However, there is a lack of knowledge on whether and

[14] Angela Dwamena-Aboagye, *Ministering to the Hurting: Women's Mental Health and Pastoral Response in Ghana* (Accra: UG Press, 2021), 130–1.

[15] David Stiles-Ocran, "Constructing a Heterotopic Christian Social Practice in Ghana." (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2021).

[16] Elisabet le Roux et al., "Getting Dirty: Working with Faith Leaders to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence," *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 3 (2016): 22–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2016.1215837; Rose Mary Amega-Etego, "Violence against Women in Contemporary Ghanaian Society," *Theology & Sexuality* 13, no. 1 (2006): 23–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/1355835806069783.

[17] Elorm A. Stiles-Ocran, "No Way Out? The Dilemma of Survivors of Domestic Violence and the Church's Response in Ghana." (MA diss., VID Specialized University, 2020); Owusu, *Mute in Pain*, 30–31.

[18] Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 72; Elorm Stiles-Ocran, "Women's Stolen Voices in Marriage in Ghana: The Role of Gender, Culture and Religion in Intimate Partner Violence," *Diaconia. Journal for the Study of Christian Social Practice* 12, no. 2 (2021): 182-186.

[19] Nata Duvvury, Stacey Scriver, Sarah Gammage & Neetu John, "The Impacts of Violence against Women on Choice and Agency: Evidence from Ghana and Pakistan," *Women's Studies International Forum* 89, no. 102536 (2021): 5, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2021.102536; UN Women, *Ending Violence against Women and Girls: Programming Essentials* (NY: UN Women, 2013).

[20] Stephen Baffour Adjei, "Entrapment of Victims of Spousal Abuse in Ghana," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 32, no. 5 (2017): 742–6.

[21] Duvvury et al., "The Impacts of Violence," 5–8.

how Christian theology contributes to women's agency in the face of IPV, a research gap that this article aims to narrow.

2. The Context of IPV and Agency: An Integrated Theoretical Lens

The concept of agency originally emerged from social theory in feminist literature and was defined on the premise of male experience, freedom, autonomy of choice, and preference.[22] Eventually, notions of agency as resistance to oppression came to dominate feminist scholarship in the 1990s, including the concept of creative self-construction.[23] This resistance was often conceptualized in the Western literature through the act of either reporting abuse or leaving abusive relationships,[24] the latter involving a gradual process for most abused women, with fear being a central motivation.[25]

However, non-Western anthropologists and gender/feminist/womanist theologians maintain that such essentialist ideological constructions of women's agency assume that everyone shares an identical experience of oppression. They criticize these constructions as limiting the agentic action and potential agency of non-Western women in constrained relationships.[26] Their studies contend that, in many ways, women are more agentive than is generally perceived in Western thought.[27] According to Saba Mahmood, the

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[22] Orit Avishai, "Theorizing Gender from Religion Cases: Agency, Feminist Activism, and Masculinity," *Sociology of Religion* 77, no. 3 (2016): 265.

[23] Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (UK: Polity, 2000), 1–3.

[24] Neil Andersson et al., "Barriers to Disclosing and Reporting Violence among Women in Pakistan: Findings from a National Household Survey and Focus Group Discussions," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 25, no. 11 (2010): 1966–8.

[25] Maria Lindgren Scheffer and Barbro Renck, "Intimate Partner Violence and the Leaving Process: Interviews with Abused Women," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 3, no. 2 (2008): 116–20.

[26] Kandiyoti Deniz, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," *Gender & Society* 2, no. 3 (1988): 274–90. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124388002003004; Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 83.

[27] See, for example, Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Project*, revised ed. (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011); Lila Abu Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–790, https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783; Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter, "Liberated through Submission?: The Worthy Woman's Conference as a Case Study of

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meanings and effects of various modalities of agency are ignored in dominant feminist discourse.[28] She argues that, although non-liberal Muslim women comply with religious norms, they privately and collectively interpret religious texts to allow for self-transformation.[29] Therefore, she contends that agency is a social construct that not only entails overt actions but also acts within oppression to cultivate possibilities for social transformation.[30] Following Mahmood, Elisabet le Roux claims that, in contexts where religious texts and laws compel women to comply, understanding varied forms of women's agency can prevent the misinterpretation of their actions as compliance to patriarchy.[31]

Meanwhile, feminist theologians, such as Alison Downie, stress that agency is not only individual but also relational, promoting the development, expression, and flourishing of life for vulnerable persons in limiting contexts.[32] The Concerned African Women Theologians[33] acknowledge that violence against women extends throughout society, including inside the church, where patriarchal theologies neglect women's lived experiences, deny women's full humanity, silence them, and exclude them from participating with men.[34] Consequently, they frame African women's agency

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For*men*ism. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 26*, no. 2 (2010): 141–51, https://doi.org/10.2979/FSR.2010.26.2.141; Rachel Rinaldo, "Pious and Critical: Muslim Women Activists and the Question of Agency," *Gender & Society* 28, no. 6 (2014): 826–7, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214549352.

