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# Motherhood and womanhood and the social ill of father absence in the South African context: A practical theological engagement

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## **Abstract**

*Over the past decades, it has become evident in numerous families that the societal roles of mothers and fathers have shifted immensely. As a result, many scholars, researchers, and authors decided to study the various components of motherhood. Hence, the primary goal of this paper is to comprehend the phenomenal role of motherhood in society and the acceptance of this role within the domestic domain. In many cases, becoming a mother was not the mother's decision; rather, it was a response to sociocultural pressure that held women<sup>1</sup> accountable for the care of children. Women had distinct motherhood experiences, and frequently, these were kept secret from the family and society. In addition to the issues associated with father absence and gender-based violence, mothers often face pressure and difficulties while attempting to imagine themselves in a morally acceptable motherhood role. Furthermore, mothers have a very negative perception of motherhood, particularly in*

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1 The concepts 'mothers' and 'women' are used interchangeably in this article. There is an immense onslaught on both women and mothers, including children.

*a highly demanding patriarchal society. Based on a culturally accepted belief that requires mothers to devote themselves to their children and set aside their own needs, society has constructed the ideal concept of a perfect mother.*

**Keywords:**

motherhood; womanhood; family; father absence; practical theology

## 1. Introduction

This article falls under the field of practical theology, which is concerned with the intentional actions, or praxis, that address the social ill of father absence and its adverse effects on women and mothers. By using the practical-theological interpretation method developed by Richard Osmer, we can learn how to act as Christians in the South African context and how to respond to the need to see mothers and women's humanity through the lenses of the Christian faith (Anderson, 2001:22).

According to Finchilescu & Dugard (2018:3) and Freeks (2023), in our current era, one of the most prevalent human rights violations is violence against women, many of whom are mothers. The effects of this abuse and brutality are extensive, negatively impacting the lives of women and girls, as well as their families, communities, and society at large. The elimination and prevention of violence and abuse against women should be a top objective in all communities. Studies repeatedly demonstrate the enormous benefits for children of having a mother who is present, nurturing, involved, and concerned. However, many activist organisations disagree with the importance of mothers and women to children and society (Schmidt, Décieux, Zartler & Schnor, 2023; Freeks, 2023). Mothers' notable and influential traits, as well as the crucial role they play in the family and society, are often contested. Moreover, motherhood still presents significant and potentially fatal difficulties for women today. One of the most common violations of human rights in our time involves violence and abuse against women, many of whom are mothers (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2018:3). These harmful factors have far-reaching effects, endangering the lives of women, mothers, and girls, as well as their families, communities, and societies (Freek, 2023). To stop and prevent this violence and abuse against women and mothers should be a top concern in every family and community (Freek,

2023; Mayeza & Bhana, 2021). The family holds great importance in both the church and broader society (Freeks, 2023). From a practical theological engagement, the family is seen as having a covenantal nature and plays a significant role in caring for individuals (Eds. Botha, Knoetze, Orsmond, Van der Merwe & Van Deventer, n.d.:84). In this context, practical theology is a diffuse and dynamic field with many diverse participants, methods, and concerns (Hunter, 1991:867). On the other hand, pastoral theology belongs to the subspecies of practical theology inquiry. Therefore, the main focus of the investigation is some sort of human spirit activity. Just as pastoral theology examines a facet of the relationship between God and humans, practical theology is likewise a study (McClure, 2010).

Müller (2005:73) notes that practical theology arises whenever and wherever there is a practical reflection from the standpoint of God's presence. By supporting the social embodiment of faith (*fides quarens societem*), which is supported by the practical theological approach, Cilliers (2009:634) expanded on this. Important focal points for practical theology are the Christian community, the church and its activities, and the church's ministry (Pattison & Woodward, 2000:6). Hence, because there is so much room for rich exchanges, practical theology moves into dialogue with other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, gender, feminist studies (Moore, 2002:18), queer theory, inter-religious and cross-cultural studies, cultural theory, and other fields wherever there are overlaps (Marshall, Miller-McLemore & Wimberly, 2000;48, Capps, 2010:249-252).

This article<sup>2</sup>, however, acknowledges the importance of motherhood and the role mothers play in families and society. Also, this article recognises the mother-child bond, which is crucial for a child's healthy development since it serves as a strong force for social interaction and cohesion.

