Homophobic hatred and violence in Pietermaritzburg: Drawing on faith to establish counter communities of care for black Izitabane women.

Submitted by Nandi Michelle Makhaye

Student Number: 212559498

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School of Religion, Philosophy & Classics, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

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Supervised by

Professor Charlene Van Der Walt

DECLARATION

I, Nandi Michelle Makhaye, declare that this thesis titled ***Homophobic Hatred and Violence in Pietermaritzburg: Drawing on Faith to Establish Counter Communities of Care for Black Izitabane Women,*** unless otherwise stated in the text, is the result of my research and that all sources used have been acknowledged using complete references.

Nandi M. Makhaye

Student

[redacted]

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08 February 2024

Professor Van der Walt

Supervisor

[redacted]

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ABSTRACT

The challenges faced by black Izitabane women, especially in relation to their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs, are significant. The compatibility of Ubutabane and Christianity has been a topic of debate, with some Christians advocating for coexistence while others view it as contradictory to core Christian principles. Black Izitabane women often experience marginalization and discrimination in various aspects of society. This autoethnographic research, which drew on queer theology and used a qualitative approach, aimed to explore the individual experiences, perspectives, and beliefs of nine black Izitabane women regarding their sexuality and faith. All participants identified as Isitabane and considered themselves devout Christians. The study used purposive sampling to select and invite participants and gathered data through a focus group discussion and individual interviews focusing mainly on the faith, violence, culture, and sexual experiences of black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. The findings revealed that the women who were part of this exploration perceived the church as unwelcoming and fellow Christians as judgmental. They faced rejection and isolation in the very place where they expected to be supported. The study suggests that, in post-apartheid South Africa, the church should take a proactive role in advocating for social justice and combatting homophobic hatred and violence, which continues to marginalize black Izitabane women.

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DEDICATION

For my grandmother – You left before I could make you proud [Mary Tina Son 1931-2010]

Hlukana nokugila imikhuba emzini kababa omkhulu. Mawuqhubeka nalomkhuba ngizofika ekhaya ngikushisele impepho ngicele amadlozi akubulale ngoba ugila umkhuba. Lokhu ngazalwa ayikaze yenziwe lento uyintombazane wena awusindoda" [You need to stop doing what you are doing in my grandfather's house. If you continue doing what you are doing, I will come home and ask the ancestors to kill you because you are doing what you are doing. Ever since I was born, this has never happened. You are a girl, not a man]. – (Participant #2 – Individual Interview, 18 November 2023)[1]

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

SITUATING THE SELF

This inquiry is influenced by my personal experiences. I am black, I am an Isitabane[2] woman. I was raised as a Christian and identified as such throughout my childhood and young adulthood. Growing up, I attended one of the highly conservative churches, the Catholic church; subsequently, I have personally experienced the degradation carried out on the Izitabane community by the institutional church. It is from that perspective that I write this thesis.

I was born and raised in Stepmore, a small rural area situated in the southern Drakensberg of KwaZulu-Natal. My neighborhood is primarily made up of black families. Most of the families in this area can be classified as extended families[3] , including my immediate family. While my family belongs to a working-class family in this area, most families barely make ends meet. Growing up, my family and I attended a nearby Roman Catholic Church, and many families were in my community. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination in the world. The church is shaped by male leadership, and it is further shaped by worldwide societal and cultural norms. While the church does not consider Ubutabane[4] (homosexual orientation) sinful in and of itself, it has an exceptionally negative attitude toward it. The Catechism names Ubutabane acts (*homosexual acts*) as "intrinsically immoral and contrary to the natural law" and names Ubutabane tendencies (*homosexual tendencies*) as "objectively disordered" (Human Rights Campaign, 2020).

[1] This text message that was sent to Participant #2 by her uncle reflects the attitudes of many people towards Ubutabane [same-sex sexuality].
[2] The term 'Isitabane/Izitabane' (Isizulu) is used in this study to refer to black queer bodies (more generally known as lesbians) within the South African context. I am reclaiming this term that has been used to discriminate and oppress non-gender conforming bodies and I am using it to showcase that Izitabane people exist in South Africa. The term is discussed in detail in the conceptual classification section.
[3] Extended families consist of several generations of people and can include biological parents and their children as well as in-laws, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins (Bester & Malan-Van Rooyen, 2015).
[4] Ubutabane is a term that is used to describe a wide range of sexualities and gender within a South African context.

Congregants are taught that sex must happen between a husband and wife and must be done for procreation. The church considers sex without both of these reasons improper. The basis for the Roman Catholic Church's opposition to Ubutabane acts dates back many years but was formally outlined in the 1992 Catechism [a text that contains dogmas and teachings of the church] of the Catholic Church (Human Rights Campaign, 2020). My experiences of growing up and actively participating in the Roman Catholic Church formatively shaped my perspectives on the relationship between spirituality, gender, sexuality, and life in general. In many ways, this informs the questions I ask, the theories I employ, and the conclusions I have drawn from this study. Growing up as a black, Zulu African girl from a deeply rural community, I was very aware of the social norms and expectations laid out for me in my home and in my community. Ubutabane was simply not a part of our worldview. It was and, to a certain extent, still is a susceptible and often shunned topic. On the few occasions when it did occur, it was quickly established that it was neither desirable nor acceptable.

It was not until I was in high school that Ubutabane became more of an issue in my life. When I was in high school, I realized that something was different about me. I could not understand what was different, but when my friends were excited about dating or having boyfriends, I was just never interested. People started calling me names such as 'Isitabane' or 'tomboy' because I did not have a boyfriend and kept to myself a lot. I was never bothered because I did not think I was Isitabane. When I realized that I was, in fact, attracted to other women, I struggled a lot. When I came out as Isitabane, things got worse. I was met with rejection, violence, marginalization, and a whole lot of other things. I was told that it is "just a phase and will pass." I was told that I needed prayers and to be cleansed. I was told that I needed to find the "right man." I was told that "God hates Izitabane." I was told that there is no place for Izitabane in my culture, the Zulu culture. While my family and friends have been very supportive of me, these negative instances never felt good. They have made me doubt myself, created a tremendous sense of conflict in me, and made me feel unsafe and misunderstood.

As someone who has been stigmatized, discriminated against, rejected, and rendered invisible and someone who is deeply interested in creating safe spaces for black Izitabane women, I came to realize why it was so important to me that I write this thesis. Not only did I want to explore the concept of faith within my own personal journey, but I also wanted to connect with individuals who share similar experiences and explore their experiences as well. Specifically, I aimed to understand the experiences of black Izitabane women in South Africa in relation to sexuality, culture, violence, and faith. My goal is to illustrate how these experiences create a complex intersection of race, gender, religion, and sexuality. I believe that the real-life experiences of black Izitabane women can contribute to the formation of caring communities. Communities that embrace, support, and include Izitabane in all aspects of congregational life as full members of the community of God.

Within this context, “Homophobic Hatred and Violence in Pietermaritzburg: Drawing on Faith to Establish Counter Communities of Care for Black Izitabane Women” is an autoethnographic study that critically examines, makes visible, and humanizes the real-life experiences of black Izitabane women in a traditional and conservative South Africa where a patriarchal culture predominates. In this study, I, the researcher, provide an insider’s account and analysis of the life of a black Isitabane woman and the struggle that such a life can be. I open myself up as I explore my experiences concerning the studied phenomena. Additionally, I explore and integrate the experiences and perspectives of nine black Izitabane women from varying social statuses in Pietermaritzburg to explore a role that can be played by faith in establishing communities of care for black Izitabane women who are facing homophobic hatred and violence. Throughout this research, the patriarchal and heteronormative practice of thought is problematized, mechanisms that contribute to its production and maintenance are discussed, as well as the intersectionality between multiple identities of class, race, and geographical location. This study seeks to contribute to the substantial body of work around the complex intersections of Ubutabane, religion, heteronormativity, homophobic hatred, and violence by engaging lived experiences, explanations, and perceptions of black Izitabane women who are surviving the homophobic and hatred violence in Pietermaritzburg.

1.1 Background to the Research Problem

In the contentious realm of sexual politics, South Africa’s Izitabane Rights movement has achieved more legal success than any other community, making the country one of the most liberal, if not most radical, in the world (Thoreson, 2008: p.680). South Africa’s “Bill of Rights offers civil protection to individuals based on vectors of identity including sexuality, gender, and religion” (Stobie, 2014: p.1), which has resulted in successful legal challenges to discriminatory laws and practices (Epprecht, 2013). In May 1996, the country’s Constitution became “the first anywhere to explicitly include sexual orientation in an enumerated list of constitutional equality guarantees” (Stychin, 1996: p.456). Izitabane rights are protected via section 9(3) Chapter Two, also known as the Equality Clause of the Bill of Rights, which affirms that “[T]he State may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth” (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

This victory was made possible in many ways by the rhetoric that the Izitabane movement utilized, which began to take shape in 1994 when the inherited apartheid laws against black

people were being reviewed and some canceled. Since then, activists have successfully used the Equality Clause to produce a recognizable body of case laws and to legislate other protections for the Izitabane community, including Section 9. Section 9 of the South African Constitution (1996) provides the following protections:

- 9(1) Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit from the law.
- 9 (2) Equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms. To promote the achievement of equality, legislative and other measures designed to protect or advance persons, or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination may be taken.
- 9 (4) No persons may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds in terms of subsection (3). National legislation must be enacted to prevent or prohibit unfair discrimination.
- 9 (5) Discrimination on one or more grounds listed in subsection (3) is unfair unless it is established that it is fair.
- Section 12 (1) provides that everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person, including the right to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources and not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhumane, or degrading way; and the guarantee of bodily and psychological integrity, which includes the right to security in and control over their body. *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*

Furthermore, in 1998, the Constitutional Court decided in *National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality and Another v. Minister of Justice and Others* to overturn the prohibitions against sodomy (Iranti.org and the Arcus Foundation, 2019, p.58). The Court found that common law and statutory prohibitions were in contravention of the Constitution (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Thoreson, 2008). The following year, the Court invalidated Section 25 (5) of the Aliens Control Act of 1991 in National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality and Others v. Minister of Home Affairs and Others, which held that the permanent same-sex partners of South Africans should receive the same immigration benefits as heterosexual spouses. Two years later, the High Court concurred that sections of the Child Care Act (2000) and the Guardianship Act were discriminatory and legalized same-sex adoption in *Du Toit and Another v. Minister of Welfare and Others*.

Finally, in November 2006, the Court Rules in Minister of Home Affairs and Another v. Fourie and Another and Lesbian and Gay Equality Project and Eighteen Others v. Minister of Home Affairs and Others, the Supreme Court ruled it was unconstitutional for the state to deny same-sex couples the right to marry. The Court later voted in favor of the legal recognition of same-sex couples' marriages through the amendment of the Civil Union Act (Thoreson, 2008). Alongside this development in jurisprudence, South African legislation has continued to evolve in ways that set precedents for the constitutional obligations of broader democratic ideals of dignity, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the general democratic ideal of anti-discrimination. These include the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act enacted in 2000 (PEPUDA or the Equality Act, Act No.4 of 2000) as amended in 2005, which provides measures to address unfair discrimination on several prohibited grounds, including gender, sex, and sexual orientation (Iranti.org and the Arcus Foundation, 2019, p.58).

Nevertheless, despite all these significant moves and many other legislative reforms in South Africa, the country, especially at the community level, is still haunted by its dark past, which was not only informed by institutionalized discrimination but also by homophobic violence against Izitabane coupled with social marginalization (Munro, 2005; Gevisser & Cameron, 1995; Naidoo & Karels, 2011). In South Africa today, Izitabane, and black Izitabane women in particular, who choose to be open about their sexual orientation, continue to be a vulnerable group that is susceptible to some of the most horrific forms of homophobic violence and crimes, including what has widely become known as the crime of homophobic rape also known as "corrective rape" and homophobia (Cock, 2003; Nel & Judge, 2008; Dayal, 2022; Francis & Brown, 2017; Msibi, 2009). Brown defines homophobic rape as rape often perpetrated by men (strangers, acquittances, or friends) against Izitabane individuals to communicate their disapproval of Ubutabane. The intention is to 'correct' or 'cure' the victim of Ubutabane, and sometimes, this act is perpetrated with the support of the victim's family (2012). In South Africa, this so-called correction has often gone beyond the act of rape to the murder of the most horrific kind.

In 2021 alone, at least 24 black Izitabane women were reportedly murdered in bias-motivated attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2022). These reported cases, all occurring in rapid succession, emphasize a disconnect between Constitutional protection and black Izitabane women's lived experiences, which range from physical violence, shaming, discrimination, and homophobia to acceptance (Bhana, 2012; Msibi, 2012); further exacerbated by the violent legacy of the

apartheid state, patriarchies of oppression found in colonialism, as well as a conservative culture which exist within South Africa's communities (Gontek, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Britton, 2006; Ratele & Suffla, 2010). In South Africa, studies found that in contrast with the progressive Constitution, many people are struggling to accept Izitabane as moral human beings and that people's attitudes towards Ubutabane are yet to improve. Heteronormative discourses and practices continue to silence Izitabane sexualities and to negate Ubutabane as 'un-African' (Bhana et al., 2007). A 2008 Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) study of attitudes towards Ubutabane found that "more than 80% of the South African population aged 16 years and above expressed the view that sex between two men or two women could be considered 'always wrong'" (2008 cited in Sanger, 2010: p.15).

Homophobic sentiments like those expressed by the South African former President Jacob Zuma have influenced popular opinion in portraying Ubutabane's behavior as "un-African" and "unnatural." In 2006, Jacob Zuma fiercely aligned heterosexuality with African values and publicly referred to Ubutabane's sexual behavior as "a disgrace to the nation to God" (Mail and Guardian, 2006, September 26 cited in Beresford, Schneider, Sember, p.220). Adding weight to this side of the debate, various religious and community leaders in South Africa maintain that God is against Ubutabane and that Ubutabane is immoral and un-Christian. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-9 and the Creation account in Genesis 1-2 are used as proof that 'normal' relationships exist only between a male and a female (Hunter, 2014: p.23). Everything outside these norms is considered 'un-African,' 'un-Christian,' and 'immoral' (Awondo & Reid, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2013). Despite all the evidence of fluidity of human gender and sexuality, Ubutabane is frequently represented as aberrant 'lifestyle choices' or mental health disorders (Ewing et al., 2020: p.3).

This observation, as well as my own lived experiences as a black Isitabane woman navigating issues of identity, faith, heteronormativity, homophobic hatred, and violence in post-colonial and post-apartheid South Africa, has inspired the present study and has led me to consider the following question: "What other interventions are required to address and respond to violence against black Izitabane women, and who should lead these interventions?". In this study, I seek to underscore the potential utilization of religion and African faith communities[5] as a pivotal

[5] The African faith communities in question are members of the African Initiated Churches. These churches are technically those churches which at the beginning of the twentieth century, either broke away from mission churches or missionary/mainline Christianity or were founded independently of European missionary activities and are headed by African leaders (Venter, 2004).

intervention mechanism. As posited by Le Roux, "religion has a unique ability to promote stability, cohesion, and solidarity" (2015). In South Africa, religion, faith communities, and faith leaders hold considerable authority and influence in the education and socialization of society and are uniquely positioned to shape community attitudes on a range of social issues, including sexuality (Palm & Gaum, 2021: p.206). During the apartheid era, faith communities, in partnership with the local community leaders (mainly traditional leaders), played a tremendous role in the dismantling of the white supremacy regime and in supporting the human rights of black people in South Africa and continue to play this role in many other countries (Dube & Molise, 2018: p.161; Muller, 2008: p.129; Emarus et al., 2005).

Among many other things, the church "spoke against race classification; the forced removal of population groups due to the Group Areas Act; the Immorality Act and Mixed Marriages Act, designed to preserve racial purity; the various education acts which created separate kinds of education along ethnic lines; as well as job reservation" (De Gruchy, 1986: p.88 cited in Masuku, 2014: p.151). Church pulpits and assemblies provided an array of platforms for black people to engage in a prophetic vocation against the apartheid system at a time when few others were available in the black community (Allen, 2006: p.233 cited in Kumalo & Dziva, 2007; Dube & Molise, 2018). This non-violent approach of the church proved to be a significant factor in the downfall of apartheid, despite predictions that transaction comes through violent revolutionary cataclysm (Hudson-Allison, 2000, cited in Dube & Molise, 2018: p.161). All in all, faith communities remain the most essential part of many South Africans and are an organizing center for political and social movements, providing marginalized communities with an empowered voice to engage in social justice issues (Bent-Goodley et al., 2012: p.53). This leads one to assume that churches can potentially play an active and prominent role in addressing the violence of heteronormativity, particularly the harmful practices aimed at silencing and suppressing black Izitabane women's identities.

1.2 Preliminary Literature Review

This section is an overview of some of the key sources that were consulted. The section is divided into three parts. Part one focuses on making sense of the phenomenon of homophobic violence against black Izitabane women. Part two focuses on the influence of Christian religion and faith communities in South Africa. Part three focuses on Christian hospitality as a hermeneutic approach to engaging the exclusion and inclusion of black Izitabane women in African faith communities. Chapter two goes into greater detail about this.

1.2.1 Part One: Placing Violence Faced by Black Izitabane Women in Context

Sexuality and sexual activity, regardless of the society, are intricately linked with the exercise of power (Foucault, 1980 cited in Msibi, 2011: p.57) and continue to be highly controlled and heavily policed (Msibi, 2011: p.57). In many cultures, including African cultures, sexuality is organized around the heterosexual/ubutabane binary, a symmetrical and oppositional coupling of a marginal category (ubutabane) with a privileged class (heterosexuality) (Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990). A closer examination of such binary, according to Katz, reveals that heterosexuality depends on subordinate or marginalized sexualities such as Ubutabane and other sexualities to reinforce and re-affirm its superior position (1995). Fuss elaborates: "For heterosexuality to achieve the status of compulsory, it must present itself as a practice governed by some internal necessity. The language and law that [regulate] the establishment of heterosexuality as both an identity and an institution, both a practice and a system, is the language and law of defense and protection" (Fuss, 1991: p.2).

In spite of its dependence on Ubutabane as a category, heterosexuality has primarily remained opaque, unquestioned, and unproblematized (Igraham, 1996). It is simultaneously marked as a natural and given category and unmarked as a ubiquitous and invisible force permeating all aspects of social life (Warner, 2002). When the view is that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate, authentic, prescriptive, and ruling social, cultural, and sexual arrangements, it becomes heteronormativity (Robinson, 2005: p.19). Yep defines heteronormativity as the invisible center and the presumed bedrock of society, the quintessential force creating, sustaining, and perpetuating the erasure, marginalization, disempowerment, and oppression of sexual others (2003: p.18). While Yep's observation may seem ancient, heteronormativity remains strongly encoded in the very fabric of our social, legal, economic, political, educational, and religious institutions yet remains invisible mainly and elusive (van der Toorn, Pliskin, and Morgenroth, 2020 see also Epstein & Johnson, 1994).

Berlant and Warner define heteronormativity as the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent-that is, organized as a sexuality- but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked as the basic idiom of the personal and the social, marked as a natural state, or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations-often unconscious, immanent to practice or to institutions (Berlant and Warner, 2002: p.309). Heteronormativity makes heterosexuality

hegemonic in our general culture through the process of normalization (Weeks, 1996). This process of normalization serves to stigmatize, marginalize, subordinate, oppress, and regulate other sexualities, notably Izitabane - pushing Izitabane to the margins of society. These include formal restrictions on behaviors that challenge heteronormativity, with homophobic laws present in at least 76 countries criminalizing consensual, adult Ubutabane relationships, cross-dressing, cross-gender behavior, and/or even discussions of non-traditional sexualities.

