

# Sustaining Feminist Hope in Covid-19 Times of Despair and Anxiety

Selina Palm<sup>1</sup>

## <sup>1</sup>SHORT BIO

Selina Palm is a feminist scholar-activist based at the interdisciplinary Unit for Religion and Development Research at Stellenbosch University. She consults for organisations around the world to disrupt violence against women, children, and queer bodies.

## INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

Stellenbosch University;  
spalm@sun.ac.za

## ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7511-0170>

## ABSTRACT

Covid-19 is a gendered pandemic. In South Africa it has exacerbated existing risks in the lives of many women and girls to gender-based discrimination and violence. This article explores how resilient habits and practices of hoping can nevertheless be nurtured by women within these times of anxiety and despair. It takes place in conversation with feminist theologian, Flora Keshgegian's five contours of hope. Hope is imagined as a choral act where the individual stories of women's lives can form acts of resistance, reform, and reimagining alongside God who is seen as an improvisational life-giving spirit, present in all our hopeful acts, no matter how small they may seem. This does not nurture an elite hope for the few, but an inclusive resurrection hope situated with those on the margins of society that can engage authentically with the tragedies of life. It offers ways to inhabit time, with all its risks and limits, whilst still remaining open to the positive possibilities with which all reality is laden.

## KEYWORDS

Gender-based violence; South Africa; feminist theology; Covid-19; hope

## Introduction

Feminist theologian, Sharon Welch asks, "What does it mean to work for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering and evil? How can we sustain energy and hope?"<sup>1</sup> This question of sustaining hope is one that we can reflect on as different women from many walks of life in the light of two pandemics that South Africa faced in 2020 – the coronavirus (Covid-19) and gender-based violence (GBV). It intersects in troubling ways that leave us with feelings of loss, despair, and uncertainty. Together, it highlights increased dangers of stigma, silence, and isolation, and the rise of fear, trauma, and bereavement. It also confronts many women with a loss of hope.

While Covid-19 affects all of us, it does not affect us all in the same way. As feminist scholars have highlighted,<sup>2</sup> Covid-19 is a gendered pandemic. Covid-19, and our social responses to it in the South African context, come with particular risks for women. As Circle of Concerned

---

<sup>1</sup> Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Selina Palm, "Homes of Bondage or Households of Freedom? The Role of Faith in Underlying Harmful Social Norms." Webinar for Healthy Households Covid-19 series, 7 July 2020.

African Women Theologians within South Africa, we seek a practical spirituality within the midst of these lived challenges. How can we find hope in the midst of our lives, not hanging abstractly above it, or controlled by the hands of male pastors? Many of us may become justifiably entangled in individualised patterns of negative hoping only (that I don't get sick, that I remain safe from violence, that I keep my job). However, these hopes alone, whilst reflecting real fears present in our Covid-19 realities, can run the risk of narrowing our hopes to ourselves alone, disconnecting from the wider world, and even becoming trapped and isolated by those fears. This article suggests that our hopes must remain "choral" if they are to build the solidarity between women that can enable increased safety and empowerment for all and nurture our imaginations for new positive social possibilities including the need to build back better social norms and practices around GBV prevention. Covid-19 heightens GBV risks for many women and girls who are trapped at home with abusive family members, many of whom are also juggling increased pressures of gendered labour in the home. At the same time, the society reinforces gendered expectations around housework, childcare and caring for the sick, whilst many women are also facing the loss of vital economic resources as their jobs are lost, go on hold, or where they are required to work endless hours at the frontline of nursing services. This is especially true of informal roles held by poorer women in, for example, home-based early childhood development centres, as informal traders, or in personal services. Covid-19 also highlights existing imbalances of gendered power in many households. Whose jobs count more? Whose time matters? For example, female students may be under increased pressure at home to assist with childcare and housework, causing them to fall behind more in their academic studies than their male counterparts. Gender intersects with other oppressions such as poverty and health, to make some women and girls far more vulnerable to violence than others.

Daniela Gennrich<sup>3</sup> highlights this in the real-life stories of women in South Africa in 2020, who escaped from violent husbands under lockdown only to be stopped by security forces and returned home to enraged husbands, or of migrant women having to pay with their bodies for

---

<sup>3</sup> Daniela Gennrich, "Gender-based Violence and the Church: A Church Gender Activist's Reflections," in *A Time Like No Other: COVID19 in Women's Voices*, eds. Nontando Hadebe, Sue Rakoczy, and Nobesuthu Tom (South Africa: Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, forthcoming), 10.

food for their children, as men took advantage of their lack of access to grants under the Covid-19 lockdown. These form a fraction of the stories of how these pandemics intersect in ways that create despair for women.