## 2. Research

The study of practical theology is essential to an interdisciplinary effort to jointly develop societal environments that are affirming and life-giving for and with mothers and women in South Africa.

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2 This article is a literature review, and its main purpose is to promote the significance of motherhood in South Africa and simultaneously elucidate the issue of father absence as destructive social ill.

## **2.1 Research question**

The research question in this article is the following:

*What can we learn from motherhood in the current situation in South Africa concerning the social ill of father absence?*

## **2.2 Research methodology**

The “dynamic process of reflective critical inquiry into the church’s praxis in the world and God’s purpose for humanity, carried out in the light of the Christian scripture and tradition and in critical dialogue with other sources of knowledge”, is what Anderson (2001:22) defines as practical theology.

The way that women and mothers are treated in South Africa is a matter of practice because it is the way that people react or behave toward them on a daily basis. It is a theological issue as well, because women and mothers are made in God’s image, and Christian theologies of motherhood and womanhood offer churches and families tools to help them develop a conception of motherhood and its consequences for day-to-day existence.

To address the research question, this article employs Osmer’s method of practical-theological interpretation (Osmer, 2008). This method of conducting practical theological research is especially appropriate for this research because the four tasks provide concise direction for investigating a problem or social ill such as the one this article poses. The first task aids in identifying the difficulties mothers and women encounter in society and in their day-to-day lives. The second assignment aids in our investigation of the causes. The third task directs our analysis of the standards that we can derive from the materials available in the multidisciplinary field of motherhood and womanhood theology. The fourth task, which is the final one, helps formulate practical theological perspectives that are strategic in order to address the need of viewing South African women and mothers through the prism of Christianity and acting accordingly within the framework of South African society. An overview of the four tasks is as follows:

### *The task that is descriptive*

An investigation of the context is the first step in this task. This indicates that the author of this piece considers the everyday conceptions held by South African mothers to be real. The fundamental element of this task, according to Osmer (2008:4), is the methodical gathering of data to ascertain and characterize what is happening in the specific circumstances, episode, or context. A review of the literature in the multidisciplinary field of motherhood studies was used to gather

data. This data was provided in order to shed light on South African motherhood and assess the daily struggles that South African families face.

### *The task of interpretation*

In this stage, the analysis of the situation's causes, contributing elements, and effects is the main focus. Osmer (2008:4) states that after completing the descriptive-empirical task, the gathered data are analysed to provide an answer to the query, "Why is this going on?" In order to determine the reasons and causes of father absence as well as how mothers are perceived in the South African context, data were gathered in this phase through a literature study.

### *The task that is normative*

In the context of living faith, scripture, church social teachings, and the resources of tradition, the normative task is defined as "an effort to understand more broadly and deeply the analysed situation and context" (Holland & Henriot, 1984:9). Osmer (2008:4) states that the focus of this task is to ascertain what should be happening, or how the ideal should appear in the context of Christian theological resources. What God expects of his people is the focus of this task. Osmer (2008:4) states that strategies of action that will influence the desired outcome's progression are decided upon during the pragmatic task. A synthesis of the research findings drawn from a practical-theological methodology is also part of the task.

## **3. Motherhood in perspective**

### **3.1 *The concept of 'motherhood'***

Motherhood is a fascinating scholarly and academic topic, according to Huopalainen and Satama (2019:102), with connections to an embodiment, the performance of gender, materiality, affectivity, femininity, and sexuality, as well as power, structural problems, and patriarchal oppression, and specifically a dense bodily experience that engages the senses (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019:99). However, it can be difficult to define what motherhood really means, but the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines a mother as "a female parent", the English suffix-hood as "a state of condition of being, character, or nature" and motherhood as "the state of being a mother or the qualities or spirit of a mother" (Merriam-Webster, Inc. 2021). Except the aforementioned, building an intimate world where everything smells of goodness, home, and

safety is a major part of being a mother. Unfortunately, patriarchal societies disadvantage women because social duties are gendered, harmful, and risky to women. Hence, the risk of reducing the experience of motherhood to a patriarchal institution and motherhood as a role forced on women is raised by some authors and scholars who claim that the discourse of motherhood is exclusively focused on. The original meaning is lost if one concentrates too much on the influence of prevalent ideas of motherhood (Frizelle & Kell, 2010:27).