In African countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Iran, Mauritania, and parts of Somalia, punishments for people whose sexual orientation or gender identity, or expression offends heteronormativity range from imprisonment to the death penalty (Simmons, 2014). Studies point out that at the heart of this "are perceptions of how people should 'be,' based on binaries that have hardened, blurred, or been redrawn over millennia between shifting layers of cultural, religious, political, and economic norms" (Ewing et al., 2020: p.1; see also Morrissey, 2013; Thoreson, 2013; Epprecht, 2013; Koraan & Geduld, 2015). In South Africa, one of the structures that uphold the heteronormative ideology is violence against black Izitabane women, and homophobic rape, also known as 'corrective rape' is one form that it can take (Lake, 2014; Warner, 1999; Jewkes et al., 2011). According to Msibi, in contrast to other African nations, where expressions of homophobia are institutionally, socially, and individually permitted and endorsed through the law, violence against Izitabane in South Africa operates in violation of the law that seeks to protect Izitabane from discrimination (Msibi, 2011).

Religion and cultural arguments are often used to reject the existence of Ubutabane and to support and justify the violence and discrimination against Izitabane. One aspect of this argument in South Africa is that Ubutabane is "un-African," 'unChristian,' 'immoral,' and against the African culture, religion, and laws (Awondo & Reid, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2013). With repetition by the media and reinforcement by religious, political, and, at times, even traditional extremists, such views persist (Ewing et al., 2020), despite the fact that many Izitabane South Africans have been raised under religion and continue to honor their religions. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-9 and the Creation account in Genesis 1-2 serve as the foundation for African discrimination against black Izitabane women. The argument by church leaders and people of faith is that God created Adam and Eve and men and women for procreation purposes. In this manner, marriage between a male and a female is viewed as correlative, exclusive, comprehensive, and permanent (Hunter, 2014: p.23).

Black Izitabane women find themselves on the receiving end of horrific forms of violence, ranging from verbal violence to physical harm and murder, and are generally stigmatized by

their families and society at large as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Nel & Judge, 2008; Mkhize et al., 2010). Between 2001 and 2002, the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project in Johannesburg, South Africa, found that 92% of the respondents were black Izitabane women, 32% of black Izitabane women had been raped at some point in their lives, 5.5% had been the victims of robbery, and 91% had been assaulted (cited in Naidoo & Karels, 2012: p.239). LulekiSizwe, a non-profit organization that helps survivors of rape in the Western Cape, has been, on more than one occasion, reported having stated that each year at least 500 Izitabane report being victims of 'corrective rape' in South Africa (Phiri, 2012; Gaitho, 2022). Statistics provided by Triangle, a non-profit organization based in Cape Town, show that support groups dealt with ten new 'corrective rape' cases every week (cited in Van der Schyff, 2018: p.37). These cases were reported in Cape Town alone. Another research published in 2003 by OUT LGBT Well-being, a non-profit organization, revealed that 10% of black Izitabane women had experienced some form of sexual assault.

In 2016, OUT found that 41% of Izitabane surveyed in South Africa knew someone who had been murdered because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. The majority of these hate crimes take place in public spaces and sometimes at the hands of people who are known by the survivor or victim of the crime (Strudwick, 2014; Morris, 2017; OUT, 2016). Furthermore, in South Africa, we cannot talk about violence against black Izitabane women without talking about the apartheid system. The long and complicated history of discrimination and violence serves as the backdrop of hate crimes and social prejudice in the lives of many black Izitabane women and many other individuals who are merely suspected of expressing affection or desire across socially constructed sex and gender boundaries (Fone, 2000 & Reddy, 2001). According to Cameron: "Apartheid valued conformity. Above everything else, it prized so-called racial purity. It treasured whiteness and European culture. Its entire edifice of separation, of exclusion, of subordination, of pass laws and body searches was built on the premise that one culture, one race, one skin color, was superior, valuable above all others" (2014: p.212).

Due to hate crimes and other related pressures, Izitabane individuals are at risk for adverse health and mental health outcomes and are likely to attempt suicide, drop out of school, experience homelessness, and use illegal drugs (Garnets, Herek & Levy, 1990; see also Willis, 2004). These challenges may also contribute to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and feelings of isolation (Jewkes et al., 2009; Ludsin & Vetten, 2005; Sadock et al., 2015). More or less, the same data were discovered in Muller's study that involved Izitabane and 14 representatives of

Izitabane organizations in South Africa (Muller, 2017). Similarly, Jewkes and colleagues found that hate crimes have extreme physical and mental consequences for survivors and can include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (including intrusive memories, flashbacks, and nightmares), which could, if untreated, in the long-term lead to increased anxiety, suicidality, and/or major depression (tiredness, temper outburst, worthlessness, helplessness, insomnia, hopelessness) (2009; Ludsin & Vetten, 2005; Sadock et al, 2015). Survivors are often so traumatized that they live in constant fear, which, according to Nel and Judge, "can have a chilling effect on the ways they present themselves in public, often encouraging them to play down or "closet" their sexual orientation or gender non-conformity" (Nel & Judge, 2008 cited in Naidoo & Karels, 2012: p.248).

In addition, a number of fundamental rights of the survivors are violated, and they are denied the promise of a post-apartheid South Africa that is free from all forms of fear, hatred, and bigotry. As Di Silvio eloquently stated, the perpetrators of hate crimes "rob its victims of their dignity and strike fear in their hearts for merely contemplating the exercise of their everyday rights" (Di Silvio, 2011: p.1485). The right to life, as guaranteed by Section 11 of the South African Constitution, has also been diminished (Mwambene & Wheal, 2015). Many survivors further face secondary discrimination and stigma from family and community members. The concept of intersectionality provides a valuable framework to interrogate and highlight the violent experiences of black Izitabane women in South Africa. Meyer argues that employing this framework will assist in revealing how black Izitabane women's experiences differ along the lines of race, class, and gender (Meyer, 2008). An intersectionality approach facilitates our understanding of the ways in which black Izitabane women interpret and experience violence in South Africa. The term "intersectional" was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, who is credited with founding the field of intersectionality studies (Collins, 1999 & Moreau, 2015).

1.2.2 Part Two: Creating Counter Communities of Care

In South Africa, faith communities are known for their prominent role in fighting for justice and bringing healing to black people. "Since the sixties until the change in 1994, the prophetic church in South Africa, directed by South African liberation theology, has had a huge influence on people, here and overseas, so much so that the previous government eventually had to fully acknowledge this" (Pieterse, 1999: p.82-83). Faith communities spoke with a powerful and fearless voice against apartheid (Pieterse,1999: p.82-83, cited in Coetzee, 2003: p.343). During this era, most African churches were part of the revolution and pleaded for action against violence. The church urged its "followers and members to take part actively in the struggle; to

see this participation as a calling, based on a specific way and method of interpreting the Bible" (Coetzee, 2004: p.342). Religion and the Bible were a foundation that gave rise to values that are fundamental to human rights, such as human dignity, freedom, justice, and equality (Vorster, 2000).

The South African context, in this way, presents an opportunity for religion and Christianity, in particular, to make a significant contribution to ending homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women and in protecting and caring for those most vulnerable. Regardless of how the church views Ubutabane, the need to support vulnerable individuals is critical to biblical interpretation and appropriation (West et al., 2016, p.4).

1.2.2.1 Radical Hospitality as a Hermeneutical Approach

Beyond the inherent benefit for African communities in general, the adoption of Christian hospitality allows faith spaces to transform and become spaces that are welcoming and that exude warmth and generosity. This aligns with the principles of Ubuntu as articulated by the late Desmond Tutu, emphasizing the significance of these values in fostering a sense of community and shared humanity. In this study, I argue that the ethic of Christian hospitality, as depicted in the Bible, is vital in dealing with the subject of homophobic hatred and violence, as well as much of the debate that has arisen over the issue of Ubutabane particularly in African faith communities. The ethos of Christian hospitality can provide insights into the contemporary church's welcoming and inclusive approach towards all people, regardless of their sexual orientation. The idea of hospitality is a theme that is often portrayed in biblical narratives. In the Kantian sense, hospitality addresses the idea, particularly in his understanding of the term as the 'natural right' "of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another." For Kant, all humans also possess this right "By virtue of their rights to communal possession of the earth's surface" (Kant cited in Henry, 2018). Kant saw hospitality as the defining element that brings people of different cultures together (Siddiqui, 2015). Hospitality "welcomes "the stranger" as one worthy of being considered a household member, marking a willingness to make room for another's unique presence" (Reynolds, 2008).

1.3 The aim of this research is to:

1. To determine the experiences of, reasons for, and consequences of homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

2. To explore the concept of faith in ending homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

3. To engage Queer Theology as a faith resource to enable the formation and development of counter communities of care for black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

1.4 Theoretical Lens: Queer Theology

> *[W]e must remember that the starting point of our theologies are bodies, but the rebellious bodies: … (Althaus-Reid, 2004: p.148).*

This study draws on a theoretical framework that focuses on reclaiming and celebrating the oppressed human bodies and sexualities, namely queer theology. Queer theology is a relative system of theology, as it seeks to reflect upon faith in concrete social, political, and cultural contexts (Cheng, 2011). The literature reviewed above suggests that black Izitabane women in South Africa face unique challenges, including limited access to faith spaces because of their real or perceived sexual orientation. Literature also shows that discussions about sexuality, in general, remain silenced, and Ubutabane is considered to be 'un-African and 'un-Christian.' Through Christianity, heteronormativity becomes an organizing principle against black Izitabane women's sexual identities and sexual activity (Boesak, 2019). Queer theology offers a useful way of understanding experiences of being black, Isitabane, religious, and African in a 'heterodominant' world and notes the circumstances under which gender and sexual minorities give meaning to religious violence. This theoretical framework can be understood as a way of doing theology that is rooted in Queer Theory and that critiques the binary categories of sexuality (that is, Ubutabane vs. heterosexual) and gender identity (that is, female vs. male) as socially constructed (Cheng, 2011: p.9-10).

According to Cheng, queer theology is Izitabane (otherwise known as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) people "talking about God" in a self-consciously transgressive manner; a "talk about God" that challenges and deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity (Cheng, 2011: p.9). Queer theology emphasizes the fluid and humanly performed nature of sexuality- or, better, sexualities. It questions socially established norms and dualistic categories with a special focus on challenging sexuality, gender, class, and racial classification (Weber, 2014). It deconstructs heterosexual epistemology and presuppositions in theology but also unveils the different and the suppressed face of God amidst it by presenting a deeply incarnational account in which God is found in human flesh and human flesh thus

reflects God (Isherwood & Althaus-Reid, 2004: p.5). In the context of Christianity, Queer theology is focused on apologetics for the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in Christianity (Tonstad, 2018). Instead, Queer theology aims to challenge existing norms and subvert the essentialist and reductionist aspects of representational politics (Althaus-Reid, 2005: p.271).

According to Althaus-Reid, the theological underpinnings of queer theology are formed on the ground where theology has been thought, the grounds of ideological legitimacy. The gender of God becomes irrelevant, not because it gets subsumed into something 'higher' but because legitimacy and illegitimacy in theology are no longer kept within the boundaries of boys and girls or heterosexuals versus Izitabane. Althaus-Reid goes on to say that Queer theology presents a unique challenge to theology, that is, to do theology from a different sexual epistemology (Althaus-Reid, 2005: p.271). Within the African contextual faith landscape, Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology is an explored theology. Similar to Queer theology, Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology calls for theology by Izitabane people and for Izitabane people in Africa. It engages with the backlash of Izitabane people by reclaiming the term "Izitabane," which has frequently been used in a discriminative manner to undermine and shame Izitabane individuals. Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology calls for theological reflections done by those, starting from the lived experiences of those who often negatively identify in the African context with the term Isitabane, "In the process, disrupting the traditional status of authoritative voices when it comes to theological discourse as well as the dominant direction of theological reflection and engagement" (The Other Foundation, 2019: p.1-p.2). Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology provides an appropriate lens for understanding black Izitabane women's experiences within the context of African faith.

1.5 Research Methodology

1.5.1 Qualitative research

The research design refers "to the overall strategy and analytical approach that you have chosen in order to integrate, in a coherent and logical way, the different components of the study, thus ensuring that the research problem will be thoroughly investigated" (Vaus, 2006). This study is a qualitative inquiry. It focuses on researching "into an experience" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Qualitative research is defined by Denzel and Lincolns as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the

world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalist approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (2000: p.3). In qualitative research, personal experiences, narratives, and opinions are valuable data that provide researchers with tools to find the answers they are looking for (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Qualitative research is the appropriate research design for this study because it allows me to gain an in-depth and thorough understanding of how black Izitabane women perceive and derive meaning from their experiences. It also enables me to gain insights into how these women relate to and comprehend concepts such as *Isitabane* and *faith*.

1.5.2 Autoethnography

I explore this issue of faith, violence, inclusion, and sexuality further by providing a personal and autoethnographic account of my experiences with faith and as a black Isitabane woman living in South Africa. Autoethnography "is a unique qualitative methodology that draws upon several qualitative traditions, including narrative research, autobiography, ethnography, and arts-based research" (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022: p.197). As a method of inquiry, autoethnography deploys data sources that capture the critical events of the researcher's life, such as photographs and medical records. As Chang stated, autoethnography "draws from autobiographic data such as memories, memorabilia, documents about themselves, official records, photos, interviews with others, and ongoing self-reflective and self-observational memos" (2013: p.107-p.108). By employing autoethnography, I examine personal experiences from my life that pertain to my research topic and consider the impact of homophobic and heteronormative discursive practices on health, well-being, and identity. In autoethnography, "the process of triangulating internal thoughts and external behaviors, current memories with past notes or artifacts, descriptive facts with visceral emotions, and so forth is key to creating the ability to observe oneself and thereby, allowing for beneficial contrast and comparisons" (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022: p.202). The chosen methodology is inspired by my own personal experience of growing up in a rural community setting that is very religious, which contributed to how I viewed myself and my sexuality.

1.5.3 Methods of data collection

To collect data for this study, I will employ three techniques, namely; my own personal narrative, one focus group discussion with nine black Izitabane women, followed by individual interviews.

1.5.3.1. Personal Narrative:

The first step of collecting data for the present study will begin by writing my own personal narrative. This exercise employs the criteria of selecting six key moments or themes that define my journey of *Being Acquainted with Christianity*, my *Journey of Coming Out as Isitabane*, being *Split Between Two Worlds*, *Recreating and Reclaiming My Sexuality and Christian Identity*, being *Condemned by Religion*; and *Redefining Faith*. I present these six snapshot stories as the first step of data collection and to reflect on my struggle with the studied phenomena, making use of artifacts such as photographs, a song, a narrative, and memories to re-tell these critical moments from my life. The intention of using the narrative research design for this study is to examine my experiences in relation to the studied phenomenon, develop a more comprehensive understanding of myself, improve understanding of the larger cultural group of black Izitabane women and homophobic hatred and violence, explore the role of Christian faith in the lives of black Izitabane women, as well as to consider how in my experiences, I have dealt with the questions that religion mainly Christianity raises about Ubutabane.

This method provides me with a way to think about what it means to be as I live through experiences that are shaped and influenced by violence, culture, and religion. My narratives will be used as a rational source and base for collecting data. I write a narrative about the struggles of being black Isitabane women and growing up in rural conservative South Africa that will later be incorporated into the complex narratives of other black Izitabane women of varying social statuses in Pietermaritzburg, offering an analysis grounded in queer theory. According to Stone-Mediatore, narration plays a vital role in reclaiming the agencies of people who have been excluded and whose existence remains a struggle: “First, because the act of telling one’s own story is empowering for the storyteller, especially for people who have been excluded from official knowledge-producing institutions. Telling their own stories enables them to reclaim epistemic authority as well as to counter the objectified, dehumanized representations of them circulated by others” (2003: p.150).

1.5.3.2 Focus Group Discussion:

According to Denzin and Lincoln, focus group discussions have the potential to produce rich data as participants interact and compare their experiences (1994). I will use the six snapshots discussed above as discussion prompts to form a focus group discussion. The intention is to invite and allow other black Izitabane to share whatever emotions will be brought up by sharing my own narrative that is drawn directly from my own lived experiences with them. This method will enable me to connect with the identified participants and explore my experiences, particularly about faith, violence, culture, and sexuality, and to test if my experiences resonate with their experiences and how the other black Izitabane women make meanings of these experiences.

1.5.3.3. Individual Interviews:

The last set of data for this study will be collected through individual interviews with nine black Izitabane women to explore their personal experiences with the studied phenomena. Individual interviews were deemed more appropriate for a subject as delicate and intricate as this one. Using individual interviews in a qualitative study provides an opportunity for clarification and flexibility to explore the participant's perspectives (McIntosh, 2015). Individual interviews with the participants will be conducted to demonstrate the possibility of alternative approaches to ending violence against black Izitabane women and to gather information that will assist in transforming the stance of African faith communities regarding Ubutabane. Seven exploratory questions have been structured to guide the interview.

1.6 The Research Setting, Sample, and Recruitment

This study was conducted in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, with nine black Izitabane women, including me, the researcher, as the 10th participant. All the participants in this study openly self-identify as Izitabane, African, Black, South African, and navigating faith. Participants were approached and selected through a local Izitabane support group, Uthingo Network[6] , in Pietermaritzburg, Scottsville. Participants were active members or beneficiaries of the Uthingo Network and have experienced homophobic hatred and violence. Uthingo Network is a registered non-profit organization (NPO) that was started in response to the need for Izitabane in and around KwaZulu-Natal to have a safe space. The site was chosen based on three criteria: 1) its commitment to providing safe spaces for Izitabane, 2) its dedication to addressing violence against Izitabane in African countries, and 3) its recognition among many Izitabane. The study sample was generated using the purposive sampling method, where

[6] https://www.uthingonetwork.org.za/

participants were selected because they occupy a defined position in a structure or social order and, therefore, have a distinct perspective to offer concerning the study objective (Etikan et al., 2016).

1.7 Conceptual classification

The following list of terms will be constantly used throughout the study, and they must first be defined before attempting to find answers to the study questions.

Hate crimes

Any incident that is perceived to be motivated, in whole or in part, by hatred or prejudice is considered a hate crime. Hate crimes constitute criminal acts of prejudice that are committed against people, property, organizations, or society because of the group to which they belong or identify. Perpetrator prejudice differentiates a hate crime from another act of violence (IACP 1998 cited in Nel & Judge, 2008: p.20). These crimes include hate speech, intentional unfair discrimination, and other hate crimes, which occur across a variety of different settings (Triangle Project, 2006). The purpose of hate crimes is to humiliate, dehumanize, and demean individuals and groups of individuals who are seen as the out-group by the in-group (Sherry, 2016; Terry & Hogg, 2001). The present study focuses on hate crimes motivated by homophobic hatred and violence, particularly hate crimes against black Izitabane women in post-apartheid South Africa. For this study, people who navigate faith are not necessarily those who attend church on a Sunday but rather people who draw on faith as they navigate their lives.