However, while Covid-19 and GBV clearly interrelate, Covid-19 does not cause GBV. GBV was already a spiralling pandemic in South Africa across all races and classes before Covid-19. It has a long history tied to a socio-spatial history of apartheid that has often ripped families apart. When we look at what we can do in these Covid-19 times in relation to preventing and responding to GBV, we must bear in mind the systemic nature of many drivers of GBV, and the everyday normalisation of intimate partner or family violence, underpinned by entrenched social norms and accepted power dynamics. Many people under Covid-19 have said, “When will things get back to normal?” However, “normal” in South Africa has for decades been bad for many women and girls. President Cyril Ramaphosa made this connection between the twin pandemics of Covid-19 and GBV in the light of recent presidential committee reports on GBV and national protests. In South Africa, violence against women and girls has been termed a second pandemic from the very start of Covid-19.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the many challenges of Covid-19, it may also open up possibilities of doing things differently in the future. Who would have imagined our current lifestyle changes a year ago? This is critical for feminist informed GBV prevention work. We have opportunities at this time of social crisis to progress towards a “new normal” around entrenched patterns of violence between men and women. German theologian of hope, Jürgen Moltmann has insisted that, while an ethics of fear sees only the crisis, an ethics of hope also perceives the changes which are made possible within the crisis.<sup>5</sup> This insight rings true right now in South Africa in relation to these two entwined pandemics and requires a feminist ethics of hope. In this article, I will engage with feminist theologian, Flora Keshgegian’s five contours of hope.<sup>6</sup> It invites us to step beyond hopeful visions alone to embed hope in everyday habits and practices.

---

<sup>4</sup> Estelle Ellis, “Gender-based Violence is South Africa’s Second Pandemic, says Ramaphosa,” *Daily Maverick*. 18 June 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope: Practices for Living in Today’s World* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 6.

## **Practicing Hope**

Feminist theologian, Dorothee Soelle suggests that the character of hope is like a baby who is beginning to walk. She points out that we learn by doing and that as we enter more deeply into practicing hope, we will gain confidence in the process of hoping in ways that go beyond abstract visions to enact everyday practices nurtured by habits of hoping. Chinese philosophers suggest that hope is like a country path, which becomes a path because many people walk that road. I have found this image of practising hope alongside others helpful, imagining God not as the object of our hope but seeing God as a verb, a life-giving spirit, present in our hopeful human acts, no matter how small they may seem.

For many years, I worked for a faith inspired organisation whose grounding mantra was “where others see despair, we see hope.”<sup>7</sup> My work took me to the rubbish dumps of urban Kenya, the streets of Zimbabwe, and to former child soldiers in Uganda, amongst many other places of seeming despair. The HIV pandemic became a springboard in my own life to an invitation to hope differently, alongside those whose lives had been directly infected and affected by HIV & AIDS. In 2012, I completed a Master’s degree on the role of hope in social transformation and what it means to hold to the vision, virtue, and practices of hope in ways that do not blind us to the data of despair in our world.<sup>8</sup> In these anxious times of Covid-19 and despairing times of GBV, I return to the same question, “How can we sustain hope?”<sup>9</sup>

This theme of sustaining a choral inclusive hope is also found in our Christian sacred texts. Romans 15:1-13 reminds us that the central purpose of Scripture is to nurture hope – not an exclusive hope for the elite few – but a plural, inclusive hope for both Jews and Gentiles, who were the insiders and outsiders of that particular time and place. In an early church marked by the economic divisions of those who had and those who did not have, the social divisions of slave and free individuals,

---

<sup>7</sup> For more about this organisation, cf. *We See Hope* (n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> Selina Palm, “Transforming Hope? A Theological-Ethical Vision, Virtue and Practice for the Common Good.” (Master’s diss., Stellenbosch University, 2012). Selina Palm and Clint Le Bruyns. “Transforming Hope: A Theological-Ethical Vision, Virtue and Practice for the Common Good,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 146 (2013): 104-121.

<sup>9</sup> Surveys in South Africa on social attitudes have identified an emerging group of “pessimists,” characterised by a recent “loss of hope.” South African suicide rates are of the highest in the world. A sense of hopelessness is a key reason for suicidal thoughts by one in five young people here who often feel overwhelmed by issues.

and the gendered divisions that limited women's hopes and roles in that world, the apostle Paul sought to knit the community together and developed patterns of shared hoping for one another (Gal 3:28). He envisions a unity in diversity where the strong do not run ahead and leave others behind, but where we become hope bearers for one another, founded in a God of hope (Rom 15:13), large enough to encompass diverse human hopes. As women face the twin pandemics of Covid-19 and GBV, they need to embody this social hope for each other.

The community of the early church was also gifted with a feminine Spirit-filled dynamic energy in the Pentecostal indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This challenged the social injustices of the day to offer new ways of being together in solidarity. However, many Christian communities have since misused those same religious tradition and texts to create texts of terror for many women, religiously justifying gendered patterns of slavery, submission, obedience, and silence, as well as leaving an Eve-infused legacy of shame around our bodies and their sexual needs and vulnerabilities. Feminist scholars in recent years, including Letty Russell<sup>10</sup> have sought to radically remap our dogmatic traditions by imagining the groans of abused women as the cries of the Holy Spirit, as has been explored in recent years by Selina Palm and Elisabet le Roux in specific relation to violence against women and girls in South Africa.<sup>11</sup> Rape narratives within Christian Scriptures such as the story of King David's daughter, Tamar whose rape by her step brother is then covered up and silenced by the rest of the household (in 2 Sam 13:1-22), have also been reinterpreted by feminist theologians on the African continent in ways that offer life-giving sources of resistance and hope to women who are currently experiencing sexual violence in their homes, and can help to give voice to their own lament and anger.