In the studies of Miller-McLemore (1994:20), motherhood can be defined as mothers performing quite a few types of indispensable caring, and who must support one another. Hence, every child's fundamental need is fulfilled by the term *mother*, which conjures up those feelings of joyful, unconditional love and care. Motherhood is further an intentional action that cultivates a self-observance practice that leads to maternal thought (Rose, 2015:11). Therefore, the act of motherhood is special and mostly an "untapped resource of theological reflection" (Miller-McLemore, 1994:21). Interestingly and appropriately, especially in the context of this article, is that Miller-McLemore indicated in her book, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma*, that she faced life's challenges while being pregnant and on the verge of becoming a mother (Miller-McLemore, 1994:21). Other than, the women's quality of life is negatively impacted by mood disorders, because they are more susceptible to them during this period of life, when their risk of developing mental health issues is at its highest (Kuipers, Van Beeck, Cijssouw & Van Gils, 2021:1). In conjunction with the aforementioned, working full-time to support families presents innumerable challenges for mothers (Miller-McLemore, 1994:21). Hence, the responsibilities placed upon women, especially as mothers, are considerably heightened due to the daily obligations and sacrifices that come with parenting. Finding a harmonious balance and sense of purpose in life, while juggling familial responsibilities, proves to be much more challenging and intricate than managing a traditional nine-to-five job and caring for one's family.

Pertaining to these mentioned definitions and explanations of motherhood and family, it is debatable because some of these issues go beyond being merely functional and descriptive or being discussed outside of the context of gender concerns. It is important to recognise that mothers often shoulder a greater amount of work and responsibilities than fathers within the family, and the discussion surrounding motherhood and fatherhood frequently revolves around this central point of contention (Miller-McLemore, 1999:286). Even so, the findings of Okorn, Verhoeven & Van Baar, (2022:140) implicated that there are no significant variations between mothers and fathers in the

strength of connections between parental support, stimulation, and positive discipline. Both mothers and fathers play significant roles in children's development, but there is a scarcity of studies that assess both mothering and fathering (Okorn *et al.*, 2022:131). Schmidt *et al.* (2023:57) highlight that in Western industrialised countries, traditional family dynamics of the past decades have often assigned mothers the primary responsibility of unpaid caregiving and household tasks. However, this conventional division of roles has gradually shifted, resulting in a blurring of societal expectations placed on mothers and fathers (Freeks, 2023).

In conclusion, it is very significant in the context of this paper when Miller-McLemore asserts that ample theologians are mother figures but only a few have studied the intersection of motherhood and theology (1999:287).

### **3.2 The Biblical notion of motherhood**

Since the author's primary focus in this section is the Bible (*locus* of Scripture), the majority of scriptural references are used.

It is obvious from Genesis 1 and 2 concerning the creation narratives that God created Eve, as the first mother. In the biblical narratives, God's love and support for women are evident. He gives mothers the honour, respect, focus, and duty of motherhood. According to Wolstenholm (2021), motherhood is a 'blessing' that God 'ordained' on women (see Ps 127:3; 139:13). It is therefore key to notice that the Bible frequently refers to motherhood as a significant calling. Wolstenholm (2021) also asserts that God created the family in Genesis 3 on his own initiative. With that initiative comes responsibility, and Isaiah 66:12-13 eloquently highlights that God will take care of his people just as a mother takes care of her children (Bible, 2009:765). It is interesting to note that many of the women identified as ancestors of Jesus were initially childless, but God opened their wombs to bear children. They are Hannah, the mother of Samuel (1 Sam 1:2-7; 18-20); Rebekah, the mother of Jacob and Esau; Rachel, the mother of Joseph (Gen 29:31; Gen 30:22-24); and Sarah, the mother of Isaac (Gen 11:30; Gen 21:2-3).