African faith communities

The African faith communities in question are members of the African Initiated Churches. These churches, often referred to as African Independent Churches/African Initiated Churches/ African Indigenous Churches (AICs), are technically those churches which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, either broke away from mission churches or missionary/mainline Christianity or were founded independently of European missionary activities and are headed by African leaders (Venter, 2004). They are called (AICs) because they are not officially linked with intercontinental evangelical movements, but they constitute the largest community of faiths in South Africa (Cox, 1995). These churches were "founded by Africans for Africans to worship in African ways and to meet their own most urgently felt needs in spiritual independence under their own leaders" (Turner, 1980: p.523). According to Dube, the bible gave birth to the inception of African Independent Churches and an urgent need to reinterpret

the bible from the experiences of Africans (2013: p.1). In South Africa, African Initiated Churches are a distinctively African expression of a universal Pentecostal movement and have gained remarkable momentum over the last decade (Cox, 1995; Poewe, 1994).

Since their formation, African Initiated Churches (AICs) have been significant in appropriating the Christian message in a distinctive way that attempted to provide locally meaningful answers to local questions and problems based primarily on the perspective of the Bible as they understood it then (Akinsanya, 2000). The African Initiated Churches (AICs) derive their theology specifically from the Old Testament (Kealotswe, 2014: p.232). According to statistics from the World Council of Churches, membership of the African Initiated Churches already numbered 17 583 086 in 2006, which is nearly half of the population of South Africa (World Council of Churches, 2006). Black Africans are more likely to be involved with African Initiated Churches, which have taken a conservative stance on homosexuality (Anderson, 2005). This study identifies African faith communities as important social structures for ensuring peace and providing a safe space for black Izitabane women.

Isitabane/Izitabane

The identity label 'Isitabane' represents the chosen terminology for this study. I have chosen to use this term because it is more common and, thus, more accessible for many to understand. While I do mention the term 'queer' and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) as the common acronym, this study is primarily concerned with the experiences of black Izitabane women. It is my understanding that to resolve issues that concern African sexualities and to address strategies towards eliminating violence against black Izitabane women, we must first deal with the issue of language and vocabulary. The word lesbian did not originate in Africa and does not very accurately describe the majority of women who have sex with women in Africa. Therefore, I am using the term 'Isitabane' to represent queer persons in the South African context. The word Isitabane has been used as a derogatory Isizulu word to refer to same-sex practicing and/or non-gender conforming and non-normative sexualities. Like most derogatory words, Isitabane does not have a direct meaning but is associated with disgust and hatred for the "queer." It carries a similar meaning to words like 'faggot', 'ngqingili,' 'nkonkoni,' 'dyke', or 'moffie.' The meaning of these terms differs with each person, even though the common understanding is that they signal same-sex practicing lived experiences.

1.8 Chapter Outline

This is a seven-chapter study. Chapter One introduces the area of the study, offers a background of the phenomenon under investigation, and provides the motivations and aim of the study. Chapter Two explores violence against black Izitabane women within the South African context and the role that African faith communities can play in ending violence against black Izitabane women in South Africa today, in light of the latest developments concerning Ubutabane in the Bible as well as in new ways of doing theology and interpreting biblical texts. Chapter Three focuses on the leading theory framing the study, namely, queer theology. The purpose of this chapter is to develop an understanding of theology that is based on the lived experiences of the body and theology that is done by and for marginalized bodies. This chapter invites faith leaders to begin thinking about homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women and about how religion and practice might be reevaluated in light of Izitabane advocacy. Chapter Four outlines the methodological processes and ethical considerations that were followed in this study. It motivates why a qualitative methodology, informed by an autoethnographic approach, suited the researched inquiry—followed by Chapter Five, which seeks to present the different experiences of the study participants. Chapter Six offers an interpretation of the research findings combined with relevant literature and a phenomenological mode of understanding. Chapter Seven evaluates the study, offering recommendations for future research as well as personal reflection and conclusion of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

PART I: HOMOPHOBIC HATRED AND VIOLENCE AGAINST BLACK IZITABANE WOMEN

In the previous chapter, I provided a summary of the legal rights of Izitabane and reviewed the prevalence of violence against black Izitabane women in South Africa. In doing so, I argued that there is a massive gap between the protections guaranteed by the South African Constitution and the lived realities of black Izitabane women. Additionally, I argued that this violence is deeply rooted in societal perceptions and conceptualization of African sexualities. In this chapter, I will examine the concept of heteronormativity and its enduring impact, as well as explore the cultural and religious contentions against Ubutabane. My aim in this chapter is twofold: First, to contextualize the violence experienced by black Izitabane women by examining the social pressures to conform to heterosexual norms, often reinforced by political and religious leaders across the African continent. This context includes South Africa's alarmingly high rates of violence, including sexual violence. Second: to discuss methods by which African faith communities can confront and address all forms of oppression in alignment with the teachings of Jesus Christ. I maintain that African faith communities must be open to contemporary interpretations of Ubutabane[7] within the Bible and embrace new theological perspectives.

2.1 Introduction

In many countries, social pressure to conform is often subtle. However, recently it has manifested as direct and frequently violent attacks against black Izitabane women in South Africa and queer people in many parts of Africa (Reddy, 2001). High levels of violence against non-normative sexual and gender minorities in Africa are now evoking international concern due to the horrific numbers of rapes and murders of black Izitabane women and the killing of black Izitabane men in countries like South Africa (Dana, 2012; John, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2011). Addressing the issue is quite complex, as it differs in form and is not equally prevalent in all African countries. The foundation is laid by society and how African communities regularly use culture to determine what is 'normal' and acceptable, including in the area of sexuality (Reygan & Lynette, 2014). Social and religious institutions create the way men, women, and gender minorities are understood, how power relations are defined, whose

[7] Ubutabane is a term that is used to describe a wide range of sexualities and gender within a South African context.

needs are accommodated, and whose contributions are valued. To understand the role that African faith communities can play in caring for black Izitabane women who are dealing with homophobic and hateful violence in South Africa, it is essential to have a solid understanding of the phenomenon of homophobic and hateful violence.

2.1.1 Locating the Study

The first task is to locate this study in an African context. The phenomenon discussed in this study demonstrates that (1) it is not new nor unique to South Africa; it is particularly prevalent in African countries. The phenomenon has a long and complicated history as a form of social prejudice in the lives of individuals who express, or are merely suspected of expressing, affection or desire across socially constructed sex and gender boundaries (Fone, 2000; Reddy, 2001); (2) it is a form of violence that is part of the moral panic caused by African states to maintain tradition conceptions of masculinity and femininity aligned with African patriarchy "coated in the construct of religion" (Msibi, 2011) and sometimes law. For this study, it is necessary first to establish how society regulates practices that produce genders that can be understood within a 'heterosexual matrix[8]', a term Judith Butler (1999) articulated in *Gender Trouble*. This will allow us to understand how non-conforming gender identities and persons who liberate themselves from prevailing gender expectations experience life within African societies. This chapter begins by exploring the general descriptions of some of the terms that are central to queer studies and violence.

2.1.2 Talking Gender and Sexuality

In the past 25 years, there have been notable developments in understanding sexual and gender identities within the sociopolitical context (Monroe, 2020: p.315). The progress has led to a better understanding of how individuals develop their gender identities from a young age. Judith Butler's concept of performativity has been helpful in understanding the construction of gender and how boys and girls assert their gendered subjectivities. As defined by Butler, performativity is "that aspect of discourse that can produce what its names… this production always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation". She adds that performativity "is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established" (1994: p.33). The analysis provides a rich engagement with the complex relations that enable the construction of subjectivity. According to Butler, "There is no gender identity behind the

[8] Central to Butler's account of the heterosexual matric is her interpretation of 'regulatory practices' and her conception of the conception of "gender intelligibility". According to Butler, "persons" only become intelligible when they become gendered. In other words, gendered representations of the self, are necessary for the self to make sense (Butler, 1999: p.22 cited in Chambers, 2007: p.662).

expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its result" (1999: p.33 cited in Bendl & Fleischmann, 2008: p.386).

2.1.3 The binary gender system is heterosexist

Masculinity and straightness are privileged over femininity and queerness (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). The construction of gender is deeply patriarchal due to the power and privilege granted to men as being perceived as dominant, assertive, possessive, and leaders. The construction of the gender identity of women sets the precedence that a woman must cater to men and be submissive. The majority of gender systems accord less legitimacy to gender identities or expressions that do not conform to a rigid dichotomy of what constitutes acceptable behavior for men and women. Thus, masculinity in women, femininity in men, or non-conventional gender identities tend to be deeply disfavoured (Heise et al., 2019: p.2441). Sexual and gender-based violence is then used, accepted, and seen as required to solve the gender inappropriate behavior and homosexuality (Msibi, 2011; Epprecht, 2013). The construction of gender and sexuality in the lives of Izitabane cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how the dominant discourse of femininity and masculinity are heteronormalized in their everyday lives, including through their faith experiences.

According to the analysis of International Human Rights Law (IHRL), gender is a term used to refer to the culturally (or socially) defined roles, responsibilities, behaviors, expressions, activities, attributes, and entitlements associated with being (or being seen as) a woman or a man in a given setting, as well as the power relations between and among women and men. "Under this definition, gender and sex do not substitute each other- they are autonomous concepts used to describe two different aspects of the human experience" (Office of the United Nations and High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021: p.1). The concept of 'gender' was coined by feminists in the 1960s to distinguish between biological and social notions of 'man' and 'woman.' According to Mikkola, the main aim was to counter the then-dominant position of biological determinism or the view that biology is destiny (2008). Therefore, gender is not a concept restricted to women. It concerns generally human persons who live in gendered social orders because it creates a context that impacts the development of their personal identities and social collaborations (Office of the United Nations and High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021: p.2).

Sexuality can be viewed as a bunch of social processes that produce and organize desire, which inevitably is intertwined with and constitutes power relations (Gamson & Moon, 2004, cited in

Bendl & Fleischmann, 2008: p.386). Similar to the construction of gender, sexuality is socially and culturally constituted, with desire constructed and policed through powerful discourses (for example, particularly religious and legal discourses) and social practices that are institutionally and individually supported at both the micro and macro levels in society (Robinson, 2005: p.21). Sexuality "is also tied to the concept of so-called "family honor" in many societies. Traditional norms in these societies allow the killing of women suspected of defiling the "honor" of the family, indulging in forbidden sex, or marrying and divorcing without the consent of the family. Norms around sexuality also help to account for the high numbers of homeless LGBT+ young people and the prevalence of hate crimes against them because they are considered a "threat" to societal norms. The same norms around sexuality can help to account for the mass rape of women" (Pandea et al., 2020: p.21).

Influenced by Adrienne Rich's (1983) notion of 'compulsory heterosexuality,' Butler argues that gender is frequently produced through a "heterosexual matrix in which 'real' expressions of masculinity and femininity are embedded within a presupposed hegemonic heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Heterosexuality, in this manner, turns into the 'norm' through which all the other thing is characterized. Hence, to be a 'real' boy or girl would include desiring to be with the opposite sex; such is the power of the heterosexual imagination (Renold, 2006: p.493). Butler goes on to argue that gender and heterosexuality are so fundamentally entwined and interdependent that deviation from normative masculinities and femininities (what Butler refers to as "intelligible genders") can throw heterosexuality into doubt. The shaming and policing of "abnormal" or "othering" sexual/gender practices, also known as "unintelligible" practices, serves to maintain hegemonic heterosexual performance (1990). Crucial to the administrative systems of heterosexual or heterosexist hegemony is a complex of power relations. In addition to essentializing and absolutizing gender-sexual differences, sustaining gender and sexual inequalities is necessary for the construction of normative sexualities (Robinson, 2005: p.21).

A significant observation of Heise et al. is that gender is a determining factor for decision-making about inclusion and participation in social, economic, and political life because it is a social construct that is deeply ingrained in society. Gendered identities often create experiences of privilege that end up benefiting very few. For many, they contribute to experiences of violence, discrimination, and exclusion. This is often the case for women and individuals whose gender identity and/or expression do not precisely conform to the preconceived notions associated with their sex at birth (Heise et al., 2019). Strict norms that govern the attributes and behaviors that are valued and considered acceptable for men, women, and gender minorities

are what hold together the system. Societies create norms and expectations related to gender and sexuality, and these are throughout a person's life, including in the family, at school, and through the media. As Holmes puts it, "Social rules about 'normal' gender and 'sexuality' demand that you must be clear about who are boys and who are girls so that boys and girls can grow up, fall in love with each other, and have more little boys and girls" (2001: p.21). Everyone in society is forced to play specific roles and follow certain behaviors as a result of these influences.

2.1.4 Heteronormativity

Although social norms change over time, they are usually based on a heteronormative order which stipulates that normative relationships are those that include a man (masculine person) and a woman (feminine person), perpetuating the assumption that those who are not heterosexual are abnormal (Riley, 2021). The term heteronormative is used to designate how heterosexuality is constituted as the norm in sexuality (Oxford, 2012). Through the process of normalization, it is presumed that heterosexuality possesses a status that is regarded as 'normal' and 'cultural.' It takes on an unquestionable position of being the 'true' sexuality, the natural order of things, primarily due to its connection to the male-female biological binary and procreation (Robinson, 2005: p.19). Robinson echoes Epstein and Johnson, who argue that the normalization of heterosexuality is "encoded in language, in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life" (1994: p.198). Religious discourses and practices, for instance, play a significant role in the process of normalization of heterosexuality. The dominant discourses and narratives that surround the socially constructed cultural binary of heterosexual us versus homosexual them constitute the normalization of heterosexuality.

Heterosexuality defines the 'other' and speaks with apparent authority about them in a powerful hierarchy. Institutionalized heterosexuality in this manner becomes the definer of 'legitimate and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements" and the norm by which all other sexualities are defined as different, illegitimate, and abnormal (Ingraham, 1994: p.204 cited in Robinson, 2005: p.19). In this context, heterosexuality becomes compulsory. Chambers has written extensively about this dynamic. Chambers argues that heteronormativity is a regulatory practice of sex/gender/desire that thereby alters or sometimes sets the conditions of possibility and impossibility for gender intelligibility. It can appear as an edict or law, but it usually functions much more subtly through societal expectations, peer pressure, and propriety (i.e., as a norm). According to Chambers, the concept of heteronormativity reveals institutional, cultural, and legal norms that reify and enshrine the normativity of heterosexuality. As such,

"'heteronormativity' tells us that heterosexual desire and identity are not merely assumed, they are expected. They are demanded. And they are rewarded and privileged… heteronormativity is written into law, encoded in the very edifices of institutions, built into an enormous variety of common practices- particularly since so much of society remains structures around dating/romance" (Chambers, 2007: p.663-665).

Chambers further clarifies that heteronormativity emphasizes how much everyone, straight or queer, will be judged, measured, questioned, and evaluated from the heterosexual norm's perspective. It implies that everyone and everything is judged from the perspective of straight (Chambers, 2003b, p.26 cited in Chambers, 2007: p.666). Simply put, heteronormativity refers to the widespread acceptance of heterosexuality as the norm in sexuality. Heteronormativity highlights the ingrained expectation of heterosexuality in our society. Naturally, that does not imply that everyone is straight. More importantly, heteronormativity is not part of a conspiracy theory that would suggest that everyone must become straight or be made so. The significance of the concept is that it fixates on the operation of the norm. Regulatory practices that produce and restrict gender intelligibility are embedded in heteronormativity. This implies that it structures the social, political, and cultural worlds not just through its effect on ideas and beliefs but also in how it works through institutions, regulations, and daily life.

Naturally, marriage and the family come to mind when we think of such social practices: "Any list of laws, customs, and practices like this points to the fact that heteronormativity accrues privilege to those behaviors, practices, and relationships that more closely approximate the norm, while stigmatizing, marginalizing or rendering invisible- making unintelligible- those behaviors, relationships, and practices that deviate from it" (Chambers, 2007: p.666). According to Letts IV, heteronormativity is ultimately about power; a reinforcing of a "culture of power" associated with heterosexuality. This culture of power conceals the normalization of heterosexuality. It diverts attention and criticism away from macro and micro social, economic, and political discursive practices that build and maintain this hierarchy of differences between sexual identities, including those in educational institutions (1999). A similar term, *heterosexism*, encompasses assumptions of the superiority of heterosexuality to homosexuality and all other sexual orientations. These beliefs can result in oppressive systems that restrict or deny fundamental rights to those who are not considered to be heterosexual if they are not challenged (Sheppard & Mayo, 2013: p.261).

2.2 Conceptualizing Identity from a Queer Perspective:

Most significant critiques of the hegemony of heterosexuality and the politics and practice of heteronormative and heterosexist social words are greatly indebted to feminists and queer theorists (Jagose, 1996; de Lauretis, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990; Seidman, 1997). This study relies heavily on queer theory and its position on sexuality and gender. Queer theory problematizes and challenges universalizing norms that marginalize those who do not conform to hegemonic normalcy. It enables us to consider gender as a "heterosexual coupling of opposites" and to question if "femininity and masculinity are mutually exclusive" (Landstrom, 2007: p.10-12). Queer theory engages with the lives of people who can experience high levels of discrimination, violence, and intolerance (Goldman, 1996: p.169). Stein and Plummer state that there are four main components to queer theory: First, sexuality is conceptualized as embodying sexual power at various social levels, expressed discursively and imposed through boundaries and binary divides. Second, posing a problem by treating gender, sex, and identities as fluid categories, and third, putting civil rights strategies ahead of anti-assimilationist ones, emphasizing deconstruction, decentring, and revisionist readings. Forth, areas are analyzed that traditionally would not be seen as terrains of sexuality, which implies a queer reading of non-sexualized or supposedly heterosexual texts (1996: p.186).

The development of the AIDS pandemic prompted the development of Queer Theory, which was influenced by a variety of factors, including the individualizing nature of medical responses, shifts in sex education from focusing on sexual identities to focusing on sexual practices, the persistent homophobic portrayal of AIDS as a gay disease, coalition politics involved in AIDS responses, and other factors (Jagose, 1996). According to Bendl and Fleischmann, "many queer scholars have (pro)feminist roots; thus, the guiding theories of both queer-and gender-oriented poststructuralist theories do not often overlap. Thus, it is queer theory's focus on deconstructing identity constructions that make queer theory distinctive, amplifying feminist perspectives" (2008: p.384). Bendl and Fleischmann borrow from Genschel et al. to further argue that queer perspectives take the non-normative alignments of sex, gender, and sexuality, as well as desire, earnestly. They also emphasize the dynamic nature of identities and reveal the mechanism of exclusion that is inherent in a heterosexual/homosexual, male/female opposition (Genschel et al., 2001, cited in Bendl and Fleischmann, 2008).

Queer theory has made a significant contribution to queer studies by moving past simple identity politics to challenging the logic of heteronormativity (Smith, 2010). Thus, queer theory

introduces valuable ideas for exploring the intersections between representations and the construction of African identities with an emphasis on sexuality and gender. The theory also opens up ways for us to explore tensions and contradictions that lead to the study phenomenon. While the queer theory has been criticized for presenting an apolitical and antie empiricist position (Jeffreys, 2003), the theory is essential for several reasons, and it can help us understand how sexuality and gender identity structure experiences of Izitabane and how they affect Izitabane in developing countries such as South Africa. It is worth noting that while Queer Theory provides much of the theoretical underpinning of this chapter's exploration of violence against queer bodies, queer theology contributes to establishing the theoretical background for understanding the phenomenon of homophobic and hatred violence. Both queer theory and queer theology will be discussed in-depth in chapter four.