At this time in South Africa, we as women must seek out shared possibilities of hope. This is not an easy task. South Africa's segregated, colonial history has historically divided women and pitted them against each other, by race, class, sexuality, socio-economic location, and ability. However, at important times in our history, diverse women have

---

<sup>10</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Selina Palm and Elisabet le Roux, "Households of Freedom? Faith's Role in Challenging Gendered Geographies of Violence in our Cities." In *Just Faith: Global Responses to Planetary Urbanization*. ed. Stephan de Beer (Pretoria: AOSIS Online, 2018), 135-64.

found ways to come together in forms of liberating praxis that refuse to leave any women behind, forging shared struggles to move from homes of bondage to households of freedom and to make hospitable room for more women in communal practices of hope.

## **Theologising Hope with the South African Circle**

“There is such a thing as an ecology of hope. There are environments in which it flourishes and others in which it dies.”<sup>12</sup>

At the heart of the Christian narrative, a hope for resurrection and new life exists. However, there are many “stones” that still need to be rolled away from our current tombs of death if women and girls in South Africa are to experience resurrection in the here and now. GBV is one of those stones – trapping women within small spaces of death. Many women understand that a “return to normal” is not the hope of most women in South Africa. It is the unacceptable social normalisation of violence against women and girls that requires committed hope-in-action for change if a “new normal” is to emerge. In this unexpected moment of upheaval, how can women’s voices play a role in resisting old patterns, transforming the present, and anticipating the new? What needs to “die” for new life to emerge? What stones must be rolled away? The Covid-19 question, “When can we go back to normal” needs to be reassessed through the lens of the ongoing GBV pandemic and the experiences of women and girls in South Africa to imagine what the new normal can look like? This involves making space for more women’s voices.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has placed the lived experiences and voices of African women at the centre of new ways of doing feminist theology. They have offered critical new insights into the drivers of, and theological responses to the HIV and AIDS pandemic across the African continent, another gendered pandemic that also created high levels of fear and stigma. In recent years, the Circle has focused more directly on issues of GBV. South African Circle member, Denise Ackermann points to the need for the hopeful imagination of *poesis* that nurtures our ability to envisage a better world as part of the work of healing and reconstruction in our society.<sup>13</sup> In response to the

---

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope – Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1999), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Denise Ackermann, “Engaging Faith: A Critical Feminist Theology of Praxis,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 94 (1996): 42.

---

Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Anglican Archbishop, Thabo Makgoba drew on Ackermann's words in his public Easter reflections in the midst of the first strict countrywide lockdown:

Despite the challenges, I pray that we will keep up hope for the future even as we work through the reality of the pandemic...Hope, as Denise Ackermann has written, "is not that blithe sense that all will end well." Hope is about acknowledging our fears, dealing with the pain, the reality and the uncertainty brought about by the coronavirus.<sup>14</sup>

Ackermann herself points to the dangers of an approach which defers hope only to the future end times when one day all will be well. She insists that hope be tied not to optimism, certainty, and assurance, but instead to possibility and feminist agency. Faithfulness for her is not about sitting back patiently and waiting for God to act, but in taking up our call to be God's hands and feet in the world in a liberating praxis, inspired by a theological imagination for the kingdom or beloved community of God. As a result, hope must recognise the tragic aspects of life and be lived and connected to communities of concrete lament in current times. Circle member, Nadia Marais<sup>15</sup> shows how hope is a critical element in Ackermann's triad of abundant life as a form of resistance and risk. Hope insists that we must never surrender our power to imagine a better world with God as the ground of our hope, enabling us to challenge in practice the provisionality and precariousness of our many current socially unjust patterns of living:

To hope is to refuse to accept despair or defeat. It is our response to the dilemma of being both oppressors and oppressed. Hope is resistance. It actively avoids the void of hopelessness by wrestling with all that seeks to deprive us of hope and disempower us. It risks daily engagement in liberating praxis. It risks ambiguity, uncertainty and darkness.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Thabo Makgoba, Archbishop's Eastertide News & Reflections – May 18, 2020. [https://archbishop.anglicanchurchsa.org/2020/05/archbishops-eastertide-news-reflections\\_18.html](https://archbishop.anglicanchurchsa.org/2020/05/archbishops-eastertide-news-reflections_18.html).

<sup>15</sup> Nadia Marais, "Blessed? A Critical Analysis of Salvation in Denise Ackermann that Portrays Human Flourishing as Liberation, Grace and the Goodness of Life," *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 55 (2016): 721.

<sup>16</sup> Denise Ackermann, "A 'Spirituality of Risk' for Christian Witness in South Africa," *International Review of Mission* 83, no.328 (1994): 126.

Storytelling in the Circle forms an embodied way for women to nurture forms of hope that engage rather than deny life's tragedies. It is to this power of storytelling in nurturing hopes for life to which we now turn to highlight the value of this methodology as a form of theological reflection by South African women during Covid-19.

## **Opening Space for Telling Stories: A Feminist Methodology of Hope**

Stories can help us make sense of reality. Ackermann suggests that "telling stories is intrinsic to claiming one's identity and in the process finding impulses for hope."<sup>17</sup> South African theologian, Charlene van der Walt also notes that stories have a sense-making function that breaks the silence where "telling the story helps to make sense of an often-incomprehensible situation, a suffering and chaotic world in which people wrestle with understanding and seek to experience relief."<sup>18</sup>

In our current context of GBV and Covid-19, where fears and risks can compound to create intersecting stigma and shame which isolate us, storytelling can become an act of resistance where "[t]elling stories breaks the silence which blankets the lives of women and other marginalized and oppressed people and is thus intrinsic to the healing of our diverse communities."<sup>19</sup> For Ackermann as a feminist theologian, telling stories is also a form of doing theology which is urgently needed for liberation and transformation, as stories can nurture relationships and open up possibilities for healing. The life stories of those who have been oppressed, must be heard and reflected upon in particular because they hold the potential for transformation of both the oppressed and their oppressors. She notes that "[i]t is only when hearing and telling stories begins as a process of openness, vulnerability and mutual engagement that alienations of class, race and gender can be challenged."<sup>20</sup> I concur with Ackermann and suggest that the stories of women during Covid-19 in all their challenges and vulnerabilities can challenge their hearers to act as agents for the mending of creation and point to the necessity of

---

<sup>17</sup> Denise Ackermann, *Tamar's Cry: Re-reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/AIDS Pandemic* (Cape Town: Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, 2001), 18-9.