Furthermore, Psalm 127:3 declares that motherhood is a gift from God: "Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from Him." God has planned and designed motherhood. As it states in Psalm 139:13, "For you created my inmost being: you knit me together in my mother's womb". As Proverbs 22:6 puts it, "Start children off in the way they should go, and even when they are old, they will not turn from it". In essence, motherhood imparts hope and confidence to future generations. Motherhood is also about joy and happiness. The Bible says in Proverbs 23:25, "May your father and mother

rejoice; may she who gives you birth be joyful". Additionally, Proverbs 31:28 declares that being a mother is an immense calling from God: "Her children arise, and her husband also praises her, calling her blessed." Motherhood is further worthy and honourable, and Ephesians 6:1-3 says: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honour your father and mother – which is the first commandment with a promise – so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

In conclusion, being a mother is a blessing and gift from God. In Isaiah 66:13, God compares and uses the metaphor of a mother to express his love and care for his children.

Additionally, in the context of this paper are the following key aspects: Despite Sarah's laughter in response to God's assurance that she would give birth to a son in her old age, God kept his word to Abraham (Wilson, 2019:41). Likewise, despite her deceitful behaviour, Rebekah gave birth to twin sons, one of whom went on to become a generation of men and women that God continued to employ in his schemes to rid the world of sin. Her motherhood demonstrated that even when God kept his promises, sin still results in loss. God kept the promises he made to his people (Wilson, 2019:41).

Esau lost respect for his mother, Rebekah, when she tricked Isaac, his father, into blessing Jacob rather than him. After that, things were different between them. Rebekah used the Hittite lady as a reason to send Jacob away since she was aware that Isaac barred his sons from marrying foreign women (Gen 27:46). She also claimed that if Jacob is going to marry a Hittite woman, she might as well die. To keep Jacob safe, she sent him away to her brother Laban. Although there was a lot of animosity and envy between Rachel and Leah, they are recognised as the matriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel (Wilson, 2019:42). Jacob showed favour to Rachel, whilst Leah received praise and favour from her boys and was given the go-ahead to be a good mother (Wilson, 2019:42).

If only they had regard for one another and set their differences aside, the two sisters could have created a legacy that would have lasted for many years. There was no peace, harmony, or agreement between the sons of the two sisters. Further, Joseph was sold to slave traders (Gen 37:12-28). The moral of the story and the lesson we learn in this scenario is that the connection between Rachel and Leah taught us that respect, reverence, and cooperation among women had the capacity to leave a legacy of God's love and play a key part in the redemption of human beings (Wilson, 2019:42).



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### 3.3 *Is motherhood a valuable domain in our current South Africa?*

Motherhood is currently viewed by women, particularly in Western societies, as the primary means of achieving womanhood. A prevalent discourse of intensive mothering norms dictates that mothers should be the primary caregivers for their children, dedicating their entire being to this responsibility and prioritising the needs of their offspring over their own (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018:2). And according to Kuipers *et al.* (2021:2), motherhood is acknowledged as a dynamic, continuously occurring process that transforms a woman's identity and brings about a lasting change in her life. Consequently, motherhood still present significant and potentially fatal problems to women and mothers presently. But even that, mothers continue to play a crucial role in the family and community, and this function is a strong motivator for social contact and cohesion. In terms of pregnancy and connection, the paper by Erato, Ciciolla, Shreffler & Greil, (2022:743) brought attention to the fact that mothers who have lost pregnancies describe motherhood as being more fundamental than mothers who have not. The mother-child bond is also essential for a child's proper growth. Although motherhood is still seen as the pinnacle of womanhood, there hasn't been enough research done on the concept in South Africa (Frizelle & Kell, 2010:26).

McQuillan, Greil, Scheffler & Tichenor, (2008:3) assert that women often perceive motherhood as a barrier to achieving career success. Therefore, the price of motherhood and womanhood is frequently undervalued by women because womens lives are shaped by motherhood, which is also essential to the gender norms that still govern women today. The strong desire to procreate, for instance, makes parenthood seem normal and childlessness abnormal (McQuillan *et al.*, 2008:1-2). Technological innovations such as dishwashers, formula, and birth control pills, to name a few, have reduced the practical burdens of motherhood for many women throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, the value and essence of motherhood have evolved over time. Scholars have studied a wide range of diverse facets of mothers and motherhood over the past 20 years (Schmidt *et al.*, 2023:57). Regarding experience, very little has been written about women's experiences throughout most of history and the past 30 years according to the study by Rose (2015:3). To the point, no studies to my knowledge have assessed whether the value and importance of motherhood is a constant trait. Due to experiences, it might alter. *Ditto*, as an author of womanhood; women studies, family studies; fatherhood, etc., women's experiences and voices need to be heard, and this is something that is highly passionate about today's academics and research.