28   Mahmood, *"*Politics of Piety*,"* 222.
29   Mahmood, "Politics of Piety," 80, 184–6.
30   Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 217–22, https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2001.16.2.202;
Rachel Jewkes and Robert Morrell, "Sexuality and the Limits of Agency among South African Teenage Women: Theorising Femininities and Their Connections to HIV Risk Practices," *Social Science & Medicine* 74, no. 11 (2012): 1729–37.
31   Elisabet le Roux, "Can Religious Women Choose? Holding the Tension between Complicity and Agency," *African Journal of Gender and Religion* 25, no. 1 (2019): 7–11.
32   Alison Downie, "Shame, Sin, Mental Illness, and a Feminist Theology of Agency," *Journal of Disability and Religion* 24, no. 1 (2020): 29–39), https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2019.1694461.
33   A Pan-African academic association of women who are committed to research and publication, also known as the Circle. They engage with communities to investigate and understand how religions affect women's lives in order to empower women and their communities.
34   Njoroge, "The Missing Voice," 81–2.

in terms of joint efforts with women in the pews to seek new ways of reading the Bible in pursuit of liberating, justice-oriented theologies that resist oppressive cultural norms.[35]

Denise M. Ackermann goes further, believing that such a theology demands praxis in which groups comprising only of marginalized women, without the presence of clergy or academics, critically study biblical texts and devise strategies of resistance in the face of constraining sexist practices.[36] Such readings introduce new perspectives that are needed, on the one hand, to challenge dominant and discriminatory texts and, on the other, creatively reconstruct meaningful and germane ones.[37]

These feminist discourses on religion, violence, and agency show that religion is a site of oppression that replicates gendered power dynamics, as well as being a site of constant resistance and recognition of the self, family, and community, thus, allowing for more nuanced and refined definitions of agency.[38] Their arguments align with Laura M. Ahearn's assertion that a broader definition of agency is needed. That is, one that may not always and necessarily equate agency to human action and resistance but, rather, embraces multiple actions and meanings, whether individually, collectively, or consciously enacted.[39] The present article's analysis of the empirical material engages with the nuanced conception of agency introduced by non-Western scholars to ask whether and how Christian theology contributes to women's agency in the face of IPV.

3. Methodological Considerations

This research employed a qualitative study to answer the research questions, yielding results that cannot be generalized.[40] The study was

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[35]   Beverly Hadad, "Reframing Women's Agency in #Blessed Sex: Intersectional Dilemmas for African Women's Theologies," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2021): 2–6, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6603; Njoroge, "The Missing Voice," 83.

[36]   Denise M. Ackermann, "Forward from the Margins: Feminist Theologies for Life," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 99 (1997): 66.

[37]   Ackermann, "Forward from the Margins," 67–69.

[38]   Avishai, "Theorizing Gender," 266–67.

[39]   Laura M. Ahearn, "Language and Agency," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (2001): 109–37.

[40]   John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (London: Sage, 2018), 258.

conducted in two areas of Ghana's Volta Region (Anloga and Ho) and parts of the Greater Accra Region from March 2022 through January 2023. The sensitivity and silence associated with violence necessitated an initial reliance on a gatekeeper and snowball sampling methods to access the research context, resulting in contact with five participants. A contextual Bible study on Esther 1:1–22 was organized to recruit eight more participants. In total, 13 Christian female survivors (laity, church leaders, and pastors' spouses) took part in the study. Interviews were split between individual interviews with nine participants and a focus group discussion with four participants (see Table 1).[41]

A CGT approach was chosen based on its suitability for the study's aims. CGT focuses on producing theory and acknowledges multiple subjective experiences and realities as well as the co-construction of knowledge by researchers and participants through their interactions.[42] Transcribed interviews were simultaneously analyzed using memos and diagrams, reflexively comparing the data to identify relationships between the developing categories. During the initial inductive coding in NVivo, concepts emerged that captured the participants' understandings of the underlying causes and conditions of their IPV experiences. Examples of these concepts include *patriarchy*, *power and male domination*; *bride price*; and *culture that silences*. These concepts represent the properties and dimensions of *sociocultural and gender norms*, a higher-level category that emerged in the second stage of the analysis through focused coding.