<sup>18</sup> Charlene van der Walt, "Hearing Tamar's Voice: How the Margin Hears Differently: Contextual Readings of 2 Samuel 13:1-22," *European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis* 2 (2011).

<sup>19</sup> Ackermann, "Engaging Faith," 48.

<sup>20</sup> Ackermann, "Engaging Faith," 48.

political and personal transformation. We can nurture shared forms of hope and solidarity by listening to the stories of women who are different to us.

Ackermann, Van der Walt, and others read the Bible stories of raped women such as Tamar against the background of the HIV pandemic and the present-day reality of GBV and sexual abuse in the South African society. Ackermann notes that “violence is an endemic reality in our society. The very fabric of our communities is fracturing as fear invades South African homes and lurks at our stop streets.”<sup>21</sup> On the cusp of the new South Africa, Ackerman insists that it is time for women to hope in ways that entail risk and resistance: living out hope and practising it in dark days to make hope become real, requires creativity and boldness as well as a refusal to make peace with oppression. The reign or kingdom of God must be one of wholeness where peace is not enforced through the powerful threat of a police weapon or husband’s fist but is nurtured through justice and equality to build a society of equals who can share power. Christian hope is never cheap but is always called to be a “hope against hope” which does not point to places of progress and optimism in our world, but paradoxically towards solidarity with dark and suffering places, inhabited by the victims of our systems, and in conversation with lived experiences of despair. All our work for social transformation must begin in these places, otherwise our vision of hope will fail to be in solidarity with God’s vision of the common good that requires solidarity with the victims to generate a critique of the present. Only a hope that is grounded in solidarity and lament enables us to see the suffering God who is already present in the darkness with us.<sup>22</sup>

A vision of hope offers standing ground outside the system from which the system can be evaluated, critiqued and perhaps changed. Hopeless people eventually conform but hope filled people are not as dependent or contained. Hope is an immense human act which reminds us that no system of power or knowledge can finally grasp what is true and offers an alternative reality as the substance of hope. Hope makes it possible not to submit, even if defiance is not successful.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ackermann, “Engaging Faith,” 45.

<sup>22</sup> Selina Palm, “Reimagining the Human: The Role of the Churches in Building a Human Rights Culture in South Africa Today” (PhD thesis, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1987), 81.

Over 25 years after Ackerman's initial call, many women still struggle to maintain hope. The vision of a society which is liberating for all has not extended to the freedom of fear for all women and girls, and this fear has been exacerbated by the lockdown of Covid-19 where women's current fears of violence from intimate partners and family members, and an entrapment within unjust gendered labour roles come under even greater pressure. We need to find new ways to embrace hope. To do this, I enter into conversation with Armenian-American feminist scholar, Flora Keshgegian's book, *A Time for Hope* to offer concrete ways to practise hope that may resonate in our Covid-19 and GBV times.

### **Nurturing New Habits: Exploring Five Contours of Hope**

Keshgegian's five contours for new social habits of hoping in women's lives are 1) seeing time differently; 2) accepting finitude; 3) challenging transcendence; 4) an ethic of risk; and 5) reconceptualising transformation. These have been explored in relation to theologies of hope in my earlier work.<sup>24</sup> She is one of a number of feminist theologians who challenge many existing ways of understanding religious hope only within a linear progressive model of time. Instead, she connects these theological contours of hope to five concrete practices by which she suggests that women can better nurture improvisational tools of hope.<sup>25</sup>

#### ***Seeing Time Differently***

First, Keshgegian suggests that the Judeo-Christian affirmation that God acts purposively within history to bring about *his* will, providing an overarching guaranteed grand hope for a happy ending to human history, can lead to "once and for all" thinking which can be abstractly utopian and unhelpful.<sup>26</sup> She is concerned that this can encourage an attitude that our human actions in the present do not really mean much because the future is fixed by God. This builds on a Western, linear, and progressive notion of time that fails to ring true for many and can benefit some at the expense of others. I find that her concern that to see the world as a "divine comedy"<sup>27</sup> where all will be redeemed in the end can repress lived experiences of the tragic, limited, and ambiguous nature of life is particularly relevant to the concrete, compounded bereavements and tragedies surrounding us in new ways through Covid-19. It highlights

---

<sup>24</sup> Palm, "Transforming Hope?"; Palm and Le Bruyns, "Transforming Hope."

<sup>25</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 191.

<sup>26</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 78.

<sup>27</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 17.

the dangers of a theology that insists that there is nothing that we can do, as the future is in God's hands. Worst of all, in South Africa, large church events have become Covid-19 super spreaders.