In the paper by Erato *et al.* (2022:742), the value and essence of motherhood can be viewed as a woman's preference for her maternal identity and motherhood. In conjunction with the paper of Erato *et al.* (2022), this article has the notion of the significant value of motherhood and womanhood in the domains of the family and society, most specifically in the lives of children. Every child's fundamental need is fulfilled by the term *mother*, which conjures up images of joyful, unconditional love and care. Even studies consistently demonstrate the positive effects on children's life of having a mother who is present, nurturing, attentive, and involved. Children eventually will exhibit fewer externalising behaviours when parents utilise constructive discipline with them, reminding them and discussing the norms and expectations with them (Okorn *et al.*, 2022:129). Notwithstanding, the value and importance of motherhood, womanhood, and mothers to children, family and society are opposed by numerous activist groups. Many criticise the special talents that women and mothers possess, as well as the crucial role that they play in the family.

The practice of motherhood, which refers to the task of mothering and encompasses meeting the physical, emotional, and socialisation requirements of children, is theorised to be one of the two terrains of motherhood that are interconnected, according to Frizelle and Kell's (2010:27) study. Together with characteristics like the norms of being aware of the child (present mother), ensuring the child's successful development (future-oriented mother), incorporating work into mothering (working mother), maintaining control (public mother), and being content (happy mother), motherhood reflects stability and increasing differentiation (Schmidt *et al.*, 2023:57).

In addition, there is the key question of what makes a good mother, which is entwined with concepts of gender, womanhood, and childhood. The social identity of motherhood is mediated by mothering and entails women creating their own conceptions of who they are as mothers. Because it recognises how mothers actively create their identity as mothers, the emphasis on social identity is crucial. The notion of parenthood, according to Schmidt *et al.* (2023:59), has been increasingly construed normatively as a responsible act. Parents, especially mothers, are expected to devote time and effort to raising their children. This includes developing a strong emotional bond with their children by putting their needs above their own. When a mother is actively engaged with her child and physically present, she is more attuned to his/her needs and desires (Schmidt *et al.*, 2023:62). Furthermore, mothers play a crucial role in ensuring their child's physical and cognitive growth, making them the most capable individuals to secure their children's successful development and future (Schmidt *et al.*, 2023:63).

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### 3.4 *Crimes against women: A practical theological engagement*

From a practical theological engagement, this article examines the horrific crimes against women in uncritically reproducing or responsibly deconstructing and reimagining them. Furthermore, practical theology addresses issues regarding the nature of religious practices and their influence on individuals' overall well-being. Also, practical theology is defined as the "dynamic process of reflective critical inquiry in the South African society and God's purpose for humanity, carried out in the light of Christian scripture and tradition and in critical dialogue with other sources of knowledge" (Anderson, 2001:22).

Crimes such as rape, sexual assault, physical violence, and verbal abuse have been present throughout history, dating back as far as the existence of human civilisation. A careful study of the Bible reveals that numerous women have been subjected to rape by men, highlighting the historical prevalence of these crimes. *What does rape mean in the context of this article?* Rape occurs when a man coerces a female into sexual activity without mutual consent.

The Bible contains several instances of both men and women being raped. In Genesis 19:5, after Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, men from the city surrounded the home of Lot, Abraham's cousin, and told him to bring the men outside so they could have sex with them. This incident demonstrates that men did not merely behave immorally toward women (Jud 19:22). According to Genesis 19:8, Lot offered his two daughters to the men for sex in order to protect them from a vicious attack. In this instance, the moral of the story is: *How can a father force his daughters to consent to be sexually assaulted by men in order to protect two strangers?* I believe that Lot understood that God had sent the men, and he knew that if he upheld their honour, God would uphold the innocence of his daughters (Gen 19:1).