CGT also emphasizes the processes and meanings of actions.[43] I coded this by looking at the causal conditions of violence and their outcomes, which provided context and explanations for the processes involved in the participants' responsive actions. For example, the participants attributed the intensity of the varied forms of abuse they experienced to a concept that was coded *church theologies*. Their understanding of those theologies and their effects provided explanations for their actions that were coded *questioning church theologies and constructing new theologies* (see section 5).

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41   The survivors' names are anonymized.
42   Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2014), 49, 53–5.
43   Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2015).

Table 1. Participants' demographic data and type of interview

Participant	Age	Marital status	Occupation	Place	Individual in-person and phone interviews	Focus group discussion	Total
Aku	35	Separated	Trading	Greater Accra (GA)	✓		1
Abla	53	Deserted	Trading	✓	✓		1
Mansa	50	Widowed	Trading	✓	✓		1
Koenya	50	Separated	Teaching	Volta Region–Ho	✓		1
Esinam	40	Married	Teaching	✓	✓		1
Eli	34	Separated	Trading	Volta Region–Anloga	✓		1
Kafui	52	Separated	Trading	✓	✓		1
Emefa	68	Widowed	Trading	✓	✓		1
Mawusi	48	Married	Trading	✓	✓		1
Enam	-	Married	Trading	✓		✓	1
Selorm	-	Separated	Trading	✓		✓	1
Ewoenam	-	Married	Teaching	✓		✓	1
Akorfa	-	Married	Teaching	✓		✓	1
TOTAL		-	-	-	**9**	**4**	**13**

I initially identified four main categories and fourteen subcategories. However, during the process of writing and disseminating the research at academic seminars and conferences, I realized that some categories, such as *informal social support networks* (ISSNs), were poorly developed, a suspicion that was confirmed by reviewing memos and transcripts, recoding overlooked data, and conducting follow-up interviews with some participants to achieve saturation. In the final analysis stage, I did the theoretical coding for what I understood as the core emerging theme. At this point, my tentative interpretation was that survivors were self-advocating. By developing a diagram to explain my understanding of the data to a colleague, I gained a clearer understanding of the connection between survivors' self-advocacy efforts and their religion/theologies, enabling me to integrate the categories around the core category. I subsumed and renamed some categories to refine them. Finally, two main categories, nine subcategories, and a core category emerged (see Diagram 1).

Research involves interfering in the lives of participants. By being aware of the general biases of research, the specific ones I hold, and the possible implications of my actions, I foresaw the potentially traumatic effects on participants describing their experiences. Therefore, I engaged the services of a family life counsellor who would intervene during interviews where needed and followed up with some survivors for a time after the study. As a feminist theologian and academic, the interviews I conducted did not follow Ackermann's suggestion that such conversations be limited to marginalized women.[44] Indeed, my presence may have influenced the participants' thoughts and narratives. My identity as a native of the research context (which gave me a prior understanding of the lack of church response for vulnerable women) and the initial reliance on gatekeepers may also have influenced my interpretations. However, those interpretations were tested through theoretical saturation, constant questioning of categories, and asking the participants to provide comments in write-ups.

4. Personal Faith, Theology, and Agency in the Face of IPV: A Case of Christianity in Ghana

Diagram 1 presents the findings of my empirical study, illustrating the faith and theology-related processes that emerged in several survivors' narratives. The women's processes begin with the factors in the box at the bottom of the diagram that summarize the *systemic realities* perceived and identified by survivors, one of the two main categories developed during the analysis. These describe the conditions and causes of IPV: sociocultural and gender norms, economic factors, ISSNs, and church theologies. Additionally, these conditions lead to multiple forms of IPV, such as physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, with economic abuse being the most prevalent, however, these conditions are not the focus of this article. I present them in a condensed form in section 5.1 as background for the subsequently described self-enactments.

The curved arrow on the right indicates that survivors not only endure IPV but, also, counter it in multiple processes that involve their personal faith and theology. These processes constitute the second category, *personal faith in God and multiple self-enactments*, summarized in the box at the top of the diagram. The small sequential arrows show how, in their narratives,

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44   Ackermann, "Forward from the Margins," 66.

survivors describe actively dealing with the trauma of violence, reacting to church theologies, speaking truth to power, economically and educationally empowering themselves, and, eventually, separating from their abusive partners (as described in sections 4.2.1 through 4.2.5).