Queer theorists have pointed to the dominant culture and its family as responsible for the creation of discriminating environments and attitudes. For instance, Warner contends that this lack of access is inextricably linked to the politics of shame, arguing that to end the politics of sexual shame, we must make room for new freedoms, experiences, bodies, pleasures, and identities. He distinguishes various hindrances to sexual opportunity, including moralism, law, stigma, shame, violence, and isolation. The politics of shame creates individual confusion and embarrassment, leads to national policies that are disingenuous about sex, and reduces the gay movement to a desexualized identity politics. According to Warner, "those at the bottom of the scale of respectability," such as 'queer, sluts, prostitutes, trannies, club crawlers…," need to adopt a broader perspective to unsettle the moralism of heteronormativity (1999: p.ix cited in Sherry, 2010: p.775).

2.3 The Impact of Heteronormativity

2.3.1 Homophobic Hate Crime

According to Schilt and Westbrook, breaking gender norms is often perceived as a danger, which can be punished through social sanctions (2009 cited in ALIGN website, www.alignplatfrom.org: p.12). Non-gender conforming bodies face direct or indirect discrimination in the public sphere as a result of assumptions and norms associated with gender and sexuality, which limit their access to a variety of services. Violence and exclusion from faith communities are all very real consequences of breaking norms. Behaviors, relationships, and practices that deviate from heteronormativity are easily marked in society and all the time exposed to extreme scrutiny and often homophobic violence. Homophobic violence exists all over the world and affects all individuals perceived to be sexually different, regardless of class,

age, ethnicity, or gender. Globally, violence motivated by homophobia is the third highest category of hate crime, after race and religion (Smith, 2018, cited in www.alignplatfrom.org: p.12). The majority of violent homophobic attacks against non-normative sexualities are usually committed by men. The global literature shows strong correlations between gender role stress and violence against non-normative sexualities (Sherry, 2010).

While a global democratization wave has made significant gains around the world and swept away authoritarian regimes, many non-democratic practices have not changed. The spirit of intolerance and violence against minority groups are some of the practices that many new democracies are unable or unwilling to change in the face of ongoing political and economic change. People who identify as or are perceived as Izitabane and other gender-variant persons constitute one such minority in countries throughout the world (Ungah, 2000). Izitabane has been and continues to be subjected to varying, sometimes escalating degrees of bias-motivated violence from a relatively young age across the world (Smyth & Jenness, 2014: p.404). Throughout history, Izitabane have been classified as a health risk, a threat to public morality, and a disease (Spruill, 2000). They have been raped and killed because of their sexual orientation (Herek, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2012). Literature reveals that sexual and gender-based violence against Izitabane women is accepted and seen as required to solve gender-inappropriate behavior and homosexuality (Msibi, 2011; Epprecht, 2013).

Heteronormativity, as previously mentioned, imposes a restrictive, ethnocentric model of sexuality on all persons. Studies have shown, for instance, that the British and French colonial powers were primarily responsible for the criminalization of homosexual acts in the territories they controlled. This legacy has primarily gone unchallenged (Browne, 2019: p.9). Izitabane are often brutally persecuted for merely expressing or being suspected of having affection or desire across socially constructed sex and gender boundaries. In Africa, there has been much work done in the past thirty years to advocate for the seizure of violence against Izitabane and immense legislative strides made with regard to the affordance of Izitabane human rights, “such as Mozambique’s phasing out of colonial Portuguese laws penalizing homosexual acts in July 2015” (Ibrahim, 2015: p.264); violence continues to proliferate and mars the experiences of many Izitabane individuals (Iranti.org and the Arcus Foundation, 2019, p.58). Scholars argue that developments that promise well for the protection of sexual minority rights in African countries have been accompanied by – indeed have sometimes directly sparked- a virulent homophobic reaction and silencing of Ubutabane (Herek, 2010 & Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020; Epprecht, 2013; Ibrahim, 2015).

More than 30 countries in Africa maintain inherited colonial anti-sodomy laws that penalize homosexuality and same-sex acts. In countries like Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, and Uganda, it is a crime to engage in consensual "gay" sex, and in most of those, it is punishable by imprisonment. Those who defy these laws and are caught engaging in same-sex relations are often executed. According to Cowell, some of these laws that are used to discriminate against those who engage in same-sex relations in Africa primarily arise from anti-sodomy laws left over from the colonial era, when colonial authorities were keen on regulating sexuality (2010). These laws remain essentially unchanged in postcolonial Africa today, and individuals who express or are merely suspected of expressing homosexual desire are treated harshly (Msibi, 2011: p.57). They face discrimination and violence, which is permitted and seen as required to solve gender-inappropriate behavior and homosexuality (Ungah, 2000). In countries such as northern Nigeria, persons who publicly demonstrate a homosexual identity and/or engage in consensual homosexual sex are sentenced to death. In contrast, in the rest of the country, the punishment is fourteen years of imprisonment (Ewing et al., 2020).

In Nigeria, sexuality and sexual conduct are "socially produced and fed by oppressive patriarchal subjectivities and ideologies that try to instill a sense of what is normal, sexually speaking, for us all" (Izugbara, 2004: p.2). Individuals who engage in same-sex relations in Nigeria are often viewed as sick and dangerous and associated with "witchcraft, magic and possession of diabolic powers" (Izugbara, 2004: p.6). In 2006, a piece of legislation known as the "Same-sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act" was proposed with the full support of religious-Islamic and Christian leaders as well as the general public. The legislation was meant to "impose five-year sentences on same-sex couples who have wedding ceremonies, as well as on those who perform such services and on all who attend" (New York Times, 2007, cited in Msibi, 2011). Young queer bodies are subjected to harmful, so-called "gay cure therapies" to change their sexual orientation to heterosexual or gender identity to cisgender, which means identifying with the sex assigned to them at birth (Yi, 2017; Dworkin & Yi, 2003; Ungah, 2000: p.63). As with many African countries, studies show that the state sponsors homophobia in Nigeria; it is directly supported by the laws, culture, and religion (Msibi, 2011).

In Kenya, queer bodies face a significant climate of violence and social hostility with little protection given by the state. According to a report that was compiled by Iranti.org and the Arcus Foundation, violence against queer bodies in Kenya is perpetuated by a web of criminalization, social stigma, and exclusion despite the strong culture of organizing and an embedded social safety network among the queer bodies. Additionally, the report states that

the protections are limited, and those legally mandated protections are seldom adequately implemented. Overall, the state's position towards queer bodies, both formal and informal, exacerbates the vulnerability of queer bodies. Government officials and civil servants often turn a blind eye to violations of queer bodies and even directly perpetrate acts of violence (Iranti.org and the Arcus Foundation, 2019: p.31). Under the Kenyan Penal Code, engaging in same-sex sexual activity, termed "carnal knowledge of a person against the order of nature", is characterized as an "unnatural offense" and is a felony punishable by up to fourteen years in prison (Finerty, 2013: p.432). In March 2019, the Kenyan High Court rejected a petition to decriminalize homosexuality, upholding the existing penal code violations. These laws create an environment of fear and stigmatization.

In Uganda, while the queer community has fought fiercely against the victimization of queer bodies, queer Ugandans continue to be targets of verbal and physical violence, sexual violence, social marginalization, as well as numerous severe violations of their human rights (Oloka-Onyango, 2015; Koko et al., 2018; Chery, 2017). The state in Uganda is a particularly heinous perpetrator of violations against queer bodies and, for a few exceptions, enables and sanctions the violation of queer bodies persons (Oloka-Onyango, 2015; Koko et al., 2018). In 2014, the Ugandan Parliament approved the "Anti-Homosexuality Act 2014," previously termed "Kill the Gays Bill." On the 24th of February 2014, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni signed the bill into law. Various Christian leaders supported the Bill, but the courts later struck it down. Before it was struck down, supporters of the Bill had proposed the death penalty for anyone caught engaging in a homosexual act (Nyanzi & Karamagi, 2015). In 2019, Uganda attempted to reintroduce the death penalty for homosexuality (Ewing et al., 2020), and again, on 21 March 2023, the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was revised from its original form and passed into law by Uganda's parliament.

The Ugandan new anti-gay legislation proposes tough new penalties for anyone who engages in consensual same-sex relations and/or identifies as queer (Africanews, 2023). Violations under the proposed law involve steep punishments, including death for so-called "aggravated" homosexuality and life in prison for gay sex (Buist & Lenning, 2022). Additionally, the Bill mandates that individuals report gay individuals, even friends and family members. This is regarded as one of the most challenging pieces of anti-gay legislation in Africa. However, it was met with widespread support in Uganda's parliament (Msibi, 2011). According to queer Rights Activist in Uganda, the new Bill is a further attempt to foster anti-gay rhetoric, and it is an attempt to divert attention from really what is important to the queer community (BBC

News, 2023). The Bill has led to fear of more attacks on queer people and violates equality and human rights principles. Individuals engaging in same-sex relations in Uganda have been forced into hiding for fear of victimization, personal harm, and even murder (Msibi, 2011). While Uganda, Nigeria, and Kenya do not represent the whole of Africa, they all contribute to the establishment of the background necessary for comprehending the phenomenon of homophobic hatred and violence.

2.4 Explaining violence against black Izitabane women

South Africa, notwithstanding strong legislative support for the equality of Izitabane and the shift prior to the criminalization of Ubutabane, the South African experience speaks to the limits of the law. The Constitution remains an ideal, sometimes far removed from life (Awondo & Reid, 2012). The reported experiences of black Izitabane women of gender-based violence[9], including "corrective rape," emphasize a disconnect between the Constitutional ideals and the South African lived experiences, particularly the experiences of Izitabane from deprived socio-economic classes in the country. In South Africa, identifying as Isitabane or openly claiming Isitabane identity puts oneself at a greater risk of being attacked or harassed, often rooted in beliefs and traditions about sexuality and gender (Bhana, 2012; Mkhize et al., 2010; Waal, 2012; Francis & Brown, 2017), most cases are never reported to the police (United Nations Human Rights, 2017). Izitabane are beaten up and have objects thrown at them or objects used to harm them (OUT, 2016). Usually, the perpetrators of violence against Izitabane are fanatics or homophobes who believe that Izitabane defies "the heteronormative gender roles and, hence, are not fit to be part of the society" (Parker, 2016: p.7).

Different scholars suggest that homophobia in South Africa has gendered undertones, with black Izitabane women, particularly those presenting as masculine from poor communities, being "correctively" raped to make them become "real" and "proper" women (Msibi, 2011; Sanger, 2013). Research conducted by OUT LGBT Well-being, a non-profit organization, revealed that 10% of black Izitabane women had experienced some form of sexual assault. In 2016, OUT found that 41% of Izitabane surveyed in South Africa knew someone who had been murdered because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. In 2021 alone, at least 24 people were reportedly murdered in bias-motivated attacks (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

[9] Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to: "any harm or suffering that is perpetrated against a woman or girl, man or boy and that has a negative impact on the physical, sexual or psychological health, development or identity of the person. The cause of the violence is founded in gender-based power inequalities and gender-based discrimination." (Preventing and Responding to Gender-Based Violence, 2015).

Findings from Msibi show that sexual activity and sexuality are linked to the exercise of power, regardless of societies worldwide. Sexuality is often policed and strongly controlled in many societies, mostly because sexuality is a laden terrain that is highly valued (2011). As such, black Izitabane women- who are seen to challenge patriarchal gender norms are oppressed, discriminated against, and targeted with the specific intent to 'punish' or 'correct' their sexual orientation (Murphy, 2015). It is alleged that black Izitabane women are mimicking Westerners and are acting against African heterosexual norms. The intention of "corrective rape" is, therefore, to "teach" black Izitabane women how to behave like African women (Mufweba, 2003).

According to Anguita, "When a heterosexual man attacks a black homosexual woman, he is communicating to the social group of which the victim is a member that they are not wanted or tolerated within society or a specific community" (2012: p.491). This so-called correction has often gone beyond rape to the murder of the most horrific kind. Little or no attention is being paid to correcting these injustices in a country where justice, as defined in the South African constitution, spelled out rights for every South African citizen regardless of sexual orientation (Hunter-Gault, 2015). According to Msibi, in South Africa, homophobic violence against Izitabane has taken a different trajectory in comparison to other parts of Africa. This has largely been owing to the constitutional protection offered to Izitabane. In contrast to other African nations, where expressions of homophobia are institutionally, socially, and individually permitted and endorsed through the law, homophobia in South Africa operates in violation of this law (Msibi, 2011). Black Izitabane women have found themselves on the receiving end of horrific forms of violence, ranging from sexual violence to physical harm and murder, and are generally stigmatized by their families and society at large as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Nel & Judge, 2008). Indeed, it is important to emphasize that this violence is at most times tolerated and legitimized by the belief that Ubutabane or Isitabane's identity, feelings, appearance, or assumed consensual sexual activity with another are wrong. With repetition by the media and reinforcement by religious, political, and, at times, even traditional extremists, such views persist (Ewing et al., 2020).

Black Izitabane women, particularly those from deprived socio-economic classes, have only experienced limited positive changes in their lives. The taboos surrounding Ubutabane and patriarchal, heteronormative values and traditions continue to define their social and cultural realities. Traditional communities tend to place great emphasis on maintaining a "proper" outward appearance; Izitabane identities are then silenced. In line with this notion,

homosexuality is treated with a don't-ask-don't-tell attitude (Epprecht, 1999). Marriage serves to conceal and deny. This implies, for example, that violence against black Izitabane women and their general discrimination are barely being noticed or made the subject of public discussion (Gontek, 2009). Black Izitabane individuals are pathologized as sexually deviant, meaning they are behaving in a manner "that threatens the norm or challenges establishes power" (ALIGN website, www.alignplatfrom.org: p.12). In addition, general patriarchal norms regarding how to dress and how to conduct oneself self place more significant restrictions on black Izitabane women than they do on heterosexual cis women. Due to the element that gender and sexuality intersect, black Izitabane women are sometimes seen as not being 'real women' due to being attracted to someone of the same sex.

Baugher and Gazmararian point out that men who hold rigid traditional gender roles experience stress when they are unable to fulfill these roles or when a situation requires them to be "unmanly." This stress frequently leads to violence aimed at controlling people who are perceived as feminine or gender non-conforming (Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015). For example, in the Northern Cape in South Africa, young men are using homophobic violence to establish themselves as masculine men (Makhetha, 2015). "Young South African girls face significant restrictions around sexuality with an emphasis on promoting modest behavior, protecting virginity, and avoiding sexual relations until trusting relationship or marriage as many religious organizations would argue… Young South African male adults assert their power in varied ways, including violence, sexual assault and rape, and the pursuit of multiple partners" (Bhana and Pattman, who note that 2009: p.70). The wider literature suggests that homophobic violence against black Izitabane women and non-gender conforming individuals are primarily motivated by maintaining traditional masculine standards and policing masculinity.

Doan-Minh put forth that corrective rape is used as an attempt to bring Izitabane bodies under the control of society, governed by heteropatriarchal rules (2019: p.170). "Men who rape lesbians seem to do so because of a desire to preserve community values- wherein lesbianism is considered as unnatural" (Rape, 2012, cited in van der Schyff, 2018: p.37). "For these men, lesbians, or rather lesbianism, threatens the notion that a woman belongs to a man because lesbians do not exhibit or espouse subservience to males of their acts of domination" (Van der Schyff, 2018: p.37). Perpetrators of "corrective rape believe that women should be with men; as a result, those who are dating other women are raped to transform them to be real women. Some victims are raped because of how they dress and conduct themselves. Others are raped

to show them how they should be receiving pleasure from a man (HRM, 2011: p.25-35 cited in Chabalala & Reolofse, 2015).

2.4.2 Defining "corrective/curative rape":

The term "corrective rape" is made out of two components that inform us as to what exactly is being perpetrated, namely, the *act* and the intention or motive behind the act (Phiri, 2011: p.9). The Compact Oxford English Dictionary for students defines the term 'corrective' as something which is "designed to put right" (2006: p.219 in Mwambene & Wheal, 2015), something which "intends to improve a situation" or something which "is intended to cure a medical condition" (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 273). The definition of the act itself, "rape," can be found in the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007 (Sexual Offences Act), which states that a person that unlawfully and intentionally commits an act of sexual penetration without consent will be guilty of rape (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development). The term 'corrective' rape, also known as 'curative' rape, is therefore defined as a phenomenon in which 'straight' (heterosexual) men rape persons they presume or know to identify as Isitabane to 'convert' these bodies to heterosexuality or 'correct their sexuality which is regarded as 'unnatural' (Gaitho, 2011; Nklane, 2011 & Boeshart, 2014; Brown, 2012: p.45-46).

The term "corrective rape" was initially coined by lesbian and feminist activists in South Africa after the stoning of Zoliswa Nkonyana, the double homicide and raping of Sizakele Sigasa and Salome Massooa, and the rape and murder of Eudy Simelane to describe rape or sexual violence perpetrated against women "who are, or are perceived to be lesbians to 'fix' them by making them heterosexual" (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2011). The term has since evolved to include hate crime that entails the rape of any member of a group that does not conform to gender or sexual orientation norms where the motive of the perpetrator is to "correct" the individual (Doan-Mihn, 2019: p.167; Brown, p.46). According to Gaitha, while lesbians, particularly "butch" lesbians who are highly visible, were and remain particularly vulnerable to "corrective rape," it became clear as reports emerged that this hate crime was not limited to them; transgender men, bisexual women, transgender women, gay men, and asexual women have all been the victims of corrective rape. At its core, "corrective rape" is a method by which anyone who violates the cis-heteropatriarchal system by displaying or expressing their gender, engaging in sexual or romantic activity is violently reminded of and brought back to the "proper place" (2022: p.3).

It is of importance to note that even though the term “corrective rape” is known and widely used to refer to rape perpetrated against Izitabane women, the term has been problematized by survivors, advocates, and scholars, including Henderson who claim that the term “contributes to the views of the perpetrators.” Henderson maintains that “the term should be used with great caution as it names an act of violence, using the term of reference of the perpetrators, which leads to the belief that rape can be used to correct or cure lesbian women of their sexuality” (cited in Mwambene & Wheal, 2015: p.61). De wee points out that “the nature in which the term is used reinforces the myth that gender identity can be ‘corrected’” (2017: p.8-9). Matebeni supports this by indicating that, “while the strategic implications of the use of “corrective rape” may be beneficial for activist circles in lobbying for hate laws, a critical reading of the language of “curative/corrective” rape suggests ambiguity in the usefulness of the term” (2013c, p.30). Matebeni further claims that the use of these terms ‘correct’ or ‘cure’ provides an elevated status to the perpetrator and simultaneously stigmatizes the victim of this crime (2013a, p. 346 cited in Lake, p.11).

It is observed that the description of the term is categorized by hetero-patriarchal indicators that reinforce the harmful attitudes and beliefs about Izitabane women's identities in South Africa as it conveys the message that sexuality can be changed through sexually violent attacks. Consequently, this undermines the problematic nature of incidences (Lake, 2014). It has also been found that the use of the term ‘corrective’ rape implies that rape has some inherent ‘rehabilitative focus.’ From a victim’s perspective, the term is an indication that a violent act is a constructive tool to ‘correct’ behavior (Chabalala & Reolefse, 2015: p.1). This submission is supported by Muller and Meer, who also criticized the term ‘corrective’ rape for focusing too much on the motivation of the perpetrator (cited in Goldenhyns, 2021: p.27). Anguita illustrates that while the term ‘corrective’ rape is generally used, it is disliked by the survivors and explicitly challenged by activists. Instead, the preferred terms were gender-based violence and hate crime, which according to the survivors, allows “them to place the phenomenon within the general problem of rape against women and the framework of hate crimes against ‘others’” (Anguita, 2011: p.491).