According to Bach (1999:389), rape is a weapon that men employ to subjugate women and intimidate or instill 'fear' in particular women. The narrative of a Levite who sacrificed his daughter and her slave so that men could mistreat him instead of his visitor is told in Judges 19:22. Judges 19:25 and 20:25, the Levite surrendered his slave to the men, who then raped and mistreated her. In Genesis 19:28, it is stated that the slave did not reply or communicate with her master. Therefore, Genesis 19:29 stated that the slave's body was divided into 12 parts, disposed of, and then sent throughout Israel with the information that a woman had been killed in order to defend a Levite visitor.

Genesis 34 tells the narrative of Dinah, a daughter of Leah and Jacob who was sexually assaulted by Shechem, a Hamor-born man. Jacob's only

daughter, Dinah, was extremely attractive, and Shechem abducted her and sexually assaulted her (Gen 34:2). After the rape, the man asked his father to set up a marriage between him and Dinah because he was overwhelmed by her beauty (Gen 34:3-4). Even saying that he loved the woman, did not excuse him from defiling her. Dinah was the only victim in this narrative since her father and brothers negotiated a bridal price without even consulting her when Shechem raped her.

Tamar, the daughter of king David, was raped and humiliated in 2 Samuel 13 at the hands of Amnon, David's son. Half-brother Amnon, who was related to Absalom and Tamar, declared his love to her in 2 Samuel 13:4. In Genesis 13:14 Amnon overpowered Tamar and sexually assaulted her. He then sends her away, out of wrath for defiling her. However, she begged him to keep her, just as she had begged him to stop raping her (2 Sam 12:14; 13:4). The result, according to 2 Samuel 13:33, is that Absalom killed his brother Amnon in retaliation for raping Tamar. The moral of the story is that Tamar's defiling by her elder brother Amnon caused a division in the family of David (2 Sam 15).

Rape is not only immoral and sinful before God, but also a demolishing factor in terms of motherhood. Rape is described as widespread and common in South Africa by Gouws (2022:1). Gouws bases her claim on the crime data of the South African police, which show that in 2019/2020, 42,289 rapes and 7,749 sexual assault offenses against women were registered. Gouws also noted that the rate of rape in South Africa is the highest in the world, surpassing that of war-torn nations. The fact that men rape women for power rather than out of lust or sexual desire makes it evident that rape is a social and societal problem (Gouws, 2022:2).

Furthermore, Gouws (2022:2) rejects the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League's suggestion that men who commit rape should undergo chemical castration at the ANC's policy conference in Gauteng. Gouws contends that because men believe they are the owners of the women, castration will never put an end to rape (Gouws, 2022:2).

The Conversation published an article on August 4, 2022, by Amanda Gouws, a political science professor at the University of Stellenbosch, in response to the rape of eight young women in Krugersdorp. Near an abandoned mine in Krugersdorp, more than 80 undocumented, illegal mineworkers allegedly assaulted eight young women who were filming a music video (Gouws, 2022:2). According to Eyewitness News (Gouws, 2022), 17 men's DNA will be analysed as part of the ongoing Krugersdorp gang rape inquiry.

ANC member Pule Mabe said to News24 that this tragedy should serve as a wake-up call and that the South African government needs to take action against these unauthorised miners and immigrants (Pijoos, 2022). Gouws (2022:2-3) indicated that the state is “missing the point” in his argument. They are pursuing illegal miners while ignoring the pressing issue of the rape and sexual assault of eight young women.

In her account, Landman (2012:5) shares the story of Mmankwanti, a woman who experienced sexual assault by the father of her unborn child. At the time, Mmankwanti was preoccupied with financial concerns and the well-being of her pregnant child. Financially dependent on her mother and already having two additional children, Mmankwanti’s mother was more concerned about her daughter’s safety than the actual rape. In other words, the mother prioritised her child’s health over her personal anguish from being raped. Lerato, whom Landman (2012:6) also interviewed, is the subject of another story. When she was five years old, the daughter of Lerato (now 13) was sexually assaulted by her mother’s stepbrother. Lerato was affected by this incident and had ideas of being sexually assaulted.

In conclusion, Lerato is willing to take the chance of going to jail because she feels so deeply guilty for her daughter’s rape-related pain. The latter was offered by their church’s pastor, who based his suggestion on Proverbs 22:15 (The Good News Bible): “A good spanking will teach them how to behave, but children just naturally do silly, careless things.” As the mother who feels responsible for not shielding her child while she was assaulted and abused, Lerato must now deal with her mental trauma. But the fact of the matter is, nobody has the right to rape or sexually abuse another person.