The curved arrow on the left indicates that these self-enactments produce possible effects of transforming the systemic structures that cause IPV. The ellipse between the top and bottom boxes highlights a connection between these two boxes and the core category of *religious self-advocacy*, defined as the agency inspired by the survivors' personal faith and theology.

Diagram 1. The concept of religious self-advocacy
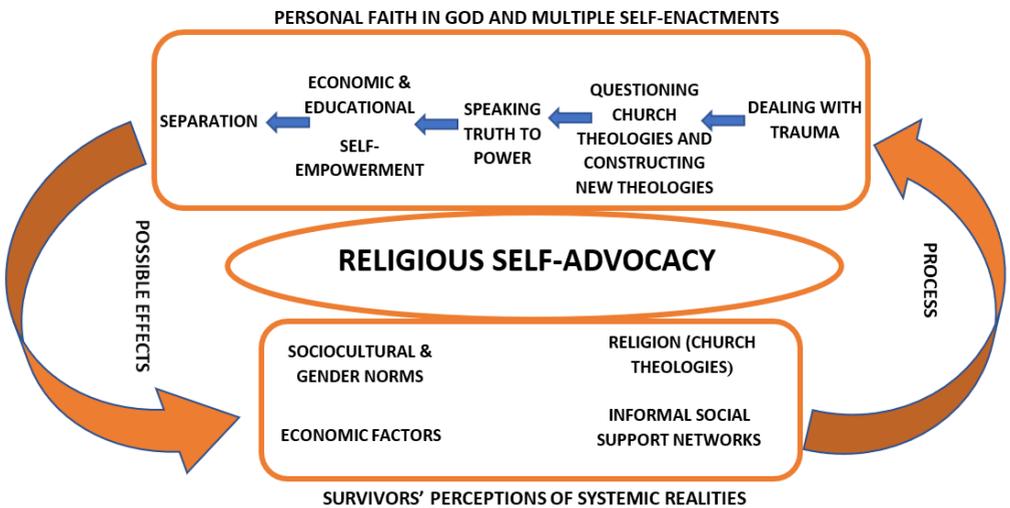
4.1. Survivors' Perceptions of Systemic Realities

Most of the causes identified by survivors overlap with those summarized in section 2. Therefore, I describe them as the systemic realities that form the background of survivors' agency. It is important to underline that IPV may leave survivors with limited scope for action as well as health complications, threats to their lives, loss of children, dehumanization, and even suicide.

Sociocultural and gender norms, expressed in practices such as the bride price, perpetuate patriarchal attitudes of dominance, permitting men to shirk their responsibilities in the home while women are overwhelmed with house chores. Women are not permitted to speak freely in the home, and major decisions affecting women's sexuality are determined by their husbands. There is also a culture of silence around abuse, including a stigma associated with divorce.

Sociocultural and gender norms are strongly connected to economic factors in that they limit survivors' access to education and property. These norms marginalize women, labelling them as unqualified property owners. As a result, survivors often have a low economic status (as evidenced in Table 1) and depend economically on men. Economic abuse was the most prevalent form of abuse in the survivors' narratives and sometimes escalated into cycles of other forms of abuse. Survivors also spoke about men resisting their efforts to empower themselves economically and educationally, interpreting them as selfish and attempts at domination. It is worth noting, however, that men's economic abuse is connected to the general economic climate resulting from the negative impact of global economies on individual families. The survivors cited economic hardships and the high cost of living as reasons for men's abusive actions. In the church space, sociocultural and gender norms have made survivors feel limited in their ability to exercise their gifts and talents.

A third root cause is the ISSNs—including friends, family, and the church—on which survivors rely to cope with crises. ISSNs may offer pockets of advice, encouragement, arbitration, and financial support in the face of abuse. However, either partners may conceive of ISSNs as promoting unwanted interference in the marriage rather than providing support, consequently furthering the risk of abuse when survivors seek help. In other words, ISSNs can potentially constrain women's agency and silence them from seeking help, thus perpetuating violence.