GBV and Covid-19 both present us with tragic experiences and limits that require actions for change and not merely a passive hope that God will one day change things, bring miracle cures, or transform abusive husbands. She suggests that we should "relearn the contours of hope for today to inhabit time differently"<sup>28</sup> and look for smaller hope-generating narratives that would let go of our human tendency to seek comprehensive solutions. I resonate with her call to better honour both the complexity and the limits of life in ways that nurture forms of social hope that do not rely on a guaranteed happy ending. Instead, it points us towards meaningful values that centre us in the present in ways that can focus on women's safety and accompany us on a journey into the unknown future. I find an androcentric insistence on discovering a cure for Covid-19 and the war-like metaphors used to fight for this goal or indeed the "fight" against GBV, to be problematic metaphors resurfacing today, that may push forward in ways that leave some behind.

Keshgegian invites us into "the practice of honouring time" by being mindful to the present as God's time.<sup>29</sup> We are all travellers on the way and need to pay attention to the signs of our time, and take time to slow down. Keshgegian is concerned that a constant drive to the future can mean that the cries of victims in the present will be unheard. This is particularly true with GBV, where a solutions mindset can close down the spaces of lament and unpacking of trauma which are needed for change to emerge. Like Ackermann, she points to the need to spend time in our public spaces on loss, grief, mourning, and unpacking trauma. This shows hope's dialectic with pain and grief. Remembering our painful pasts together, recalls alternative histories that do not exclude the voices of survivors. During this era of Covid-19 and GBV, a call to mindfulness, public lament, and listening to stories of alternative histories is valuable.

### ***Embracing Finitude and Limits***

Second, Keshgegian points out that much traditional Christianity has postponed the fulfilment of hope into another heavenly place or has refused to accept human finitude and vulnerability. Finitude and death

---

<sup>28</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 157.

<sup>29</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 191.

are even seen as a punishment for original sin with salvation through Jesus, while eternal life is presented as the “answer” to that fear of finitude.<sup>30</sup> Instead, feminist theology explores death in a more holistic eco-centred way, as a natural part of the cycle of life, by also drawing on personal experiences of new birth. The reality of limited space in our world requires death, not as a punishment of sin, but as an intrinsic part of creation’s own renewal. The hope claims of eternal life and immortality, typical of Christianity, may reflect a damaging refusal to accept the finitude and limits that are natural parts of human life. Women’s theological voices instead argue for agnosticism in the face of death, buoyed by a trust in a relationship with a God of love, rather than holding to rigid doctrines about our post-death future that can fail to ring true, bring genuine comfort, or speak meaningfully into our times. Seeing death as a cost of the privilege of life may help Christians to avoid a triumphalist approach to resurrection that is too quick to deny the reality of our human experiences of finitude and our lack of certain knowledge about the future beyond this horizon. At a time of Covid-19, where the death of loved ones hovers on all our horizon, this offers new ways to inhabit the fragile life which we have and to accept its vulnerabilities and limits, whilst still resisting the ways in which death often comes to women unjustly at the violent hands of another person.

Here, Keshgegian invites us into the “practice of concrete embodiment.”<sup>31</sup> As women we can pay closer attention to our own bodies and the safe spaces in which they need to thrive. In relations between men and women, men’s bodies and needs often take up too much space or make shared spaces unsafe for women. Reclaiming the value of women’s bodies and learning how to live together within a limited space in ways that are healthy for all involved, can remind us that all bodies matter to God. The smaller spaces of lockdown living which Covid-19 has pushed us into, require urgent critical reflection on hospitable and dangerous spaces for women and girls in their everyday lives. A recognition of the inherent limits of life for all, rejects unlimited ideas of growth, prosperity, and expansion as unsustainable. As the natural environment flourishes under the Covid-19 curbing of economic consumption, a hope generating practice can emphasise the value of making enough space for all bodies in the here and now and not too much for some. It offers a sobering reminder that women should not

---

<sup>30</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 129.

<sup>31</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 131.

---

have to create safe spaces for others in need of care at the expense of their own needs and safety.

### **Challenging Transcendence**

Third, Keshgegian, following Welch, questions whether we should hold to a transcendent horizon of hope outside history that guides and grounds our human journey as Christians.<sup>32</sup> She lets go of a transcendent God outside history to embrace finitude as part of the human condition whilst remaining hopeful. She notes that Jesus held up the idea of God as immanent and discoverable in the ordinary and the human, but that the institutional church constantly pushes away from this radical idea and in doing so, can split off the transcendent dimension of hope, emphasising transcendence over immanence, disconnecting space and time and frequently rejecting human finitude as a result. She invites us into a more incarnational position with transcendence reframed within human histories and experience. A refusal to accept how things are and to work for social transformation becomes an alternative form of “horizontal” transcendence where people go beyond what currently exists to develop new possibilities, but also seek to live fully within the present, despite its limitations. Her critique challenges the image of God as overall controller to point instead to an improvisational energy for life:

The living god is known in and through the process of living. This is a god of improvisation, an abundant energy, powerful and ever moving. This god is ground of our hope. The monarchical god reigning in heaven so often portrayed as the object and ground of our hope is not adequate for the vision of life we need today. Nor is a god made in our image of a loving parent granting our every desire, able to provide the hope needed. The god of life, ground of hope, speaks forcefully out of the whirlwind. God’s power for life makes resurrection happen – not person but relation.<sup>33</sup>

Keshgegian invites us into “incarnational practices of awe and wonder” within our everyday lives that help us to step away from trying to control everything.<sup>34</sup> This can enable us to experience a mystery within the wider creation that could ground us in a sense of perspective and

---

<sup>32</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 222.