#### **4. The social ill of father absence in families**

A pebble will cause waves in the water when it is dropped into a body of water, such as a pond. The waves start to proliferate and spread across the surface of the water, and they can cover a significant area. The ripples may be harmful or result in erosion depending on the size of the pebble. The decision of a father to abandon his children has repercussions, just like waves in water. Not only will his decisions affect his children and harm the family, but they will also have an impact on everyone around them. These decisions may have a similar ripple effect on his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Since 1968, approximately five decades ago, father absence has drawn particular attention since it has been and continues to be a major contributor to children's difficulties with personal adjustment in terms of the socialisation process (Thomes, 1968:89). Thus, it is not surprising that the South African government had coined *father absence* as one of its top socioeconomic challenges (Kamau, 2018:14). Furthermore, it is noted in the article by Freeks (2022:1) that Don Browning, a theologian from the University of Chicago, first proposed the idea of father absence in the 1990s (Meyer, 2018:7). It is key to keep in mind that being a father and being a husband are two entirely different roles. The existence of a child in the family determines what it means to be a father (Salami & Okeke, 2018:2).

#### **4.1 What is father absence?**

According to Reuven-Krispin, Lassri, Luyten & Shahar, (2021:453), *father absence*, also known as *father hunger*, refers to a person's emotional and psychological need and longing for a father who has been emotionally, physically, or psychologically absent from their lives. Father absence has also two meanings, according to Patel and Mavungu (2016:20), notably the physical absence brought on by elements such as family unrest, divorce circumstances, employment, social upheavals, and conflicts. The second meaning speaks about a father's emotional withdrawal from his child's life, whether he is absent or physically present.

#### **4.2 The adverse consequences of father absence in South Africa**

This article acknowledges that the effects of father absence have been thoroughly explored by numerous authors and academics and is not a recent topic of study (Freeks, 2022:4). However, the problem of father absence is a significant field of research, particularly considering the South African social, historical, political, and economic context, all of which have contributed to the high prevalence of father absence (Ramatsetse & Ross, 2023:199). According to Freeks (2022:2), father absence is not confined to South Africa; it is a widespread global dilemma and a damaging societal malady that has an impact on many families and societies worldwide. However, in South Africa, the lack of father figures has become a national issue (Tau, 2020:4), and this stark and obvious problem is causing rapid changes throughout Africa, particularly in South Africa (Kesebonye & P'Olak, 2020:1). The lack of fathers within families and society is a serious societal issue (Kamau, 2018:5), and it is evident that the country has an exceptionally high rate of father absence (Khan, 2018:18). This alarming trend is a significant societal problem that affects families across all racial backgrounds, impacting children

from diverse communities (Freeks, 2022:2).

Furthermore, it is articulated that countless families in South Africa are headed by single mothers, and that the main reasons for difficulties in single parenting are the fatherhood problem and father absence as social deconstructive ills (Freeks, 2020:3). Hence, a rise in the prevalence of female-headed families in South Africa and the subsequent impact on the formation and development of masculine identities was reported by Kamau (2018:8-9). And due to the fact that single mothers raise their children without the involvement of fathers, South Africa has a high divorce rate (Tau, 2020:v). Irrespective of the high divorce rate, women are more capable of providing for and supporting their families on their own (Kamau, 2018:16).

In addition, the inability of a family to function effectively is rather impacted by the absence of a parent, which leaves a void in the parenthood role (Freeks, 2019:685), and therefore, one of the main factors that endanger family lives is the absence of the father (Freeks, 2022:2). Hence, families and parenting can be difficult, especially when one considers the catastrophic impacts of father absence (Freeks, 2022:5). Tau (2020:1) points out that families without a father figure are increasingly prevalent, leading to numerous families struggling with the challenges posed by the absence of a father and the lack of paternal presence (Freeks, 2020:3). The latter also has a significant impact on the development of one's identity and interpersonal relationships with other men (Kamau, 2018:5).