The issue of corrective rape has attracted national and international attention as researchers, reporters, and human rights activists became increasingly interested in learning how the phenomenon manifests itself. Although the concept of “corrective rape” is discursively rooted in South Africa, the logic of this hate crime is not foreign in countries such as Uganda, Jamaica, Zimbabwe, and the United States (Boeshart, 2014; DoanMinh, 2019). According to a recent

United States State Department human rights report, queer women in Zimbabwe have been raped and forced into heterosexual marriages by people who seek to 'convert' them or 'cure' them of homosexuality.

2.4.3 Prevalence of "corrective rape" in South Africa

According to the most recently available South African Police Services (SAPS) statistics and research by Medical Research Council (MRC), rape in South Africa continues to be one of the most under-reported forms of crime, and thereof unpunished (Deane, 2002). About 88 percent of rape cases are not reported to the police or other authorities. Therefore, the actual number of sexual offenses committed in any one year is around nine times higher than reported numbers. Reasons for under-reporting include meager conviction rates, intimidation by perpetrators, fear of retaliation, shame and stigma attached to sexual violence, fear of secondary victimization by state authorities, and lack of faith in the police. South African police are perceived as incompetent, homophobic, unsympathetic, and untrustworthy (cited in Human Rights Watch, 2011). These factors contribute to the normalization of rape and violence in South African society. Furthermore, rape ranks last on the list of South African crimes in terms of conviction rates. A considerable percentage of cases are withdrawn before they reach court or during court proceedings. There is a significant backlog of cases in the justice system, with some rape cases taking as long as two years to be finalized (Deane, 2002, pp. 14-15). Along with these reasons, women face mistrust from judges and jurors, being socially blamed as responsible for the rape (Anguita, 2012: p.491).

Media reports, civil society organizations, and human rights activists in and outside the country have recorded and analyzed dozens of incidents of this brutal form of gender-based violence directed against black Izitabane women and gender non-conforming individuals. In 2011, Human Rights Watch reported that between April and July 2007 alone, three separate instances of sexual assault and murder of known Izitabane women were reported; at least eight separate instances of violence against Izitabane women were recorded in 2008, of which three were cases of sexual assault and murder (Human Rights Watch, 2011). In the same year, Zanele Muholi, an internationally renowned visual activist whose work focuses on the sexual victimization of black Izitabane women in South Africa, published findings from a study that she had conducted between 2003 and 2004. The study found that out of 47 women that were interviewed, "20 were raped explicitly because of their sexual orientation and gender non-conformity, four experienced attempted rape, 17 were physically assaulted (3 with a weapon), eight were verbally abused, and two were abducted". Twenty-nine women knew their attackers,

and only 16 survivors reported these crimes to the police. Many survivors reported having experienced these crimes more than once (Muholi, 2004: p.118).

Muholi's essays on Lesbian Rape focus on the accounts she has heard from friends and neighbors when she talks about "corrective rape." Although she only uses the term "curative rape," she vividly depicts women's stories and experiences of "corrective rape." In her discussion, Muholi focuses on how the women she spoke to relate their struggles with identity and empowerment following the occurrence of the crime. In her essays, Muholi slams Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for not acting on this issue and the South African government for not labeling "corrective rape" a hate crime (Muholi, 2011). Other findings from unpublished research of the Forum for the Empowerment of Women (FEW) reveal that out "of the 46 black women interviewed, 41% had been raped, 9% were survivors of attempted rape, 37% had been assaulted and 17% verbally abused" (Judge and Nel, 2008: p.24). A study that was conducted by OUT LGBT Well-being, a non-profit organization, in 2003 revealed that 10% of black Izitabane women had experienced some form of sexual assault. However, the study was limited to the Gauteng area alone. LulekiSizwe, a non-profit organization that helps survivors of rape in the Western Cape, has been, on more than one occasion, reported having stated that each year at least 500 Izitabane women report being victims of "corrective rape" in South Africa, and this already high prevalence continues to escalate (Phiri, 2012; Gaitho, 2022).

Statistics provided by Triangle, a non-profit organization based in Cape Town, show that support groups dealt with ten new "corrective rape" cases every week (cited in Van der Schyff, M, 2018: p.37). These cases were reported in Cape Town alone. Brown found that aside from news reports, support groups, and work by LGBT advocacy groups, it is difficult to accurately quantify the number of "corrective rapes" that occur in South Africa because many incidences go underreported. Regarding the number of reported rapes, it is not clear how many are done with the intent of 'correcting' the victim's sexuality (2012, p. 46. See also Jewkes et al., 2012; Anderson, 2000; Mkhize et al., 2010). The fact that crimes motivated by prejudice are not explicitly defined as a separate category of crime in South African legislation further complicates this reality. This lack of legal recognition has inspired many Izitabane activists and organizations to fight with increased vehemence for the legal acknowledgment of "corrective rape" as a hate crime in South Africa (Gaitho, 2022).

2.4.4 Heteronormativity [10]as the dominant model of South Africa:

The above figures are exceptionally high and demonstrate the heteronormative and patriarchal South Africa, where black Izitabane women "continue to be denied cultural recognition and are subject to shaming, harassment, discrimination, and violence" (Cock, 2003: p.41). As suggested earlier, violence against black Izitabane women is primarily driven by gender, with men asserting their authority over women and other men. For example, those who perform these violent acts commonly excuse their behavior by stating that the women were trying to be "like men" and they, therefore, deserved to be punished through rape and violence (Mkhize et al., 2010). Similarly, Nel and Judge note that Izitabane "who are perceived to subvert or undermine patriarchal gender stereotypes, roles, and behaviors, are seemingly punished through discrimination- as a form of social control" (Nel and Judge, 2008: p.26). Discrimination and violence are perpetuated as a means to maintain patriarchal power and reinforce the current heteronormative social order. These realities are compounded by the inherited and continuing apartheid legacy of rampant violence, crime, and deep structural inequalities.

In Tamale & Murillo's opinion: "Any variation in sexual activity and sexual partners from heteronormativity is considered "pathological," "deviant," "unnatural," and is condemned in the strongest possible terms. The gendered politics implicit in these views are crucial since sexual activities that go against the grain of mainstream ones subvert conventional gendered relations and hierarchies. Sexuality, therefore, becomes a critical site for maintaining patriarchy and reproducing African women's oppression" (2007: p.19). To further this discourse, Msibi makes an argument that: "the twenty-first century has been characterized by demands for human rights, democracy, and accountability in world affairs, particularly in Africa. The human rights agenda has prioritized gender minorities and has, therefore, challenged the role and definition of manhood. In effect, men's position of superiority has been threatened and destabilized". The emancipation of women has troubled men's position in society, creating the need for men to reassert themselves. This is most evident in the "corrective rapes" that are perpetrated against female Izitabane in South Africa, and now the determined moves to reduce homosexuality in Africa by introducing more stringent laws (2011: p.70).

[10] A set of lifestyle norms, practices, and institutions that: (1) promote binary alignment of biological sex, gender identity, and gender roles; (2) assume heterosexuality as a fundamental and natural norm; and (3) privilege monogamous, committed relationships and reproductive sex above all other sexual practices.

Msibi's work has been seminal in gaining an understanding of how African constructions of masculinities have been challenged by gender equality and homosexuality. He argues that hegemonic masculinities are framed to regulate, silence, subvert, and police other forms of masculinities; to hold hegemonic masculinities in place, deviance is punished (2011). Msibi further expresses that for the legitimacy of patriarchy to be in place, compulsory heteronormativity is promoted. Gender roles are entrenched and held up as fixed and legitimate as a result of heteronormativity. The attempts to rid Africa of Izitabane symbolize the rise in conservative sentiments seeking to legitimize patriarchy in African societies. If homosexuality is discredited, then heterosexuality-and this patriarchy-remains intact. When men's status and heteronormativity are threatened, Izitabane becomes the target. The new wave of homophobic laws and homophobic and gendered violence in Africa directly reflects the rise of conservatism driven by patriarchy, which uses the appeal of tradition, law, and lies to keep heterosexuality in place (Msibi, 2011).

2.4.5 Underreported

While South Africa is the only country in Africa where the right to sexual orientation is protected by the Constitution, the South African Government has failed to uphold its duties and penetrate the workings of the criminal justice system in ways that are beneficial to Izitabane. A report compiled by Iranti.org and the Arcus Foundation shows that while a small number of crimes of violence perpetrated against Izitabane have led to arrests and even prosecution, this represents only a fraction of violations and is the result of sustained advocacy and campaigning. Many cases go unreported and unnoticed and, therefore, remain outside the public consciousness (Reddy et al., 2007: p.11). However, the relatively low number of arrests and convictions should be understood in the context of a generally ineffective justice system in which only those with economic power can reasonably expect to access state justice (Iranti.org and the Arcus Foundation, 2019, p.5). The stigma that is attached to being Isitabane usually prevents those who survive the ordeal from reporting the perpetrators of the crime (Herek, 1992: p.1). The few who do report homophobic hate crimes often face backlash, retaliation, hostility, and discrimination at the hands of the police and, sometimes, from other service providers (Chabalala-Roelofse, 2015).

The majority remain silent and refrain from reporting these violations to law enforcement because they feel that they would "not be taken seriously" and that "the police would not understand" (Wells and Polders, 2006: p.67). It has also been reported that many survivors of homophobic hate crimes do not report perpetrators of the crime because they fear exposing

their actual sexual orientation to the police (Action Aid, cited in Martin et al., 2009). In some cases, the police are often obsessed with why the victim 'chose' to be Isitabane instead of focusing on the case. As a result, most survivors have a lack of trust in the police, and sometimes, they are reluctant to report perpetrators (Judge & Nel, 2008). Research by Out/UCAP "found that approximately 33% of the respondents experienced the police as 'not interested' in assisting them when they had reported discrimination" (Polders & Wells, 2004, cited in Judge & Nel, 2008). These experiences that survivors of rape encounter directly from the law enforcers create a lack of faith in the law execution and criminal justice (Young, 2011).

Muholi "cites the 'emotional trauma' of reliving the incident, the 'fear of exposure' to family and friends" and 'humiliation' as contributory factors. According to Muholi, revealing intimate violations to anyone is painful and can be delegitimizing and disempowering for survivors (2004: p.118 cited in Naidoo & Karels, 2012: p.245). In a poll of survivors of homophobic hate crimes in the Western Cape, 66% of respondents argued that they did not report the crime because they feared it would not be taken seriously. Of these, 25% said they feared exposing their sexual orientation to the police, and 22% said they were afraid of being abused by the police (Martin et al., 2009: p.14). As a result, survivors are unable to access the psychological and medical help that they need (Cornelius et al., 2014: p.12). In addition, in many societies, it is seen as shameful and weak, and many women are still considered guilty of attracting violence against themselves through their behavior. The persistently low levels of reporting and investigation can be partly attributed to this (Pandea et al., 2020).

2.4.6 Locating the problem: causes of homophobic rape

There is no single satisfactory answer to why the country has significantly high levels of sexual violence inflicted by men on women in South Africa. However, rather several historical explanations offered by different academics and activists help to explain the country's rape epidemic. Such explanations consider the impact on levels of serious crime of the country's ongoing political and socio-economic transition, the connection between the country's violent past and contemporary criminal behavior, and the consequence of a poorly performing criminal justice system (Institute for Security Studies, 2001). According to Anguita, other factors that are usually mentioned are as follows: "First, socio-cultural (the patriarchal embedded in the culture, tradition, and religion; the legacy of apartheid; the perception of the police service and the backlash created by the promotion and recognition of the rights of women and sexual minorities); secondly, low economic development; and thirdly, legal reasons (unsympathetic police service and dysfunctional criminal justice system)" (2012, p.491).

Moffet is of the view that the causes of sexual violence in South Africa lie in the construction of male control over females in violent ways, as found in every patriarchal system. She writes: "I argue that contemporary sexual violence in South Africa is fueled by justification narratives that are rooted in apartheid practices that legitimated violence by the dominant group against disempowered, not only one overtly political arena but in social informal and domestic spaces. In South Africa, gender rankings are maintained, and women are regulated through rape, the most intimate form of violence. Thus, in post-apartheid, democratic South Africa, sexual violence has become a socially endorsed punitive project for maintaining patriarchal order. Men use rape to inscribe subordinate status onto an intimately known 'Other' – women. This is generally and globally true of rape, but in the case of South Africa, such activities draw on apartheid practices of control that have permeated all sectors of society". She goes on to say that "although there are no logical barriers to women raping men, rapists are invariably male, which places, any discussion of rape squarely within discourses of violent gender and patriarchal domination" (Moffet, 2006: pp.129-136).

2.4.7 The Legacy of Violence in South Africa:

Gqola argues that the prevalence of violence against Izitabane in South Africa, and violent crime in general, cannot be understood separately from the histories of colonialism and apartheid (2015). In South Africa, then, some men believe that by resorting to violence, they are participating in a socially approved project to keep women within certain boundaries and categories (Moffett, 2006: p.140). Along with this, both the apartheid state and the liberation groups struggling against apartheid were often characterized by gender inequality and violence, with little effort being made to achieve gender equality, as 'gender was relatively unimportant in the context of race oppression' (Morrell et al., 2012: p.9). Naidoo & Karels argue that "since apartheid categorized and discriminated against people, it led to the production of 'otherness' and a 'discriminatory mindset' in South African society directed at those who are different and do not conform. One of the major legacies of apartheid, therefore, is intolerance towards those who are different, be it based on race, ethnicity, nationality, or sexual orientation. This manifests today in murder and "corrective rape" of black Izitabane women (2012: p.255).

Similarly, Judge & Nel, the historical, cultural, and political contexts in South Africa form the background for hate crimes in the country (Judge & Nel, 2008). Like other postcolonial countries, the South African country has a troubled history steeped in a struggle for independence (Morrissey, 2013: p.73). However, the country's advent into democracy is more recent- only achieving a constitutional democracy in 1994 due to the racist apartheid regime

(Palm & Gaum, 2021: p.206). From the start of European settlement in 1652, the country's history has been marked by a brutal, violent struggle over land, with forcible dispossession of the indigenous population (Morrell et al., 2012: p.14). Within the apartheid system, oppressive practices and power disparities were justified by social constructs such as race and gender. Violence and the threat of violence were officially sanctioned and normalized as a tool of power by the oppressors until the early 1990s (Reid & Dirsuweit, 2002; Tshishonga, 2019; Brown, 2012; Graaff & Heinecken, 2017: p.624; Kynoch, 2008: p.629). Violence was also used "to challenge the dominant power structure and government of South Africa" (Ntshoe, 2002: p.62), to maintain order, and to advance political and social position (Farwell, 2004). An estimated 20,000 people died as a result of political violence between 1984 and 1994 (Goldstone, 1998).

The apartheid system operated to protect white heterosexual families (Morrisey, 2013; Mkhize, 2010; Reid & Dirsuweit, 2002) and controlled and disadvantaged the majority of the population (black Africans) simply because they did not share the skin color of the rulers (Rodriguez, 2010; Judge, 2018a). The government routinely manipulated ideas about sexuality to maintain unjust power relations (Collins, 2004: p.87). According to Francis, apartheid racialized normative sexuality as white and othered not only other sexual identities but also those of other racial identities (2021). Race "in and of itself, was the social and psychological reality through which repression and violence functioned. Racism was institutionalized, legalized and internalized" (Harris, 2004: p.3). Race was "used to justify the exclusion of some people from political and economic power, and the creation of a racial hierarchy was entrenched in legislation and government programs that denied access to land to some; restricted higher-paying professions to others; and ensured that some were paid more than others for the same work. It provided more funding per capita for education, health, housing, and social assistance for some people than others. It ensured that some were marginalized from certain opportunities and confined to lives of poverty" (Houston & Davids, 2016).

Alongside this acceptance of violence by the colonialist and apartheid governments, there was a tendency to legitimize and encourage violence against women even outside the law (Ewing et al., 2020: p.2; Britton, 2006). The levels of violence against women, particularly those who were held in apartheid detention centers, were high. Women were subjected to violent crimes such as rape and other crimes (Amstrong, 1994). Rape was regularly used as a political tool or weapon against female prisoners by both apartheid and anti-apartheid forces (Anderson, 2000: p.17; Wood, 2005: p.305). While this study does not intend to examine the entire history of violence in South Africa, as it is an extensive subject on which a lot has been written, "the

country's violent history has left the society with a 'culture of violence,' which has contributed to the high levels of violence associated with criminal activities. In fact, violence has now become an acceptable means of resolving social, political, and even domestic conflicts. In the absence of effective policing, the confidence of the common people has been diluted" (Pandey, 2012: p.143).

According to Collins, post-apartheid South Africa embraces violence "as an appropriate and effective way of regulating interpersonal relationships. It is understood as an essential tool for raising children, a useful disciplinary technique in educational institutions, an acceptable strategy in pursuing sexual encounters, an indispensable resource in intimate relationships, and an effective way of establishing social status… violence is also understood to be a useful tool of broader social negation. It is widely used as a tool for political mobilization and as a way of eliminating the threat of democratic political competitors. It is used to eliminate economic competitors, such as the xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals, and to regulate gender and sexuality through gay-bashing and 'corrective rape'" (Collins, 2013: p.31). Statistics indicate that South Africa continues to top international rankings of occurrences of violence (Britton, 2006) and is among the countries that have the highest reported cases of gender-based violence, mostly directed towards women and black Izitabane women (IRIN Humanitarian News and Analysis, 2001: p.1 cited in Chabalala & Roelofse, 2015). Thousand other cases of violent crimes against humanity are reported every day, including murder, aggravated assault, robbery, property crime, and vehicle hijackings (Lamb, 2018: p.7; Sedaat et al., 2009).

Between 2009 and 2010, about 2 122 200 cases of serious crime were recorded; 30 percent of these were crimes of assault involving grievous bodily harm (Department of Police, Crime Statistics, 2009-2010, cited in Human Rights Watch, 2011: p.14-15). Between April 2015 and March 2016, the National Crime Statistics reported an estimated 18 673 murder cases, 18 127 attempted murders, 51 000 sexual offenses, and 132 000 robberies (National Crime Statistics, 2017). In 2019, a report compiled by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation revealed that between April 2016 and March 2017, the South African Police Service reported: "about 34.1 murders per 100 000 people per year" (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2019: p.2). In 2018, the country was listed by the Global Peace Index as "the second most unsafe country out of the 48 countries South of the Sahara" and as one of the most violent and dangerous places on earth, especially for women (De Beers, 2007: p.6 cited in Davies & Drayer, 2014: p.1). About 40,000 cases of assault against women were reported by September 2022- an increase of about 16% from 2001. According to Anguita, the rising number

of cases of assault against women in South Africa is because women have become the new 'other,' and are subsequently policed and, when 'necessary,' corrected through sexual violence (2012: p.491).

Among the countries for which statistics are available, South Africa has among the highest rates of reported gender violence, particularly rape in a country not at war (Human Rights Watch, 2011). A 1996 comparison of South African crime ratio indicates that in 1996, the country came second out of 96 countries to have reported the highest numbers of rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and trafficking for sexual purposes, and the third to report the highest numbers of murders (Deane, 2002; Institute for Security Studies, 2001). About 500 000 rapes, hundreds of murders, and countless physical violence against women are reported every year in South Africa (Mkhize et al., 2010). More than 27% percent of South African men questioned in a 2009 survey reported having perpetrated rape, and nearly half of those men said they had raped more than one person (Jewkes et al., 2009). Between April 2009 and March 2010, the South African Police Services (SAPS) filed approximately 68,000 reported cases of sexual assault. According to South Africa's 2016 Demographic and Health Survey, one in five women older than 18 has experienced physical violence. According to a report by United Nations Global Statistics, 1 in every three women has been beaten, forced into sex, and/or abused in their lifetime (Lips, 2014). These figures are reportedly higher in the poorest households (Sibanda-Moyo et al., 2017: p.5).