The most interesting root cause determined through my analysis is religion and church theologies. Although women's collective membership in the church offers strong networks for belonging, joy, shared ideas, and occasionally, a space of safety, these networks are considered weak and short-lived due to concerns regarding trust. In many ways, the survivors lacked confidence in these networks and identified them as a source of women's predicaments. They reluctantly access existing church structures due to power dynamics. Ideologically, marriage vows and church theologies related to suffering, divorce, and male headship are used by power structures in the church to reinforce gendered cultural norms of marriage privacy and men's unequal dominance over women. Theological notions such as the cross and suffering, compel survivors to endure abuse in silence like Jesus Christ. The theology of divorce makes them believe it is a sin to divorce, instilling a fear of speaking out and garnering help.

This summary illustrates how systemic structures often intersect and contribute to IPV. Together, they reveal the complexities of survivors' lives and provide context for the agency that survivors develop despite resistance, as described in my analysis below.

4.2. Personal Faith in God and Multiple Self-Enactments

As sketched above, church theologies and practices often keep survivors trapped in complex circumstances. Nevertheless, my analysis also points to faith in God as empowering. When survivors find systemic structures oppressive, they turn to God, signaling a form of agency. Moreover, survivors' stories reveal that their faith imitated their ability to take control of their own affairs, speak for themselves, and take responsibility for their actions. Below, I describe the five most prominent areas of self-enactment in the data: dealing with trauma, questioning church theologies and constructing new theologies, speaking truth to power, economic and educational self-empowerment, and using separation as a tactical tool.

4.2.1. Dealing with Trauma

Violence raises existential questions that survivors find difficult to answer. For some, it is a life-or-death situation. Against this backdrop, many survivors described how their personal faith helped them cope with the violence they experienced. In a group discussion, Enam, Selorm, Akorfa, and Ewoenam agreed that "it is by the grace of God we are surviving and putting ourselves together". In personal interviews, Mawusi said, "I prayed

that I will not think of any of those things . . . I used to think of it a lot". Eli said,

> Through prayer, I came to realize that when I'm thinking too much, It would worry me. So, I stopped thinking. I lived as if nothing was happening to me. I don't sit and even remember that I have a husband.

Although this intentional memory work (prayer) may seem to be a form of denial, several survivors described it as a necessary survival mechanism that helped reduce feelings of frustration, depression, and other threats to their mental health. They said that praying built their faith and kept them focused on God.

Another recurring theme in the material is individual engagement in reading the Bible in search of answers, which produced a new understanding of their situation. In Aku's words,

> "The way my husband made me feel did not agree with the Bible . . . going to church and reading the Bible is very important for our faith. I would read encouraging words from the Bible . . . through reading the Bible . . . I had my understanding". These examples demonstrate how survivors used prayer and Bible reading to shift their minds from the violence to God. They interpreted these faith practices as actively working on their mental health and, thus, dealing with the trauma of IPV.

4.2.2. Questioning Church Theologies and Constructing New Theologies

A second persistent theme in the survivors' narratives is their criticism of the theologies they encountered in church and the development of their own theologies. Personal Bible readings produced in the survivors a consciousness of who they were and the nature of their situations that was instrumental to questioning and distancing church theologies. At least five changes resulting from these readings can be identified in the survivors' narratives. First, some survivors recognized and bemoaned that church theologies reiterate male dominance. They pointed to the interpretation of Ephesians 5:22, which is often cited by those who overemphasize women's submission to men, as contributing to their marginalization in the home and in society and preventing their marriage relationships from being ones of equal partnership, respect, and mutual decision-making. Esinam, for instance, said, "Just like how the Bible says we women should submit ourselves to men; in that respect, they say that men are the head". Second,

the survivors were strongly against theologies of the cross that were used to dismiss their experiences or portray IPV as the kind of suffering that Christians must endure. In the discussion group, Akorfa challenged the "words of comfort that we hear, like 'Be silent and carry your load, for your burden is light . . . Keep quiet and wait on the Lord.' For how long can we continue with that?". Esinam said, "I have been hearing messages on suffering . . . take up your cross . . . But that doesn't mean you should be suffering . . . Me, I hate suffering".

Third, the survivors deconstructed church theologies by observing how male church leaders and pastors took their own experiences for granted and did not consider survivors' realities. Eli commented that "Suffering is relative to how a person sees it . . . what is happening to me, maybe if that person were to experience what I am also experiencing, then they will know how and what to say". The survivors criticized their lack of representation in prevalent church theologies and, fourth, complained that church theologies are presented as universal. Akorfa noted that

> We are made to understand as if it's angels that wrote the Bible, and so everything that comes out of the Bible is what needs to be followed. That is what Christianity has become. You are born in it, and so you don't see anything wrong with it.