<sup>33</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 221.

<sup>34</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 210.

humility. I suggest that this encourages women to live in the habit/at of wild wonder where transcendence is not controlled by fearful patriarchal doctrines or human-made church buildings, but is found in the creative energy of the spirit of life and the rituals of nature where we relinquish control and become participants in awe, connected to each other. This can offer a new perspective on our interconnected place in the world and stimulate our imagination for hope, generating dialogues and relationships of solidarity. In a world where Covid and GBV fears can confine women to smaller and smaller spaces, stepping out into nature can be an act of resistance against the female fear factor that keeps us trapped and helps us to reconnect to generative possibilities. While writing this article, I took time away from my desk to hike a mountain trail with a female companion. I returned energised and envisioned, reminded that I need open spaces in which to be free to imagine different ways of living in the world. I also felt more aware of how many women remain trapped inside, due to fears of being attacked if they venture out without male protection.

### ***An Ethic of Risk***

Fourth, Keshgegian contrasts an ethic of control with an “ethic of risk and solidarity.”<sup>35</sup> She points out that there are no guarantees of decisive social improvements, but that we can choose to resist in hope by imagining a world that is different from the present, developing strategies of resistance, and finding ways of sustaining each other in the struggle for justice. She seems to let go of a transcendent, omnipotent God outside the system, whose promise forms the guarantee for our actions in the world. Instead, she suggests that much utopian thinking is often about control and power over others, framed in terms of the good. She challenges an image of a sovereign God who holds absolute power and invites us to relinquish these absolutes to live in an alternative space of the “beloved community that celebrates limits, contingency and ambiguity with no-one to offer us a guaranteed future.”<sup>36</sup> This requires relinquishing all forms of “power over” to work in solidarity towards mutually transformative relationships and interactions.

While all our social responses to Covid-19 and GBV are in some ways temporal and partial, they are still meaningful and needed. Keshgegian and Welch both use the playful image of God as a jazz improviser rather

---

<sup>35</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 86.

<sup>36</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 88.

than an omnipotent controller where an interactive space emerges between divine and human action where there is potential and possibility.<sup>37</sup> Hope becomes a verb, enabling us to craft meaningful values for the journey, as opposed to being a static hope for a utopian end-goal where, as Ackermann also reminds us, “to hope is to engage hour by hour with life in a way that our deeds express that for which we hope.”<sup>38</sup> This points away from a passive reliance on God alone towards a commitment by each of us to do what we can to sustain life, a focus that is urgently needed in this time of Covid-19 and GBV where many women and girls may retreat away from the idea of taking risks or resisting because of its accompanying dangers, and in this way quietly ceasing to hope.

Keshgegian invites us to “practise a creative imagination” and to refuse the cultural colonisation of women’s expectations as tied only to what has been or what is, and not what could be as a form of atrophied imagination.<sup>39</sup> She notes that “being able to envision change in our circumstances and to imagine a different and better life are fundamental to being able to hope. Hope not only imagines the correcting of injustices and wrongs but it also brings into conception what has never existed before, initiating birth process of the new.”<sup>40</sup> While she notes that it is poets and artists who may often lead the way, she insists that we can all learn to imagine. I share her concern that, at this time and in the midst of these twin pandemics, we run the risk of falling only into negative imaginings about the future. Many women’s busyness, anxiety, preoccupation, and cramped living spaces can make it hard to step into spaces of positive imagining that nurture creative alternatives for change as a hope generating practice.<sup>41</sup> She invites all women to reclaim the prophetic imagination of God’s desires for justice and to use their discontent with present realities to generate and embody alternatives.

### ***Reconceptualising Social Transformation***

Finally, Keshgegian draws on insights from earlier generations of feminist scholars that “social change is about conversion to the centre

---

<sup>37</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Denise Ackermann, “A Time to Hope,” *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* 81 (1992): 67.

<sup>39</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 89.

<sup>40</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 201.

<sup>41</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 200.

rather than to the end.”<sup>42</sup> She shows that our motivation for social transformation can come from centring the embodiment of core values in our own lives such as peace, justice, and equality, rather than by turning it into a “once and for all” thinking about the future (“one day I will get to heaven and this is where God will rescue me from my violent husband”). Women can reject theologies that privilege the end of time over the need to have these values embodied in our present lives and spirituality, as this privileging “turns visions into utopias, transforms imagination into wish fulfilment and hope into the eternal embodiment of desire.”<sup>43</sup> Society is to be seen as in need of constant correction as new forms of injustice and new victims emerge. Smaller hopes for the possibilities of improvement enable us to work for ongoing changes rather than relying on a single hope for a once-off transformation. New beginnings will always be needed, and God can be envisioned as on the journey.

Constant correction is not a failure of social transformation but acts as an inevitable part of life. Women’s work in relation to transformation has often been daily, ongoing, repetitious tasks – turning ingredients into meals eaten, dirt into cleanness that dirties again, material into clothes that wear out, children into adults who have new children. This lived experience brings a slant of worldly housekeeping to bear on social transformation.<sup>44</sup> In this theology, responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible. Partial successes are valued and anticipations on a small scale enlarge other imaginations, while offering glimpses of other social structures. This approach can enable us to respond more actively to the human challenges of Covid-19 and GBV, not as God-ordained pandemics for which those entangled in it as victims must pray passively for release and feel shame and guilt, but as human challenges to be addressed together.