2.4.8 Cultural attitudes and religious beliefs

Although homophobia is not state-sanctioned in South Africa, "countervailing tendencies remain very strong and vocal" (Awondo & Reid, 2012: p.157). The cultural argument is often used to support and justify the violence and discrimination against Izitabane. One aspect of this argument in Africa and South Africa is that Ubutabane, or homosexuality as referred to in other countries, is "un-African," 'unchristian' and 'immoral,' meaning it is against African religions and African laws (Pew Research Center, 2013). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to contest this claim, it is essential to note that a great deal of research has been done to demonstrate that same-sex desire is a logical feature of African societies and belief systems. It was never introduced by the colonialists, as often argued, but it has always existed in Africa, including South Africa, and was considered normal and tolerated by societies in which it existed**.** However, the colonialists introduced its intolerance (Achmat, 1993; Epprecht, 2001, 2004, 1998; Murray & Will, 1998). The difference is that it was not perceived in the Western discourse of "gay" and "lesbian" or a pathologized "homosexual" category, and it may even

have gone beyond sex to affectionate, caring relationships (Epprecht, 2004 cited in Msibi, 2011: p.63).

Despite this, African leaders continue to use culture not only to oppose, contest, denounce, or condemn Izitabane but also to make Africans believe that Ubutabane or same-sex relations do not exist in Africa. In 2006, Jacob Zuma, while still deputy president of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), declared that "same-sex marriages were a disgrace to the nation and God." He continued, "When I was growing up, ungqingili [an isiZulu name for queer or homosexuals] could not stand in front of me; I would knock him out" (Sowetan, 26 September 2006, cited in McKinley, 2010). Zama's infamous statement has shaped discourses on Ubutabane identities and non-heteronormative sexualities. In addition, many people still hold his views today, including political and religious leaders today. Kenneth Meshoe, the head of the African Christian Democratic party, was also quoted stating that Ubutabane: "is a lifestyle that is unacceptable to the majority of South Africans, besides the fact that it is unchristian and anti-all religion. It is against our culture as Africans, although we know that there are people introduced to this lifestyle. I'm sure they are an embarrassment to their ancestors. This is a white men's disease that has been introduced into the black culture" (Spruill, 2000: p.3-6 cited in Gontek, 2009).

The Kenyan President, Daniel Arap Moi, as well as the former president of Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, have all communicated similar sentiments (Ibrahim, 2015: p.265; Reddy, 2002; Mwaura, 2006). Arap Moi announced that there is no room or time for homosexuals in Kenya. He further stated that homosexuality is against African customs and traditions and that it is considered a great sin even in religion (Mwaura, 2006). In 2014, the former president of Gambia, Yahya Jammeh, addressed the Gambian nation and referred to homosexual persons as "malaria-causing mosquitoes." He called on Gambian citizens to "fight these vermin called homosexuals…the same way we are fighting malaria-causing mosquitoes, if not more aggressively" (Laccino, 2014: p.1). Leaders such as the late former President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, also attracted global media headlines after he publicly declared that homosexuality was "an abhorrent" Western import, a threat to the nation, and averred that sexual minorities are worse than pigs and dogs and deserve no human rights at all. In addition, Mugabe portrayed homosexuality as a "scourge" that goes against Christian customs and African teachings (Gontek, 2009; Reddy, 2002: p.168).

In 2012, a group of African leaders allied with the Organization of Islamic Conference to condemn homosexuality and oppose campaigns and initiatives that seek to afford more excellent protection to LGBT rights in the United Nations General Assembly and Human Rights Council (Ibrahim, 2015: p.265). These kinds of actions and public sentiments by prominent African leaders demonstrate the extreme intolerance of homosexuality in Africa and the unwillingness of many African leaders to confront a violation of the dignity of those who engage in same-sex relations. These sentiments further provide a context where homophobic and heterosexist violence are not only made possible but also acceptable. According to Msibi, not only do African leaders publicly endorse homophobia, but relies on outdated laws, contradictory ideas on morality, and unproven claims of an imposed homosexual identity. These claims are just a façade designed to make patriarchy and heteronormativity continue to be accepted and ingrained in African societies (Msibi, 2011).

In South Africa, various responses rapidly came to light immediately after this statement was made. Rights groups have reported that these sentiments are cruel and inhumane and demonstrate the hypocrisy and predictability of African leaders. Some believe that this ongoing battle against Ubutabane is not about defending African traditions and culture. Many African leaders have failed to solve their problems and often use the Izitabane narrative to deflect Africans from real issues and bolster their control over the political and social context. Others affirm that these sentiments are a risk to Izitabane and facilitate the control of Izitabane. The current homophobic upsurge and the legal winds of recriminalization of homosexuality that are sweeping across the African continent are not coincidental or mere happenstance. The homophobic gusts blow amidst the rising cost of living, high unemployment, corruption, repression, and increased hopelessness among the populace (Tamale, 2013: p.39). To put it succinctly, political leaders use fear, misconceptions, and lies about Ubutabane to achieve specific sociopolitical purposes and maintain political power.

According to Essien & Aderinto, research and scholarship clearly demonstrate that sexuality in precolonial Africa was more complicated than the idealized heterosexuality that contemporary African leaders claim to be African tradition (2009). According to Tamale, the worn and tired claim that homosexuality is “un-African” is absurd; feminism has also been tarred with the same narrative. “Such claims are simply reductionist oversimplified of extremely complex human phenomena that are impossible to bind in racialized or ethnicized bodies” (2013: p.40). Even though colonialism endeavored to racialize sexuality, keeping in mind that it is the case that sexuality has a few social particulars (which are themselves not

inherent, natural, or fixed), sexual orientation transcends racial and ethnic identity. Moreover, there is no such thing as an authentic African essence that is inherently damaging to homosexuality.

To put it another way, the political rhetoric of heteronormativity cannot ignore or deny the existence of same-sex relationships. The attempt by political and religious leaders to construct African models of sexuality is designed to control and regulate this part of our lives. As a result, "un-Africanness" becomes merely a metaphor for conservative goals (Tamale, 2013: p.39-40).

2.5 Religion, Sexuality, and Gender

Now that I have demonstrated much of the physical abuse and violation of black Izitabane women in South Africa let us shift our focus to the second section of this chapter, exploring the intersection between religion, sexuality, and gender. Chidester defines religion as a: "discourse and practices that negotiate what it is to be human about the superhuman and in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman… religion entails discourses and practices for created sacred space, as a zone of inclusion but also as a boundary for excluding others" (Chidester, 2005: p.vii-viii). In exploring the African and religion, John Mbiti, an African scholar claim that "for Africans, religion is an ontological phenomenon: it pertains to the questions of the existence of being (Mbiti, 1990: p.15). He argues that "religion permeates into all departments of [African] life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it" (Mbiti, 1969: p.1). Both these statements by Mbiti summarize the role and function of religion in Africa very well. This section of the study delves into the impact of religion. It offers valuable insights into how religion has contributed to the creation of an environment within which violence against black Izitabane women is normalized.

2.5.1 The Role of Religion in the Crisis of Violence against Black Izitabane Women

In addition to the argument that Ubutabane is not African, African opponents of Ubutabane often cite religion-particularly Christianity- as the reason for their justifications for rejecting the existence of Izitabane (Arndt & De Bruin, 2006). The Bible has been used to suppress Izitabane and Ubutabane practices. According to Gunda, despite attempts to cite specific Bible passages to denounce certain Ubutabane acts, it is important to recognize that the Bible itself is a foreign document in much of Africa (2010). Msibi acknowledges that there is an inherent contradiction in African leaders who condemn same-sex acts and challenge the provision of Izitabane human rights to continue to use the Bible. According to Msibi, if Africa rejects ideologies brought from the West, then surely religion brought from the West cannot be utilized

to reject something that is being rejected for its foreign roots. Overall, the religious argument represents a contradiction in an argument: if the intention is to rid Africa of Western impositions, then Christianity cannot rationally be used to justify the rejection of Ubutabane (Msibi, 2011). It is therefore argued that the rejection of Ubutabane in South Africa goes beyond simply labeling it a "Western" imposition. It is a rejection of the visible and embodied "Isitabane" identity. An identity that troubles the pretense of heteronormative culture.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-9 and the Creation account in Genesis 1-2 serve as the foundation for African Christian discrimination against black Izitabane women. Church leaders and people of faith often argue that God created Adam and Eve, men and women. This viewpoint firmly maintains that God created pairs of human beings and other living things. In accordance with this, the ethics of sexuality depend on Genesis 1-28-29 and 2:28, which underline that God created two genders so that they can procreate. In this manner, marriage between a male and a female is viewed as correlative, exclusive, comprehensive, and permanent (Hunter, 2014: p.23). It is believed that the creation story, in the beginning, is confirmed by the Book of Genesis. The woman is created from a man. In other words, only a woman should be a man's partner. Other than male and female, there is no other sexuality in creation. For the people who live in sexual sin, specifically Izitabane, the Torah provides the law. As a result, being Isitabane is a sad state and an unreasonable intrusion attempt to disrupt God's intended creation order (Miller, 2005: p.129). Strictly speaking, this doctrine teaches that sexuality is for procreation.

It is also emphasized that heterosexual marriage is the norm in Christianity, as stated in the Bible (Brownson, 2013; Hunter, 2014: p.24). Only sexual unions between a man and a woman are recognized and approved (McQueeney, 2009; Herek & Mclemore, 2013). Genesis is used as proof that Ubutabane is a sin and contrary to God's will (Gnuse, 2015). "The traditional stance of the church on this passage has been that Sodom was destroyed (or at least one of the reasons it was destroyed was) because of the homosexual desire of the men in that city who wanted to rape Lot's guests (who were really angels sent to destroy Sodom)" (Harshman, 2017: p.3). It is suggested that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because God wanted to get rid of homosexual persons who infested the city (Gunda, 2010). Other Bible verses, Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:10-16 (Holiness Code) are viewed as the most straightforward verses on the condemnation of homosexual activity. The argument made by many religious leaders on the Levitical laws is that they refer to homosexuality as an abomination and a violation of the created order (Murray et al., 2003).

I Corinthians, 6:9-10 (Letter of Paul): First Corinthians 6:9-10 is another important Scripture to have been featured in arguments against Ubutabane. I Corinthians contains lists of behaviors that are described as sinful, godless, and morally reprehensible. Those who engage in such activities will not inherit the kingdom of God. The text reads: 9: "Do you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived by the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, ten nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor the drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God". Locke observes that "for some Christians these passages are incontrovertible proof of God's negative attitude toward same-sex physical relationships; homoerotic behavior is inherently sinful and must be condemned and discouraged at all times" (Locke, 2005: p.135). Two others, 1 Timothy 1:10 (homosexuals will not enter the kingdom) and Roman 1 (homosexuality is wrong), are invoked as opposing to Ubutabane. Based on these Scriptures, Ubutabane is condemned, and "only monogamous heterosexual relationships are condoned by God" (Huffling & Gentry, 2020: p.26). Ubutabane is considered to be "unnatural," "perversion," an "abomination in the eyes of God" (Murray et al., 2004; Clark et al., 1990; Other Foundation, 2016), and a threat to the virtue of heterosexual marriage and patriarchal families (Battle & Ashley, 2008), and is regarded as one of the many shameful acts in Christianity. As a result, those who engage in Ubutabane acts face much hostility (Nkosi & Masson, 2017: p.19).

According to Masango, we cannot deny the existence of these Scriptures and what they say about male homosexual behavior. However, Christians must question other behaviors that are "similar" to homosexuality listed in the Bible, such as eating raw meat, planting two different kinds of seed in the same field, pride, greed, disobedience to parents, and jealousy. These behaviors are often regarded as outdated by some Christians, except for homosexuality (2002). Discrimination is only shown against people who engage in same-sex sexual activity, a sign of double standards (Arimoro, 2018). It is also important to note that the Bible itself is a foreign document in much of Africa (Msibi, 2018: p.69), and it does not fully address the topic of homosexuality. "In Sodom, homosexuality is mentioned within the context of idolatry (Baal worship) involving lust and dishonorable passions. 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 talk about homosexual activity in the context of prostitution and possibly pederasty…. Nowhere does the Bible condemn a loving and committed homosexual relationship. To use the Bible to condemn such a relationship, as we see, involves a projection of one's own bias and stretching of the Biblical text beyond that of which the scriptures speak" (Cannon, 2008: p.11-12).

2.5.2 Heterosexism, marriage, and the Bible

While legalizing same-sex marriage in South Africa is considered by some as a gain for Izitabane rights, queer scholars have tended to view the desire to be married as conservative, as marriage typically upholds traditional gender norms and heteronormative institutions (Croce, 2015). Heterosexual reproduction has always been central to the development of many African communities through maintaining the social reproduction of cultural and national values (Epprecht, 2013). Izitabane are not viewed as having biological reproduction potential in the same way that heterosexual persons are. As perceived, Izitabane falls outside the normative discourse of reproduction, which makes them 'worthless' in the eyes of many. In South Africa, this is a common argument against Izitabane human rights on the basis that Ubutabane is inconsistent with the ability to procreate through heterosexual sex. Such instances demonstrate not only the complex ways in which gender may be uniquely constructed and deconstructed (Goldberg & Allen, 2013: p.107) within the context of Izitabane families "but also a lack of understanding and ability to consider reproductive needs beyond normative heterosexuality" (Browne, 2019: p.11).

Furthermore, Augustine's doctrine of the sanctity of sexuality is firmly upheld. According to Augustine, sexuality is the root of sin, thus making it a significant issue for humanity (cited in Burk & Lambert, 2015). The condemnation of Ubutabane and victimization of black Izitabane women are generally characterized by this early Christian attitude toward the body and sex, meaning that sex must be done for procreation with the right person (one's spouse) and the right way, which is heterosexual genital intercourse (Augustine cited in Heyward, 2013: p.33). Setyawan argues that according to Augustine, sex can only be justified in marriage for procreation. In contrast, true life is embodied in such a way that it is not polluted by sexual lust, that is, being celibate. Setyawan borrows from Pizzuto to argue that the essence of the sanctity of life is at odds with the goals of enjoying sexuality and procreation. Accordingly, the sexual orientation of Izitabane individuals is viewed as incapable of maintaining the sanctity of sexuality. According to this doctrine, sexual activity between Izitabane individuals cannot fulfill the primary purpose of sexuality, which is biological procreation. In this context, "the normative standard of sexual relations is strongly determined by the perspective of heterosexuality" (Pizzutto, 2008: p.164, cited in Setyawan, 2021: p.313).

2.6 An intersectional analysis of homophobic hate crimes against black Izitabane women

The synergistic interaction between various aspects of an individual's identity, which may result in compound oppression, discrimination, or disadvantages, is referred to as

intersectionality (Gaitho, 2022). Originating in the Black Feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s and ultimately coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, the term "intersectionality was created to understand the constitution of racism and sexism in the lived experiences of women of color. With specific reference to the United States, Crenshaw uses the metaphor of the traffic intersection to conceptualize how black women encounter discrimination and the law" (Crenshaw, 1989 cited in Moreau, 2015: p.496-497). According to the United Nations, intersectionality is a concept that is used to capture: "the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of discrimination or systems of subordination. Intersectionality specifically addresses how racism, patriarchy, economically disadvantaged and other discriminatory systems contribute to create layers of inequality that structure the relative positions of women and men, races and other groups" (United Nations Gender and racial discrimination: Report of the Expect Group Meeting, 2000).

As an analytical tool, intersectionality assumes that social categories such as race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, ethnicity, religion, and other categories of difference in an individual's life are interrelated and mutually shaping (Battle & Ashley, 2008). Based on this central insight, I employ the components of an intersectional approach to examine embodied experiences and identities of black Izitabane women that have historically been overlooked or hidden from dominant cultural discourses. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the issue concerning violence against black Izitabane women in South Africa has received an amount of attention because it occurs within the context of a robust framework of legal protections achieved as a result of a successful elite Ubutabane movement in the country (Mampane, 2020; Muller, 2016; Jugde, 2015; Moodie-Mills, 2012; Kinama, 2011; Naidoo & Karels, 2012; Mulaudzi, 2018; Mkhize et al, 2010; Pretorius, 2017). Decriminalization has not necessarily had positive ramifications for the rates of violence against Izitabane. People who identify as Izitabane, with an emphasis on black-butch bodies, are disproportionately the target of violent hate crimes and open discrimination (The South African Institute of International Affairs SAIIA, 2021).

Black Izitabane women are at the "intersection" of race- and gender-based oppression, where their lived experiences of discrimination and violence are different from those of their white Izitabane women. The significance of the physical appearance of black Izitabane women and other boundaries such as demographic area, gender norms, sexual orientation, religion, and race are all intertwined, providing multiple justifications for stigmatizing, excluding, and acting violently towards black Izitabane women. These boundaries are critical to understanding

Izitabane hate crimes and how black Izitabane women may experience intersecting forms of discrimination based on one or more of these identities. A better understanding of these intersections is essential to respond in a comprehensive and specific way to violence targeting black Izitabane women in South Africa. Recent scholarship in South Africa demonstrates the necessity to begin analyzing the embodied experiences of marginalized bodies; in the context of this study, black female Izitabane living in South African townships or rural areas (Moreau, 2015; Gaitho, 2022; Ewing et al., 2020). By doing so, we draw attention to the gap between the legal status of Ubutabane in South Africa and the different experiences of black Izitabane women, particularly around the issue of violence.

Black Izitabane women's vulnerability is increased by the fact that they are seen as un-African and unChristian, a threat to African beliefs, and to patriarchy and hetero-normativity, which define women's bodies as male property (Mwambene & Wheal, 2015: p.72). In this context, to be a South African is understood and measured through a racialized, gendered, and heteronormative focal point. As per Brown, because black Izitabane women represent a minority, they are susceptible to being denounced as "abnormal" or "different" in any given country, but in South Africa, abnormality poses a particularly reprehensible threat to the heterosexual norm. At the point when black Izitabane women pose this threat, the standard reaction of straight men is to meet it with violence. In response, the public implicitly, or sometimes explicitly, supports violence against Izitabane women. For too many straight men in South Africa, Ubutabane is an insult to their masculinity and their power (Brown, 2012: p.53). Given the centuries of colonial rule and apartheid, the transition to democracy, and the formulation of Izitabane rights, the South African context provides the perfect setting for this kind of analysis.

PART II: THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF CARE: CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

The following question arises from the above discussion: What other interventions are necessary, and by whom? This section of this chapter explores concrete steps that faith communities and religious leaders can undertake to advance and foster the inclusion of black Izitabane women. The discussion in this section examines the notion of radical embodied hospitality- the act of welcoming the 'other'- and how it can be employed to challenge African faith communities to take up a position for the full inclusion of black Izitabane believers. I maintain that African faith communities are in the best position to address violence against black Izitabane women because they are widespread, have credibility at the grassroots, and can

decisively influence people's beliefs and perceptions. Additionally, I argue that for African faith communities to become truly inclusive communities, faith leaders and congregants must seriously consider the latest theological views by queer scholars and theologians regarding Ubutabane alongside new ways of biblical interpretation. Additionally, there must be a reconstruction of the spirit within African faith communities, fostering them as inclusive communities of care.