Fifth, the survivors' narratives indicate that they also constructed new theologies of their own. For example, they drew parallels between Christ and the church that suggested marriages ought to be loving relationships. Esinam contended that "Men should love their wives like Christ loved the church", and Aku said, "God's desire for marriage is that there will be joy. Because where there is joy, God is there . . . where there is no joy, then God is not there".

Furthermore, the survivors constructed new approaches to theologies of suffering. While conceding that suffering is part of the Christian journey, they argued that such general teachings must be contextualized whereby an endurance of suffering that discourages divorce cannot produce good things, and a preparedness to suffer as a Christian does not demand refraining from action if a situation can be improved. As Aku said, "God tells us to carry our own cross. If we follow him, we will suffer. …The same Bible also said that if one hand is disturbing you, you have to cut it off." Esinam, who felt assured of God's deliverance, said, "God is not happy when we

suffer" and referred to biblical stories of God delivering the nation of Israel from its enemies. The survivors believed that God would relieve their suffering, as Koenya suggested

> Jesus performed a miracle at that marriage ceremony. If he wanted them to suffer, he wouldn't have performed that miracle by turning water to wine. And the two shall be one . . . So, if I'm suffering in the marriage, then God is going to fight for me.

These quotes and examples illustrate how the survivors actively used their faith, prayers, and Bible study to cope with IPV and their suffering. The dual actions of criticizing church theologies that do not support IPV survivors and developing new theologies provided a basis for the various strategies of self-enactment, presented below in sections 4.2.3. through 4.2.5.

4.2.3. Speaking Truth to Power

New theologies altered the survivors' self-understanding and situation as they used their faith to cope with IPV. Esinam pointed out that "those who don't get revelation or understanding, they suffer the most . . . When I get it and I act on it, it works for me". The new theologies enabled survivors to feel capable of actively challenging power structures that oppress them. Akorfa explained that "Understanding God's word also helps motivate us to act and defend ourselves". Their theologies reflect a consciousness of who they are and the processes of change that allows for a self-conceptualization of an active, responsible agent.

The survivors' theologies also enable them to advocate for themselves by speaking truth to power. They subtly confront power structures in their homes, aware of the dangers involved. When they spoke, they forced their abusers to recall their humanity. Emefa recounted her reaction to her husband's repeated abuse:

> "As an educated person, you'll be using such language, shame onto you!" . . . Because it's the truth I said, he is hurt! I won't go far. He beats me but . . . I don't allow him. "I'm not your slave . . . you are not making me happy, and yet, when it's night, you want to mount me". Will a person accept that? She can't. I'm not a fool. "I am not your slave. Though I am a woman, I am also a human being".

Developing an understanding of the self based on new theologies empowers survivors to speak up on their own behalf in their homes and even speak truth to power there.

4.2.4. *Economic and Educational Self-Empowerment*

In situations that survivors are not able to change their situation at home or in their relationships some, instead, pursue economic and educational self-empowerment. Several of the participants believed that suffering calls for the application of wisdom, citing the woman in Proverbs 31:10-31 who was known for her diligence and prudence. Esinam, who trusted in God and persevered, eventually gaining admission to pursue her master's degree, said:

> I told God that, if it was his will for me to take this course, then he should pave the way . . . It's not a sin to upgrade myself . . . The God who created man is the same God who created the woman. But their destiny is different from mine . . . If we sit down and fold our hands in between our thighs and always say, "God will do", where will God pass to do it when you haven't worked at it?

As many of the survivors were economically dependent on men and experienced the resulting abuse, they sought independence and testified about their satisfaction with their attainments. Koenya relates that, "I bought a [piece of] land . . . sell water . . . they name me as 'woman *kapo*', meaning a man. I do a whole lot". Emefa challenged her husband to prove that she was equally deserving of earning money and could do so. She said, "Though I am a woman, I faced everything on all sides . . . because I should also be earning a monthly income . . . I continued doing this and made more money than he made".

The participants submitted numerous examples of their educational and economic activities that can be understood as actions enabled by self-understanding and theologies that encouraged them to actively change their situation.