Keshgegian also invites us into “participation in interrelation” where hope is a social habit directed towards social change.<sup>45</sup> This is founded on an interconnected web of interrelations with which African people are already familiar in the reciprocal concept of *ubuntu*. We can become hope bearers for one another and value positive appreciation by culti-

---

<sup>42</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 200.

<sup>43</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 78.

<sup>44</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 91.

<sup>45</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 204.

vating the habit of *being-in-relation* with a sense of gratitude for others. This calls for a generosity and willingness to share, which will let go of fearfulness about scarcity that can resurge in our responses to Covid-19. It decentres a life lived at the expense of others and nurtures a life lived in a right relation to all others and in solidarity with those who are excluded. Women embody this social hope when they refuse to move ahead at the expense of more marginalised women and create a matrix of possibility for the next generation to experience life without gender-based violence, where God does not hover above our relationships but inhabits it. The reality of our web of interrelation becomes more visible in a pandemic where our actions impact the safety of others and where God's commitment to healing and safety can be incarnated in how women domestic workers or nurses, both highly vulnerable groups in the pandemic, are being treated by those who hold power.

## Becoming Communities of Hope

I suggest that Keshgegian's five contours or habits of hope can help to avoid the dangers of an ethic of control that emphasises militaristic once-off solutions such as a Covid cure, total lockdown, or a war on GBV. Instead, her ethic of risk and solidarity helps us to work for, and celebrate partial successes and to let go of a desire for absolute guarantees which can often mean prioritising some people's safety at the expense of others. Sustaining ongoing social transformation requires a daily focus by all of us in contributing towards a better world, by letting go of our grand visions of perfect worlds that can even lead to new tyrannies in the name of the good. Covid-19 invites us to re-engage with the realities of human finitude and to be wary of the triumphalist tendency of some religions to explain our limited vulnerable existence away.<sup>46</sup> A linear approach to time is problematised as coming at the expense of alternative metaphors which pay attention to those who are the victims of our current stories. Reimagining transcendence within immanence introduces themes of everyday worldly housekeeping as ongoing tasks of social transformation.<sup>47</sup> Hope becomes a social habit that honours both time and place in an embodied way that helps us to inhabit our lives differently in the midst of life's challenges.<sup>48</sup> In the face of the twin pandemics of GBV and Covid-19, household and social patterns need to change.

---

<sup>46</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 77.

<sup>47</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 91.

<sup>48</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 90.

This alternative narrative of hope can ground our shared journeys into unknown futures within a set of core values. It recognises limits, rejects guaranteed blueprints for change, and learns to improvise and imagine creatively within the messy realm of possibilities. Hope is not imposed as a system or a controlling vision. Instead, practising hope maintains a risky openness to the continual possibility of new goods in the midst of vulnerability and finitude. Social transformation is a human journey in partnership with the divine, inspired by the possibilities with which our realities are laden. It allows us to turn a critical eye on our present realities without becoming fatalistic, cynical, or despairing, and to engage fully with the messiness of life in history with all its human tragedies.<sup>49</sup>

The pandemics of both Covid and GBV run the risk of thrusting us into a superstitious fatalism where we desperately pray for God to protect us in a supernatural way whilst at the same time, falling into a social apathy where everything feels too hard to handle. Alternatively, it can generate a control ethic where I must keep myself or my family safe even at the expense of others' needs (e.g. buying up extra masks needed by nurses through panic buying). In between these various dangers is an alternative possibility of nurturing new habits of theological hope as women that refuse to confine God statically to a fixed place of worship that is "closed for business" every now and then under Covid-19, but instead see the divine on the move in hope with us – a fellow traveller journeying alongside women and men in the search for better and more just ways of being together. The church is called into being in new ways under Covid-19, as its established patterns and places of worship are disrupted. It can become an embodied people in hope, a dynamic community that participates in the practices of a God of hope, found in an unlikely place. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, "a hope-filled church that can resist, reform and offer alternatives"<sup>50</sup> to the many social injustices that still mark our world today. GBV specifically forms a large part of those injustices in our context. Our practical and theological responses to Covid-19 must engage and not mask this.

---

<sup>49</sup> Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 78.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Communities of Hope midst Engines for Despair," in *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context*, ed. Walter Brueggemann (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2001), 3-12.

---

## Conclusion

To hope in these despairing times of Covid-19 and GBV must be a choral social practice. It requires a choir of voices to bring out its harmonies and is not merely the action of a soloist. New habits of hope can open up spaces for smaller hope-generating stories in unexpected places of suffering and struggle and not only in places of success. This shapes the contours of hope in ways that do not leapfrog over the lived data of despair. Authentic hope does not seek to escape or control limits that are part of human life but offers a way to inhabit time with all its vulnerabilities whilst being open to the good possibilities with which reality is laden. It can nurture resilient hope in action that fuels resistance to present injustices and takes risks to shape alternatives. As women, we can each add our individual voice to the choral community of hope.

Creating spaces for women's storytelling of their experiences, offers many possibilities for nurturing these smaller hope generating narratives. It becomes theological acts which can help us to lament, recognise limits, understand time differently, imagine creatively and seek good relationships with one another. It is not just the raw material onto which theology must then be crafted.