2.2.1 African faith communities as Communities of radical embodied hospitality: Potential Contribution

Faith communities in South Africa are known for their prominent role in fighting for justice and also for bringing healing to black people. "Since the sixties until the change in 1994, the prophetic church in South Africa, directed by South African liberation theology, has had a huge influence on people, here and overseas, so much so that the previous government eventually had to fully acknowledge this" (Pieterse, 1999: p.82-83). Faith communities spoke with a powerful and fearless voice against apartheid (Pieterse,1999: p.82-83, cited in Coetzee, 2003: p.343). During this era, most African churches were part of the revolution and pleaded for action against violence. The church urged its "followers and members to take part actively in the struggle; to see this participation as a calling, based on a specific way and method of interpreting the Bible" (Coetzee, 2004: p.342). Religion and the Bible were a foundation that gave rise to values that are fundamental to human rights, such as human dignity, freedom, justice, and equality (Vorster, 2000). Furthermore, faith communities have served as a central organizing hub for political and social movements, providing the black community with a powerful voice to address social justice issues (Bent-Goodley et al., 2012: p.53).

During the enslavement of African bodies, the church provided slaves with the opportunity to learn how to read and write (Martin & Martin, 2002). Faith communities offered a safe space for literacy development, healing, and hope at times when black bodies were denied access to services outside of their community (Bent-Goodley et al., 2012: p.53). Through it all, faith communities have played a role in the physical, spiritual, economic, political, and social needs of many black individuals and families (Lewis, 2015: p.141). Furthermore, faith communities are positioned in such a way that they can influence and take the lead in issues and problems with which they are not traditionally associated. For most people, the church is one of the most significant spaces in which social attitudes and ethical responses form. Many societies affected by violence are poor, and faith communities fulfill a significant role in restoring peace, healing, and promoting the ethos of human rights. This study considers how African faith communities

can play an instrumental and positive role for black Izitabane women in South Africa. This role can be fulfilled in various ways, e.g., intervention, preaching, diaconal and pastoral care, church meetings, ecumenical bodies, etc. (Vorster, 2003, pp. 464-474).

2.2.3 Theological Perspectives on Hospitality: What is hospitality?

The concept of 'hospitality' comes from the Latin words *hospitium* or *hospitalis, which have been* turned into the English word hospitality. The two Latin words were formed in turn from the word *hospes*, which means both host (the one providing hospitality) and guest (the one to whom hospitality is extended) (Nnamunga: 2013: p.167 cited in Mligo, 2021). Embedded in its etymology is the idea that a stranger or guest is welcomed into the guest chamber by the host that includes them (Henry, 2018). In the Kantian sense, hospitality addresses the idea, particularly in his understanding of the term as the 'natural right' "of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another." For Kant, all humans also possess this right "by virtue of their rights to communal possession of the earth's surface" (Kant cited in Henry, 2018). Kant saw hospitality as the defining element that brings people of different cultures together (Siddiqui, 2015). Within the Bible, and specifically, the New Testament, numerous references and instructions to believers regarding the practice of hospitality and treating humans with respect and dignity are highly promoted- although sadly neglected in many contemporary societies.

Leviticus (19:33-34), for instance, states that: "If you have resident strangers in your country, you will not molest them. You will treat resident strangers as though they were native-born and love them as yourself, for you yourself were once aliens in Egypt" (Lottes, 2005; O'Gorman, 2007; Blevins, 2009: p.106). An anonymous writing known as the letter to the Hebrews (13:1-2) states: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (13:1-2) (Yong, 2015: p.25). These appeals are set to remind believers of the behavior that God desires. The author prompts believers to focus on those who reside outside of the community, in this case, black Izitabane women in particular (Sykes, 2004: p.58). To welcome into their midst those who are being oppressed and marginalized. These scriptures demonstrate the possibilities and prospects contained in the Bible for promoting safe and welcoming spaces for strangers and outsiders. Given the current stigma imposed on black Izitabane women in South Africa, it is necessary to consider the reality that black Izitabane women are 'strangers' in that they are socially, institutionally, religiously, culturally rejected, misunderstood, silenced, excluded, and discriminated against because of what the Bible says about Ubutabane.

The ethic of hospitality thus provides us with a hermeneutical approach that is vital in dealing with much of the debate that has arisen over the issue of Ubutabane and the exclusion of black Izitabane women in African faith communities. Furthermore, hospitality was central to Jesus' ministry. Jesus engaged with outsiders at the table in a hospitality setting, which signaled acceptance. The readers learn in this passage that the early church gave away their homes, money, and other resources to help and sustain believers in Christ. Acts 2:47 shows that these actions helped the early church grow in size and won the favor of everyone. According to Smith, the context of this passage makes it abundantly clear that hospitality has more to do with welcoming guests who are culturally, economically, and spiritually different from us than it does with entertaining guests who are similar to us. Acts 2:42-47 discusses a serving society. When it comes to a society that is serving, which is defined as looking out for the interests of others while assisting others, reciprocity is only one factor. Accepting people who are different from us as believers in Christ prevents us from imposing our cultural traditions on others because we care about serving the genuine needs of others.

In Luke 14, Jesus demanded radical hospitality to outcasts. According to Sykes, Jesus blurs the boundaries of insiders and outsiders through his association with outcasts in Matthew (25.31-46). The story that Jesus tells here in response to the question 'Who is my neighbor?' is one in which a Samaritan, someone who is an outsider, is upheld as the exemplary neighbor. Today's Christians are encouraged to practice hospitality and welcome outsiders. For Sykes, "the followers of Jesus are to live their lives according to new ideas of kinship and humanity, thus welcoming those who would have been previously unapproachable" and without a proper space. Sykes maintains that Luke's gospels include many "illustrations of how Jesus often came near people who were ostracized and allowed them to approach him. These people included sinners, lepers, tax collectors, unclean and foreign women, as well as those possessed by demons. His closest companions were people from the margins, manual laborers, such as fishermen, tax collectors, and women. Moreover, it is these people from undesirable backgrounds whom Jesus taught and with whom he shared table fellowship, the most powerful symbol of hospitality" (2004: p.61).

The early Christian church saw hospitality as an essential virtue for every disciple and community (Timothy 1.3:2). As noted by Pohl: "Hospitality to needy strangers distinguished the early church from its surrounding environment. Noted as exceptional by Christians and non-Christians alike, offering care to strangers became one of the distinguishing marks of the authenticity of the Christian gospel" (2002: p.36). According to McCormick, the early church

followed Jesus' command to show hospitality to the poor by "selling their property and possessions and distributing to every one according to his need" (Acts 2:44-45). Hospitality was so important that the apostles themselves were entrusted with the daily food distribution. Other New Testament witnesses testify to the importance the early church gave to hospitality to the needy. Paul tells his audience in Romans 12:13 to "contribute to the needs of God's people and practice hospitality." The author of 1 Peter tells his readers to "be hospitable to one another without grumbling (4:9). And 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:8 list hospitality as a requirement for leadership and ministry in the church. Moreover, both Paul and James argue that any inhospitality to the poor is a grave sin, a violation of the Body of Christ, and dishonors God (McCormick: 2004: p.92).

2.2.4 Hospitality in the African Context

As a responsibility, hospitality in the African setting is based upon a way of thinking of Ubuntu. According to Gathogo, "Being human through other people is the tenet of the African philosophy of life known as Ubuntu (Gathogo, 2008a). According to an African perspective, Ubuntu is humanism. The study's focus on African Izitabane experiences necessitates understanding how to navigate the act of hospitality within the African context. According to Mligo, the notion derives its origin from the hundred ethnic Nguni and Bantu languages. The same philosophy has been referred to by several different names throughout Africa: *Unhu and ubuthosi* (Zimbabwe), *botho* (Botswana), *bumuntu* (Tanzania), *bomoto, gimutu, umunthu, vumuthu and umuntu* (Congo, Angola, Malawi, Uganda, and South Africa). All these terms express the existence of Ubuntu virtues of "sympathy, compassion, benevolence, solidarity, hospitality, generosity, sharing, openness, affirming, available, kindness, caring, harmony, interdependence, obedience, collectivity, and consensus" (Mligo, 2021: p.7). Ubuntu "rejects selfish, paternalistic, restrictive rules and rulers who completely disregard the interests of their neighbors, their community, and their fellow human beings" (Tamale, 2013: p.40-41). According to Tamale, while the hierarchical structures of inequality did exist in precolonial Africa, the ethos of Ubuntu guaranteed that even the weakest and most vulnerable in society were protected from undue harm (Tamale, 2013: p.41). On the other hand, the power of the hospitality of Ubuntu in African hospitality is amplified by John S. Mbiti when he writes: "To visitors, strangers, and guests, hospitality means that when a visitor comes to someone's home, family quarrels stop, the sick cheer-up, peace is restored, and the home is restored to new strength. Visitors are, therefore, social healers- they are family doctors in a sense" (Mbiti, 1976: p.23 cited in Mligo, 2021: p.7).

2.2.5 The church and hospitality

According to Paul, the church is an important place to foster a life of hospitality. The nourishment gained here is physical, spiritual, and social. Pohl further states that although hospitality requires making a safe space for the 'other,' responsibility, and faithful performance of duties, the act emerges from gratitude; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God's love and welcome to us. It does not occur in any significant way unless we give it deliberate attention. Because the practice has been mostly forgotten and because practice clashes with several contemporary values, we must intentionally nurture a commitment to hospitality. It must be nurtured because its blessings and benefits are not always immediately apparent. For Pohl, "understanding the church as God's household has significant implications for hospitality. More than anywhere else, when we gather as the church, our practice of hospitality should reflect God's gracious welcome. God is our host, and we are all guests of God's grace. However, in individual churches, we also have opportunities to act as hosts who welcome others, making a place for strangers and sojourners" (2002: p.37-38).

2.2.6 Moving towards gender inclusivity

The move towards inclusivity regarding sexual orientation and gender identity within the faith spaces seeks to embody these values of hospitality. As stated by Vosloo, "The challenge posed by the moral crisis does not merely ask for tolerance and peaceful co-existence or some abstract plea for the community, but for an ethos of hospitality. The opposite of cruelty and hostility is not simply freedom from the cruel and hostile relationship but hospitality. Without an ethic of hospitality, it is difficult to envisage a way to challenge economic injustice, racism, xenophobia, lack of communication, the recognition of the rights of another, etc., hospitality is a prerequisite for more public life" (2003: p.66). Issues around sexual orientation and gender identity confront the church anew with the subject of human sexuality. Churches have to revisit the way they understand their Scriptures about human sexuality, and this has led to more responsible readings and interpretations of texts that are often used to address these issues. It furthermore encourages churches to take a serious look at how inclusive or exclusive their communities are (de Lange and Gaum, 2015: p.21).

According to de Lange and Gaum, understanding sexual orientation and gender through hospitality "raises the issue of the depth of understanding of God's unconditional grace, love, and acceptance. It, therefore, calls the church to deepen its understanding of God's self. Since this movement captures the imagination and elicits considerable public interest and largely plays out in the public sphere, it can be seen as an expression of public theology" (2015: p.21).

The ethos of hospitality stands out because it consolidates welcoming and inclusive attributes. It requires churches to revisit the way they read, understand, and interpret the Bible to respond to the different experiences of black Izitabane women. In the case of this study, it also provides a fitting corrective to specific contemporary forces threatening pastoral care. It provides clarification on the engagement between faith communities and black Izitabane women. From the rich perspective of hospitality, outsiders are imagined predominantly as subjects, not objects, and pastoral care prioritizes personal rather than impersonal relations.

2.2.7 Hospitality as a condition for conceptualizing the inclusive faith community

The call for African faith communities and other local congregations to welcome black Izitabane women is quite clear. The above examples of scriptures and tenets of religious traditions highlight the critical themes of hospitality and the inclusion of strangers. Moreover, believers are called to love their neighbors, welcome strangers and recognize everyone as brothers and sisters, subvert social hierarchies, and recognize all humans as *Imago Dei* (Pohl, 1999: p.97-98; Oden, 2010). Given the way religion is so deeply intertwined with South African society, it is clear that many black Izitabane women are religious. As stated by Epprecht: "many African LGBTI are proudly, happily and deeply religious" (2013: p.66-67). Like every human being, black Izitabane women want to explore and experience God's love, to be accepted for who we are, and to deepen our faith in a safe and compassionate community. In other words, black Izitabane women have a right to experience faith regardless of their sexuality and/or gender identity and regardless of whether homosexuality is a sin or not. However, the literature documenting the experiences of black Izitabane women in South Africa highlights stories of silencing and/or exclusion. There is uncertainty among leaders and members of African faith communities when it comes to embracing black Izitabane women. Some African faith leaders and members are unsure of the best course of action, and some are reluctant to make the necessary changes to remove barriers to full participation.

2.2.8 Practicing Inclusive Hospitality Today

The practice of hospitality today requires a transformation in our thinking about strangers. It requires going more profound than our thinking; we need a transformation of our precognitive disposition so that we are no longer suspicious of those who are different from us. Through training and prayer, we can come to see all people as bearers of God's image and, therefore, worthy of our respect and hospitality (Martin, 2014: p.6). It is necessary for all humans to repentant, as Ogletree puts it, "a deep turning of the mind away from the familiar world toward the possibility of a new order of the world" (2003: p.7). Sackreiter and Armstrong's

contribution to this philosophy is captured in their article "*Radical Hospitality: Welcoming the Homeless Stranger*." The authors identify three salient factors that need to be acknowledged and understood to practice hospitality as imagined by the Hebrew people, Jesus, and other New Testament writers (1 Corinthians 11:17-34; Romans 14:1-15:7; Hebrews 13:2 Revelation 3:20). The first factor is gratitude. It is only possible to compassionately and generously give without worrying about the recipient's ability to reciprocate if one recognizes that the only reason one can give is that one has first received. The second factor is the understanding that welcoming the stranger and engaging in hospitality involves a certain level of risk-taking.

Hospitality involves actively welcoming and befriending the stranger- in this case, queer persons- not as a spectacle, but as someone with inherent value, loved into being God, created in the image of God, and thus having unique gifts to offer as a human being. In a society that thrives on keeping people restrained by categorically identifying them, engaging in hospitality necessarily blurs the boundaries between people. Sackreiter and Armstrong conclude by saying that when the stranger enters the host's household, he is no longer a stranger but part of the household. This is risky not only because it upsets the status quo of the larger society but also because the stranger is not someone the host knows, and so the host takes a risk with his/her safety and security. The host takes the risk of trusting in God and trusting the stranger to recognize their common vulnerability (Sackreiter and Armstrong, 2012: p.208-209). It is the vulnerability that we all share as human beings because it provides a way to more firmly acknowledge and experience our deep connections with one another, connections that indicate a primary web of mutual dependence but that all too often become obscured by "the tyranny of normality" (Reynolds, 2008: p.15).

Additionally, practicing hospitality is taking the risk of giving up the reigns of control and expecting to be surprised not only by the appearance of the guest but also by what the guest might have to offer, which might be Christ himself (Reynolds, 2006: p.197 cited in Sackreiter and Armstrong, p.208-209). Finally, engaging in hospitality requires a mutual sharing between the host and the stranger, in which the center of the relationship is not each other but God. Put simply, "if we love God and God meets us in the stranger, then we shall naturally (and even unconsciously) love the stranger" (Reynolds, 2006: p.197). When we see each other not as strangers or people who fit into any specific category but only as people "to whom Jesus comes" (Bonhoeffer, 2003: p.170).

2.2.9 Hospitality and Otherness

Volf imagines hospitality in the form of embracing the other. In the book "*Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Justice,"* Volf calls for Christian love in the pursuit of justice. The author declares that justice without love may only serve to reinforce violence (1996). His work distinguishes between differentiation and exclusion. Differentiation is necessary, Volf writes, because "without boundaries, there would be no discrete identities, and without discrete identities, there could be no reflection to the other." Nevertheless, differentiation does not bleed over into exclusion, which is "when the violence of expulsion, assimilation, or subjugation and the indifference of abandonment replace the dynamics of taking in and keeping out." Further, "we need more adequate based on a distinction between legitimate "differentiation" and illegitimate "exclusion" and made with humility that counts with our proclivity to misperceive and misjudge because we desire to exclude" (Volf, 1996: p.68). In a separate article, "Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflection in the Wake of Ethnic Cleansing," Volf maintains that the practice of hospitality is taken as an occasion to suggest that we place the problem of otherness at the center of theological reflection on social realities.

The author's response to the problem of otherness is a theology of embrace in which the dominant categories of 'oppression and liberation' are replaced by categories of "exclusion and embrace." "To embrace others in their otherness must mean to free them from oppression and give them space to be themselves." He continues to make a point that forgiveness is the boundary between exclusion and embrace. It heals the wounds inflicted by the power acts of exclusion and breaks down the dividing wall of hostility. The author argues that the only way to peace is through embrace- that is, after the parties have forgiven and repented, for without forgiveness and repentance, embrace is a masquerade (Volf, 1993: p.16). The purpose of this chapter is to restate this message and emphasize the need to preach and practice hospitality that is welcoming of all.

2.2.10 The church embraces Izitabane individuals

Contrary to the view that rejects the existence of Izitabane, leading to ecclesial discrimination, the church needs to be an inclusive communion by accepting Izitabane individuals based on the following main points. To begin with, African faith communities must develop a more realistic understanding of the Bible and better approaches to interpreting its texts. According to Tuttle, it is crucial to view the Bible as a testimony of the struggle of human faith regarding human nature, including that relating to Izitabane issues, rather than viewing the Bible as a

prescriptive book (Tuttle, 2009). While it is essential to recognize that the narrative of human creation must be understood within the context of faith, in the process of its formulation, it was dominated by the ideology of heterosexuality (that the normal is to be male and female) and a patriarchal culture- (in which women are created as male helpers and women are taken from man). This is also to say that the God who made men and women is "queer" (Ladin, 2014: p.17). Even though God the Creator calls Himself "us," He is still a "deviant," "strange," "unusual," and "abnormal" God; in short, God is queer (Ladin, 2014: p.17 cited in Setyawan, 2022: p. 318).

2.2.11 Re-interpretation of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2

It is essential to realize the fact that Genesis 1 and 2 do not contain sexual ethics that can guide human behavior regarding sexuality, yet for a long time, they have been utilized to suppress women and Izitabane individuals. Similarly, Genesis 19:1-19 is not a text that can be used as a foundation for sexual ethics because it discusses the denial of Izitabane, but also the issue of showing hospitality to strangers. In the context of Ancient Near Eastern culture, sexual acts against foreigners in Genesis 19:1-19 were regarded as a means of degrading other people's dignity (Setyawan, 2022). Moreover, Leviticus 18:22 and 2013 ought to be scrutinized as a feature of the Holiness Law that controls religious life, especially the priestly office. Thus, this does not mean that Izitabane individuals should be rejected. According to this perspective, the prohibition of Ubutabane has more to do with the cultic rule and not with ethical and cultural issues (Pizzuto, 2008: p.166). It is essential for faith communities to seriously consider re-interpreting these texts that are frequently used by anti-Queer churches. These texts represent Paul's perspective on this kind of sexual relationship. The text does not speak about Ubutabane but about God (Heminiak, 2000: p.77).