4.2.5. *Separation as a Tactical Tool of Control and Punishment*

Separation was another dimension of the survivors' agency, albeit a last resort. After immediate efforts to address the situation seemingly failed, some separated or planned to separate from their husbands. In these instances, new theologies helped them to justify the separation. They would

not tolerate oppression because God's love does not condemn them to suffer. As Akorfa expressed it,

> I read the Bible. God said he loves me and has not condemned me. I am precious for him. So, an individual cannot condemn me for me to take it in . . . So, we use those words to encourage ourselves and come out.

Esinam saw herself as an instrument of God to punish the offender and make him see her value. She said,

> I have taken a bold decision . . . I will leave . . . I know that at the right time, he will come to his senses . . . it is God who wants me to punish him, that's why [God] is pressing it on me that I have to leave.

Mawusi, who separated from her husband, said,

> When it all started, I myself I withdrew. I backed out. Because when I'm on my own and I tell myself I'm not going to cook *akple* today,[45] there is no problem with that.

Koenya similarly reported,

> "To be apart is also good . . . I made that decision. Out of sight, out of mind! Now it's working perfectly for me". These remarks indicate how closely decisions to separate relate to new theologies. Their conviction that God wanted to relieve them from their suffering and impressed it upon them provided survivors with the courage to consider separation and eventually realize it.

4.2.6. Personal Faith and Self-Advocacy

Moreover, the analysis shows that Christian theology played an important role for survivors of IPV in the case of a Protestant mainline church in Ghana. The examples and quotes above reveal that it was not traditional church theologies but, rather, the survivors' personal faith in God and their new theologies that acted as their lifeline for dealing with the trauma of IPV and resulted in multiple self-enactments. Motivated by their faith, the participants individually engaged with biblical texts, inspiring them to question and liberate themselves from oppressive church theologies. Not only did they believed in God's divine intervention as a necessary condition for their

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[45]   A local dish among the Anlo-Ewe.

liberation from oppression but also saw themselves as active partners in that mission. Their new theologies acted as a springboard to diverse kinds of agency, such as speaking truth to power, economic and educational empowerment, and, eventually, marital separation. Although these processes have been presented sequentially as analyzed from this empirical data, they may not necessarily follow that pattern in view of indeterminate human behavior and the systemic structures operating in specific times and contexts. In this context, the analysis confirms that Christian theology contributes to ensuring women's agency in the face of IPV. These processes, as described by survivors, begin with their personal faith and result in changes to their realities, and can, therefore, be characterized as a form of agency that I conceptualize as *religious self-advocacy*.

5. Configuring the Connections

I began this study with the aim of providing nuance to the concept of agency as introduced by Western feminist scholars, using a case study in Ghana to ask whether and how Christian theology contributes to women's agency in the face of IPV. In this section, I draw upon existing research in the field to discuss three central findings that contribute to a deeper understanding of agency in conditions of oppression: (1) personal faith and theology as complementary when ISSNs are ambiguous, (2) practices of personal faith as a starting point for the construction of new, liberative theologies, and (3) self-enactment and self-advocacy.

This study's findings support those of existing studies that maintain that sociocultural gender norms, church theologies, and economic factors interact to determine survivor's experiences.[46] This is further complicated when, as also found in my study, ISSNs interplay with these structures, confirming the complex, multidimensional nature of IPV.[47] Contrary to the Western conception of agency as resistance—where a Western woman is more likely turn to the justice system,[48]— survivors in Ghana, due to social stigma, do not access formal institutional structures to report abuse. Germane as ISSNs may be to survivors,[49] the dynamic complexities of

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[46]   Chisale, "Domestic Abuse in Marriage," 6–7; Owusu, "Mute in Pain," 26–32.
[47]   Le Roux et al., "Getting Dirty."
[48]   McNay, Gender and Agency, 1–3; Andersson et al., "Barriers to Disclosing," 1966–68; Scheffer and Renck, "Intimate Partner Violence," 116–20.
[49]   Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 46, 103.

ISSNs that range from minimal or no support, trust issues among female support groups, and patriarchal power structures seem simultaneously to constrain them. Le Roux contends that this finding must be considered cautiously as it does not necessarily imply women's compliance with patriarchy.[50] Instead, one may assert that gender is a relevant but limited analytical tool for assessing the multifarious oppressions women face. Researchers may benefit, therefore, from increased attention to other subtle social identifiers, such as ISSNs, that are heavily relied on in African settings. The analysis of the survivors' understanding and choices in relation to these networks reveals a quagmire of ISSNs, further illustrating the need for research on their ambiguous role in Africa. Indeed, an interesting finding arising from my research question is that survivors turned to their personal faith and theologies as a replacement for ISSNs.