This article was first written as a framing chapter for a forthcoming book collating the self-narrated stories of diverse South African women living under the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. In this reproduction of that chapter, those women's stories, poems, artworks, and reflections across a 50-year age range are sadly missing. These stories speak about trauma and mourning, reclaim practices of lament, engage with the reality of death, the pain of separation from loved ones, and the reality that formal church services and the traditional access to the Eucharist (still often a male dominated ritual) have not been possible under Covid-19 lockdown. However, this has allowed new signs of hope to emerge through ways in which women are online ministering to other women to birth new stories of hope and gratitude and to accompany one another through these twin pandemics. Women finding their voices within the interconnected wildernesses of GBV and Covid-19, form embodied signs of hope as they demonstrate resilience and courage.

If we are to nurture habits of hoping within the despair, anxiety, and messiness of our real lives, we must also add our own stories as readers. Take a moment to think of one woman in your life who

embodies hope for you at this time and place in the South African history. For whom do you feel your own story can embody habits of hope? We can become concrete hope-bearers for one another, cultivating a sense of honouring our own time and the time of other women, creating spaces of safety and care within our inevitably finite and vulnerable lives for ourselves and others, embracing the wild wonder of creation as a form of transcendence and by taking risks in solidarity with each other to imagine and embody a different world, characterised by right relationships between and within genders and hopeful practices of world-centred housekeeping, if God's world is to become a more just household for all who live in it today.

## References

Ackermann, Denise. "A Time to Hope." *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* 81 (1992): 66-9.

Ackermann, Denise. "A 'Spirituality of Risk' for Christian Witness in South Africa." *International Review of Mission* 83, no.328 (1994): 123-8.

Ackermann, Denise. "Engaging Faith: A Critical Feminist Theology of Praxis." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 94 (1996): 32-49.

Ackermann, Denise. *Tamar's Cry: Re-reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/Aids Pandemic*. Cape Town: Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, 2001.

Bauckham, Richard and Trevor Hart. *Hope against Hope – Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context*. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1999.

Brueggemann, Walter. *Hope within History*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 1987.

Brueggemann, Walter. "Communities of Hope amidst Engines for Despair." In *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context*, edited by Walter Brueggemann, 3-12. Westminster: John Knox Press, 2001.

- Ellis, Estelle. "Gender-based Violence is South Africa's Second Pandemic, says Ramaphosa." *Daily Maverick*, 18 June 2020. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-06-18-gender-based-violence-is-south-africas-second-pandemic-says-ramaphosa/> (Accessed 5 July 2020).
- Genrich, Daniela. "Gender-based Violence and the Church: A Church Gender Activist's Reflections." In *A Time Like No Other: COVID19 in Women's Voices*, edited by Nontando Hadebe, Sue Rakoczy, and Nobesuthu Tom, 9-22. South Africa: Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, forthcoming.
- Hadebe, Nontando, Sue Rakoczy, and Nobesuthu Tom. *A Time Like No Other: COVID19 in Women's Voices*. South Africa: Circle of Concerned Women Theologians, 2021.
- Keshgegian, Flora. *Time for Hope: Practices for Living in Today's World*. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Makgoba, Thabo. Archbishop's Eastertide News & Reflections – May 18, 2020. [https://archbishop.anglicanchurchsa.org/2020/05/archbishops-eastertide-news-reflections\\_18.html](https://archbishop.anglicanchurchsa.org/2020/05/archbishops-eastertide-news-reflections_18.html) (Accessed 5 June 2020).
- Marais, Nadia, "Blessed? A Critical Analysis of Salvation in Denise Ackermann that Portrays Human Flourishing as Liberation, Grace and the Goodness of Life." *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 55 (2016): 701-27.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *Ethics of Hope*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.
- Palm, Selina. "Transforming Hope? A Theological-Ethical Vision, Virtue and Practice for the Common Good." Master's diss., Stellenbosch University, 2012. <http://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/20135>
- Palm, Selina. "Reimagining the Human? The Role of the Church in Building a Human Rights Culture in South Africa Today." PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2016.
- Palm, Selina. "Homes of Bondage or Households of Freedom? The Role of Faith in Underlying Harmful Social Norms." Webinar for Healthy

Households Covid-19 series, 7 July 2020.

[http://blogs.sun.ac.za/urdr/files/2020/07/Palm\\_7-July-webinar-slides.pdf](http://blogs.sun.ac.za/urdr/files/2020/07/Palm_7-July-webinar-slides.pdf)

Palm, Selina and Clint le Bruyns. "Transforming Hope: A Theological-ethical Vision, Virtue and Practice for the Common Good." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 146 (2013): 104-21.

Palm, Selina & Elisabet le Roux. "Households of Freedom? Faith's Role in Challenging Gendered Geographies of Violence in our Cities." In *Just Faith: Glocal Responses to Planetary Urbanization*, edited by Stephan de Beer, 135-64. Pretoria: AOSIS Online, 2018.

Russell, Letty M. *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987.

Van der Walt, Charlene. "Hearing Tamar's Voice: How the Margin Hears Differently: Contextual Readings of 2 Samuel 13:1-22." *European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis* 2, 2011.  
[http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/11\\_2/van\\_der\\_Walt\\_Charlene\\_2011.html](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/11_2/van_der_Walt_Charlene_2011.html)

Welch, Sharon. *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

We See Hope. Covid-19 Pandemic: Skills for Sustainable Futures. n.d.  
<https://www.weseehope.org.uk/>.