In their article, Yi and Nel (2020:2) outline the primary causes of father absence, namely unemployment, divorce, the HIV epidemic, and cultural factors. Additionally, poverty stands out as a crucial cause and consequence of father absence, alongside various other elements (Freeks, 2022:1; Kamau, 2018:15). It is indeed the case pertaining to the context of this article that men or fathers are failing their families and society due to the destructive social ill of father absence.

### ***4.3 Children as a vulnerable group in a father-absent home***

The essence of children is the fact that they are blessed by God with parents and families, yet many of them have grown up in homes where fathers have neglected their responsibilities (Freeks, 2019:686). Consequently, adolescents without a father figure may struggle to understand the function of a father and may develop a distorted perception of God the Father. Moreover, when fathers are emotionally absent from their children, it becomes difficult for children to perceive the affection and tenderness of God the Father (Yi & Nel, 2020:1). Furthermore, children who grow up without a father run the

risk of experiencing negative life outcomes, including drug addiction, suicide, poor academic performance, criminality, mental illness, and a negative self-image (Freeks, 2022:2).

In South Africa, the dilemma is that the most vulnerable group affected by father absence is the communities with children. Furthermore, the lack of a father figure among most South African children, resulting in the absence of a positive male role model, has been identified as a socially detrimental problem (Freeks, 2019:686). Consequently, approximately half of the South African children grow up without regular contact with their fathers, contributing to an unusually high rate of absent fathers in the country (Patel & Mavungu, 2016:19). Children who grow up without fathers are more susceptible to experiencing violence, being prone to drug or alcohol misuse, engaging in criminal activities, and displaying risky sexual behaviours (Salami & Okeke, 2018:2). Additionally, children who lack a meaningful father-child relationship face challenges in both receiving and expressing love, and the absence of a father perpetuates the suffering they experience (Salami & Okeke, 2018:2). According to research, it appears that the fatherhood phenomenon in South Africa is declining, and the country is rapidly turning into a fatherless society (Freeks, 2022:1; Magqamfana & Bazana, 2020:169; Freeks, 2017:3; Feni, 2016:2).

Furthermore, the vulnerability of children, including the risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation, is greatly impacted by father absence (Freeks, 2019:685). Children's low academic performance, criminality, and school dropout have all been linked to father absence (Tau, 2020:1). Moreover, inadequate self-esteem, trouble forming romantic connections, psychiatric problems, living in poverty, taking sexual risks, dropping out of school, becoming pregnant at an early age, and other negative consequences are common in young girls who grew up without fathers (Brown, 2018:1).

Boys, on the other hand, are more susceptible than girls to the harmful impacts of father absence and economic deprivation. They are prone to experiencing academic issues, such as being suspended from school, when their fathers are absent, while girls are more likely to have adolescent depression, especially in families with a stepfather (Lundberg, 2017:1). In fact, when comparing boys to girls, the impact of father absence on truancy and school suspension is notably more pronounced in Grades 3 through to 8 (Lundberg, 2017:4). In the article by Salami and Okeke (2018:2), it is stated that boys who do not have involved fathers are more likely to exhibit 'hypermasculine' traits like aggression and emotional instability, while girls who do not have involved fathers are more likely to exhibit low self-esteem,



high levels of risky sexual behaviour, and difficulties forming and maintaining romantic relationships.

In conclusion, this paper asserts that children will more than likely experience difficulties and trauma when growing up in a family without a father.

## 5. Conclusion

This article focused on motherhood and the social ill of father absence in South Africa and a practical theological engagement. In our society, motherhood is being ravaged by the social destructive ill, father absence. A patriarchal idea is the exclusion and marginalisation of mothers from family, society, and even the church. Furthermore, if patriarchy is to be reduced, it must affect all social structures and formations. Unfortunately, the current world does not always offer a promising future for mothers and children. However, Scripture is a reliable indicator of the value of motherhood. It showcases God's revolutionary actions in the face of societal prejudice against marginalised individuals, including mothers and children. Within society, it is essential to recognise and appreciate the immense capacity and moral responsibility that mothers possess in upholding the integrity of families and society as a whole. They deserve commendation and admiration for their invaluable contributions. Thus, being a mother is a role that is sublime, essential, and profound—in the opinion of some, a *calling* and activism to the world.

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