Recounting how survivors enacted their personal faith, prayer practices and personal Bible readings demonstrated how they were instrumental to inspiring alternative understandings pivotal to disputing and deconstructing oppressive church theologies. Contrary to feminist/womanist theologies that call for partnership with marginalized groups for life-affirming theologies,[51] the theologies of the participants in this study may be seen as more individual or personal than relational. In other words, the survivors constructed theologies by and for themselves and showed no interest in transforming systemic structures at the macro level. At the same time, one cannot deny that their personal work and transformations have wider consequences, such as raising new questions and opening spaces of new possibilities. For instance, a potential positive outcome of their efforts at further education and work is the development of local and national economies that challenge gender norms and raise our consciousness of the prevailing systemic, intersectional drivers of IPV. Ackermann introduces the concept of a hermeneutic of life that devises strategies of resistance.[52] The new theologies of liberation that survivors personally construct can be interpreted as such a strategy.

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50   Le Roux, "Can Religious Women Choose?," 7–11.
51   Hadad, "Reframing Women's Agency," 4.
52   Ackermann, "Forward from the Margins," 66.

Following Mahmood, I argue that these women's agency may be read along a continuum of perceptible and imperceptible actions and meanings. For example, the choices they make regarding their non-reliance on ISSNs to dealing with the trauma of IPV and constructing new theologies. Mahmood posits that the ability to effect change in oneself and in the world is not a universal trait but, rather, a culturally and historically defined one.[53] Survivors' ability to effect change in their lives is also personally defined. My analysis of the various concepts that emerged from the survivors' narratives reveals that their perceptions and understandings of change enable them to enact ways of being and garner responsibility that was not given but dynamically evolved. Their self-enactments indicate their personae as agentive beings who find and rely on the God of the oppressed who fights for his people.

This dynamism agrees with Ahearn's argument for more flexible approaches to the concept of agency[54] and adds nuance to how we may conceptualize agency. Survivors' ability to read and interpret multiple, intersecting, and constraining structures is crucial to their processes of strategizing. They not only construct new theologies but act on them to carry out self-change. As active beings, they stand up for themselves. They speak truth to power while being conscious of the risks involved. They empower themselves economically and educationally in both formal and informal sectors and go beyond to separate from their abusive partners. These steps allow them to challenge gender norms and the stigma of singleness and divorce.

Their agency may be seen as generative in that they are motivated to engage in multiple acts of self-advocacy that allow them to reconstruct their damaged identities. Their agency reminds us that they are persons with dignity and unique capabilities who are equally created in God's image. They describe themselves not as slaves and fools but as rational, responsible beings capable of identifying and pursuing their own needs. Based on their choices and responsibilities, such agency may be understood as self-advocacy. In view of how they rely on their theologies to advocate for their own dignity, personhood, and needs, I argue there is a strong connection between religion/theology and survivors' agency, describing this agency as *religious self-advocacy*. Based on the survivors' narratives, I understand

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53   Mahmood, "Feminist Theory," 212.
54   Ahearn, "Language and Agency," 109–37.

religious self-advocacy as the human capacity to intentionally draw upon personal faith as a resource that generates a critical awareness of oneself and the systemic structures that inhibit human progress. Moreover, it is a resource that motivates multiple acts to improve one's situation. The concept of religious self-advocacy can, thus, be considered an answer to the question of whether and how Christian theology can contribute to ensuring women's agency in the face of IPV.

Conclusion

I referred, in my introduction, to the growing phenomenon of IPV against Christian women under the justification of church theologies in religious communities. This inductive empirical study emerged from my interest in the forms of agency that evolve from the meanings survivors make of their experiences with IPV with the help of church theologies. It is a truism that multiple intersecting systems, including church theologies, will at times constrain women's agency. However, my study indicates that theologies are equally a potential source of liberation as well as of oppression. The personal theologies of survivors motivate their will to rise. The theologies that survivors individually constructed based on their experiences subvert dominant norms and inspire generative forms of agency that I describe as religious self-advocacy. I use religious self-advocacy heuristically to illustrate the dynamic interplay between religion/ individualized theology and survivors' independent navigations of intersecting systemic structures in the context of IPV. The concept of agency as religious self-advocacy that I have developed in this article provides nuance to Western and non-Western feminist conceptions of agency. It highlights that personal faith and theology should be taken into consideration due to its ability to enable change in the context of IPV, not as church theology but as liberative theology that is constructed individually.

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