2.2.12 Hermeneutical approaches

Biblical scholars have conducted interpretive analyses utilizing different approaches, including historical-critical and hermeneutical approaches, that underscore the role of the reader in the process of interpretation, for example, reader-response criticism. A particular historical-critical approach is utilized through language analysis to comprehend the meaning of words that typically demonstrate the rejection of Izitabane existence. In this type of interpretation, the texts of Romans 1:26-28, 1 Corinthians 6:9, and 1 Timothy 1:10, especially about the words of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, do not directly prove that they reject the existence of Izitabane. Malakoi is often translated as a male partner who is intimately associated with homosexual relationships. Arsenokoitai is frequently referred to as homosexuals or sodomites. However,

these texts cannot simply be used to affirm or condemn Izitabane sexual orientation (Pizzuto, 2008: p.168). Sexual acts that are characterized by violence, oppression, and humiliation are outlined in these texts as examples of unethical behavior (Pizzuto, 2008: p.168).

Biblical scholars emphasize, through the use of reader-response criticism, that Izitabane persons have the freedom and right to interpret biblical texts from the perspective and experience of queerness (West, 1999: p.28). This method acknowledges that the reader of the text is always a member of a particular community in a society with a distinctive history, which will ultimately influence and determine how the text is read. A community-situation approach is a common name for this approach (West, 1999: p.29). In addition to being a response to historical-critical dominance, marginalization and oppression have been the driving forces behind this. This approach underlines community situations and focuses on four systems in reading biblical texts, namely defensive stance, offensive stance, outing the Bible, and reading from the social state of being queer (West, 1999: p.29).

2.2.13 Considering the history of Ubutabane in Africa

Findings from the latest studies on the Ubutabane reveal that although heterosexuality was the most common form of sexuality in precolonial Africa, as it was elsewhere in the world, and that most communities valued fertility and reproduction, there is no doubt that same-sex copulation was also practiced (Tamale, 2013: p.35). This perspective is reinforced by Epprecht (2008) and Ward (2013), who assert that Ubutabane has always been present in Africa and also occurred in traditional Africa. Concurring with Epprecht and Ward, Murray and Roscoe argue that historical and anthropological studies show that same-sex African partnerships existed in one form or another sometime before outsiders set foot on the continent (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). According to Ilesamni, various historical paintings tracked down in ancient African walls prove that our ancestors enjoyed homo-affection, love, and sex (cited in Mnyandi, 2020: p.163). Additionally, oral tradition teaches that many African cultures dealt with individuals who did not conform to heterosexual ideals in sophisticated and compassionate ways (Epprecht, 2004). According to Tamale, in Uganda, among the *Langis*, effeminate men, or *mudoko dako*, were treated as women and could marry men. In the mighty kingdom of Buganda, it was also common knowledge that King Kakaka Nwanga had sexual relations with men (Tamale, 2013: p.). The point is that while same-sex relations have been shunned in precolonial Africa, it was not criminalized.

The vocabulary used in traditional languages to describe same-sex relationships provides additional evidence that such relationships existed in Africa before colonization. This can be seen in the terms Inkontshane, used by the Shangaan of southern Africa, and motsoalle, used to describe relationships between Basotho women (Murray & Roscoe, 1998; Epprecht, 2008). "Thigh sex," also known as maotoane in Sesotho, hlobonga in Zulu, ukumetsha in Xhosa, and gangisa in Shangaan, is a common form of sexual exploration among adolescent herding boys who spend hours alone in the field. In any case, it is critical to take note that the unique situation and encounters of such connections did not reflect same-sex relations as understood in Western countries, nor were they fundamentally predictable with what we may today portray as queer identity. The historical record contains several activities involving same-sex or "unnatural" sexual behavior in addition to those involving same-sex erotic desire (Wilson et al., 2003). These include ritual activities practiced in Angola and Namibia by a caste of male diviners who were believed to carry powerful female spirits that they would pass on to fellow men through anal sex. These practices guaranteed abundant crop yields and hunting, good health, and protection from evil spirits (Tamale, 2013).

According to Tamale, the shape and contours of African sexualities, particularly their formal aspects, were altered when colonialists arrived on the continent in the nineteenth century in search of economic opportunities and political-religion security. African sexualities were portrayed as primitive, deviant, and excessive through an elaborate "othering" process, which was crucial in laying the groundwork for the colonialists' "civilizing" mission on the "dark" continent and the establishment of the colonial empire. Following this reasoning, the sexualities of Africans were addressed in "natural" hetero and conceptive terms. Missionaries and neocolonial anthropologists later linked same-sex desire to the sophisticated Western world. Ironically, as numerous authors have pointed out, Ubutabane is not unique in Africa; instead, it is the far-off lands of Sodom and Gomorrah and numerous other religious depictions of other sexuality that are frequently cited in condemning same-sex relationships on the continent (Tamale 2013: p.36). Tamale borrows from Achmat to emphasize an important point that it is not Ubutabane that was exported to Africa from Europe but instead sanctioned homophobia that was sent out as Western systematized and religious laws (Achmat, 1993; cited in Tamale 2013: p.36).

Tamale's views were later shared by Ilesanmi, who asserted that the African continent has always been queerer than is generally acknowledged. Ilesamni adds that queer individuals in many African cultures were loved and worshipped as spirits of the divine beings, drawing

attention to the Yoruba god of thunder, Sango, who was depicted as a beautiful man who had his hair braided and accessorized like a woman and also dressed like a woman. According to Ilesamni, it was common for Azande male warriors in northern Congo to marry other male youths who served as temporary wives. In Nigeria, when there is no male child in the family, it is culturally acceptable for the eldest daughter in the family to marry another woman. The eldest daughter is viewed as the husband and will pick a man to impregnate her wife for the child to bear the family name (Ilesamni, 2013, cited in Mnyandi, 2020: p.163). Therefore, it cannot be said that same-sex practices are an import from the West, or, in other words, that same-sex practices are "un-African."

2.2.14 African Faith Communities as Community of Care

Dulles portrayed five models of the church: the church as a foundation, the mystical community, as a sacrament, as a preacher, as a servant, and as a fellowship of disciples (1990). It is vital to highlight the church model as a fellowship of disciples or as communion concerning the ecclesiological model that rejects discrimination against Izitabane persons and accepts them fully in the church community (Volf, 2002). In line with this understanding, the church is viewed not merely as a social organization but also as a community of care. This is obvious from the church membership consisting of persons of spiritual birth (Volf, 2002: p.186). This ecclesiological model follows the description in the New Testament, which starts with the calling of the disciples. In the church, believers gather in the name of Christ and are determined to let Jesus Christ direct their lives. As such, Christ's presence is not directed to the individual believer but to the whole church. The church is the mother, where the believers are dependably in the fellowship of believers (Volf, 2002: p.163). The church is a symbol of communion that the Gospel has liberated. Anyone, regardless of their background, can experience the message of this liberation. As a result, the liberated church develops into a community that rejects oppression, discrimination, and injustice (Tonstad, 2018: p.84).

According to Kang, the admission of persons in the early church did not depend on their race, gender, or social class; instead, it was based on the confession that Jesus was the incarnated God who saved and delivered human beings from their sins (2005: p.279). As a community of the redeemed, the church is an egalitarian entity that overcomes differences (Setyawan, 2022: p. 322). To put it plainly, the church is an inclusive fellowship of disciples, a new group of believers. Concerning the acceptance of the existence of Izitabane individuals, the church must first welcome, acknowledge, and treat Izitabane as fellow believers who are essential for faith. The church needs to change its mentality from homophobia to accepting and welcoming

anyone who believes in Christ and is dedicated to becoming a fellow of Christ. The church must accept everyone regardless of their sexual orientation as long as they are willing to show faith and make a commitment to follow Christ. Consequently, discrimination against Izitabane individuals goes against the fellowship of teaching. Furthermore, because Izitabane are inherently a part of families and society, the church, as an inclusive community of care, is called to not only accept their existence but also to fight for their rights in society and families.

The church, as a community of care, is obligated to follow Jesus' example in the fight for Izitabane rights, just as he advocated for the oppressed and marginalized (for example, women who were punished for adultery) and the early Christian communities accepted those who were excluded and oppressed (women and slaves). To persuade families and society that Izitabane are human beings with the same dignity as other people, the church must support Izitabane. In this regard, the church must also initiate cultural change. The church must also confront the stigmatization of Izitabane individuals, namely the need to continuously promote the message that being Isitabane is not a crime and has nothing to do with HIV/AIDS. In addition, the church must alter its ministry in inclusive ways and languages as a community of care that accepts and welcomes the existence of Izitabane. All people, including Izitabane, must be included in worship, preaching, social services, counseling, and educational services. The language utilized in these administrations welcomes and respects all believers, including Izitabane. As a community of care, the church should also encourage Izitabane members to participate in church activities like other fellowship members. However, again, God did not call his followers to become leaders of the people based on sexual orientation, but rather, based on a commitment to follow Jesus.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ENHANCING THE ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN BLACK IZITABANE WOMEN AND FAITH COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA.

In this chapter, I draw on theoretical frameworks that focus on engaging in questions about human sexuality and faith. The literature reviewed in the previous chapter suggests that the Christian church in South Africa is devastatingly homophobic, discussions about sexuality in general remain silenced, and Ubutabane is considered to be 'un-African. Through the Christian church, heteronormative becomes an organizing principle against particular sexual identities and sexual activity (Boesak, 2019). Heteronormativity is generally understood as a "theoretical concept in which patriarchy and heterosexuality are centered as the social norms and all other genders, and sexuality are cast as deviant… It maintains itself by oppressing and marginalizing certain bodies based on their certain identity categories" (Battle & Ashley, 2008: p.1-5), and its privilege is obvious in the Christian church in South Africa and Africa. The privilege occurs through a sex/gender binary, which states that sexual desire occurs only between women and men, and other forms of sexuality are categorized as 'deviant.' This privileging informs the Christian church in South Africa.

Queer theology can be understood as a way of doing theology that is rooted in Queer Theory and that critiques the binary categories of sexuality (that is, [*Ubutabane*] homosexual vs. heterosexual) and gender identity (that is, female vs. male) as socially constructed (Cheng, 2011: p.9-10). The question here is: How can queer theology be used as a tool to develop resources to enhance the church's engagement with black Izitabane women? Queer theology as a theoretical framework offers a valuable way of understanding experiences of being *Isitabane* [queer], religious, and black in a 'heterodominant' world and notes the circumstances under which gender and sexual minorities give meaning to religious violence. For example, the Christian church in South Africa often avoids addressing sexual matters and has been identified as a space that sits in tension with the rights of Izitabane. To develop appropriate interventions, we must focus on the neglected lived experiences of black Izitabane women in South Africa. This will help deconstruct traditional attitudes about normative sexuality and make space for diverse identities to emerge.

This chapter takes this approach further, examining how religion shapes and reshapes the tensions and determinations of religious black Izitabane women. The role of religion in the lives of black Izitabane women is explored. This chapter contains an embodied analytical

method that considers how certain faith practices are experienced through the body. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first section of this chapter aims to introduce Queer Theology, and its origin and development, building on a discussion of queer and queer theory. This section offers a reflection on work that affirms and celebrates *Isitabane* sexuality and advocates for black Izitabane women's inclusion in faith. The second section explores Queer Theology to develop an understanding of theology that is based on experiences of the body and theology that do not limit the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in faith.

3.1 The Emergence of Queer Theology

Queer theology advanced from queer theory, which attempts to "study both the active embracing and articulative experiences and lifestyles, and their repression, marginalization, and suppression" (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2007: p.277-278). According to Halperin, the term 'queer' is understood as critically non-heterosexual, transgressive of all heteronormativities: it is whatever is "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant… It demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative…. It does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance" (1995: p.62). Halperin explains, "It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviors, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-construction, and practices of community-for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth, and desire" (Halperin, 1995: p.62). Queer is, therefore, a practice or process of criticism, an ongoing challenge to what is considered the norm.

Patrick Cheng's "*Radical Love: Introduction to Queer Theology*" (2011) offers three possible meanings of the word "queer": "first, as an umbrella term that refers collectively to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, and other individuals who identify with non-normative sexualities and/or gender identities; second, as an intentional reclaiming of a word that previously had only negative connotations" (2011: p.3-5). Drawing on the above two definitions by Cheng, the early 1990s saw the formation of queer theory. This meaning of 'queer' developed "at the intersection of theory and activism, queer theories intended to problematize the production of dominant and normative categories of sexuality" (Schippert, 2011: p.67). According to Cheng, this definition understands sexuality and gender as constructs that are superfluous and able to be changed. This effectively allows for the erasure of labels of

heterosexual/*ubutabane* and male/female, challenging the dichotomy. As such, this third definition of queer refers to the erasing or deconstructing of boundaries concerning these categories of sexuality and gender (Cheng, 2011: p.3-6).

Queer theory is shaped in various ways through the works of the French philosopher, activist, and historian Michael Foucault (1926-1984) and the development of his ideas by Judith Butler. Foucault wrote *"A History of Sexuality"* Volume I (1976) more than a decade before the queer theory was initially articulated (Callis, 2009: p.221). In this volume, Foucault opened up a new field for thinking critically about the relationship between sexual identity and social power. Foucault generates an influential theory of sexual identity. He argues that sexuality is always situated within mediums of power, that it is always produced or constructed within specific historical practices, both discursive and institutional, and that resources to practice, both discursive and institutional, and that resource to sexuality before the law is an illusory and complicitous conceit of emancipatory sexual politics (cited in Butler, 1990: p.83-p.124). He further insists that "sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct" (Halperin, 1989: p.258). In light of Foucault's understanding of the instability of identity as something that is not fixed but has a history formed by power- and the complex political and cultural forces surrounding LGBTQ lives, a queer theory developed.

Though Foucault was being read and discussed among scholars in literary studies and philosophy departments, the political and social landscape also primed the way for queer theory to emerge as a field of analysis (Daniels, 2017: p.292). According to Stuart, the Stonewall Inn riots of 27 June 1969- "caused when the patrons of a New York bar known as a relatively safe space for the sexually marginalized resisted a routine police raid and fought back against the harassment for four days- have become the mythical and symbolic beginnings of the modern gay liberation movement" (1999: p.371). Similarly, for Jagose, the twenty-seventh of June continues to be celebrated internationally- "as Stonewall Day, a date which marks the constitution of lesbian and gay identities as a political force. Stonewall functions in a symbolic register as a convenient if somewhat spurious marker of an important cultural shift away from assimilationist policies and quietist tactics, a significant if the mythological date for the origin of the gay liberation movement" (1996: p.30). The event led to modern gay rights organizations in the United States and "symbolizes the transformation of homosexual people into lesbian and gay people as they claimed their voice, subjectivity, moral agency and right to self-definition

and determination. It also symbolizes a rejection of heterosexual normativity and the pathologizing of homosexuality" (Stuart, 2003: p.7).

3.2 The Founders of Queer Theory

Teresa de Lauretis, a critical theorist and a professor of the history of consciousness at the University of California, has been credited with coining the term "queer theory" in 1990. The term began to circulate and quickly gained momentum within academic circles after a conference that was themed "*Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*" called by De Lauretis. De Lauretis claims that the goal of the conference was to articulate "the terms in which lesbian and gay sexualities may be understood and imagined as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization, counteracting dominant discourses with other constructions of the subject in culture" (1991: p.iii). During the conference De Leuretis criticized heterosexuality's normative power and argues "that homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal concerning a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined either by opposition or by homology. In other words, it is no longer to be seen either as merely transgressive or deviant vis-à-vis proper, natural sexuality (i.e., institutionalized reproductive sexuality), according to the older, pathological model, or as just another, optional "lifestyle," according to the model of contemporary North American pluralism" (1991: p.iii). She suggested that *Izitabane* men's and women's sexualities should be studied, not as deviations of heterosexuality, but on their terms.

In 1990, two books were published by women deeply influenced by Foucault. These books herald the birth of "queer theory." In her book, "Epistemology of the Closet" (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explored the opposing discourses around sexuality in twentieth-century Western thought. The book opens with a solid claim: "Epistemology of the Closet proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in modern Western culture are structured- indeed fractured- by a chronic, new endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century (1990: p.1). This book was especially influential during the early days of queer theory following the work of Foucault on power, history, and identity. According to Stuart, Sedgwick uses literary criticism to analyze and question dominant discourses around sexuality in modern Western thought. "She identified two sets of conflicting discourses: the essentialist 'minoritizing' understanding of homosexuality versus the 'universalizing' understanding, which regards sexual desire as a spectrum that allows for choice and a separatist attitude to gender versus an attitude that celebrates the fluidity between gender" (Stuart, 2017: p.9). Her analysis drew attention to the

fact that modern *Ubutabane* is not a stable, coherent identity but incoherent and contested (Stuart, 2003: p.9).

Judith Butler, in her book, "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," also published in 1990, is also widely considered a founding text in queer theory. Butler set out to explore why gender has been such a troublesome issue in feminism. She utilized Michael Foucault's (1926-1984) "method of genealogical critique, which is not interested in the origins of truths of things but in the reasons why people search for the origins and causes of sexual desire and the political implications and effects of such a search" (Stuart, 2017: p.9). Butler challenges the idea that our gendered, sexed, and sexual identities are not fixed essences but formed and performed, often unconsciously (Daniels, 2017: p.296). Agreeing with Sedgwick, Butler argues that our identities are socially constructed and maintained for the sake of authorizing particular social and political institutions. She maintains that we learn to become our "gender" by following the gender script that our culture hands out to us, and each performance reinscribes that gender upon our bodies (Butler, 1990, cited in Stuart, 1999: p.376). For Butler, "What qualifies as "gender" is itself already a question that attests to a pervasively normative operation of power, a fugitive operation of "what will be the case" under the rubric of "what is the case" (1990: p.xxi).

According to Butler, the point of *"Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity"* is to show that the "naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality. To the extent the gender norms (ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies, ideals, and rules of proper and improper masculinity and femininity, many of which are underwritten by racial codes of purity and taboos against miscegenation) establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be "real," they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given the legitimate expression" (Butler, 1990: xxiii). Butler goes on to say that "if there is a positive normative task in "*Gender Trouble*," it is to insist upon the extension of this legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal, and unintelligible" (Butler, 1990: xxiii). She explains that "gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative that is constituting the identity it is purported to be" (1990: p.33).

Another resource for understanding queer theory is *"Queer Theory"* (2012), published by Laurel Schneider. The essay traces the development of queer theology from its roots in liberation theology and poststructuralist gender theory. In this essay, Schneider detailed queer theory as concerned principally with cultural deployments of power through the social construction of sexuality and gender. Like Butler, Schneider maintains that queer theory seeks to disrupt notions of fixed sexuality and gender by approaching post-structuralist critiques of 'natural' identities. Schneider further maintains that "in theoretical terms, 'queer' has come to denote a hermeneutical position similar to other late-twentieth-century theories such as third-wave feminism and postcolonialism. These theories all aim to challenge or deconstruct once-stable identities such as homosexuality, heterosexuality, race, nationality, woman, and man. For Schneider, "what queer theory principally provides is an intellectual framework for treating sexuality as a meaningful site of difference that could illuminate texts and traditions in helpful if sometimes unsettling ways" (2012: p.206-212).

To summarize, queer theory questions the idea of fixed identities and recognizes that various forces of power historically and socially shape identities. It emphasizes that social justice involves challenging and resisting the notion of fixed identity and seeing sociocultural norms for what they are. Queer theory suggests taking a position within marginalized groups or at least outside of the boundaries of "normality" (Britzman, 1995). From its earliest iterations, queer theory challenged norms that reproduced inequalities and, at its best, sought to understand how sexuality intersected with gender, race, class, and other social identities to maintain social hierarchies. A key and important concept in queer theory is the idea of "heteronormativity," "the belief that heterosexuality is and should be the preferred system of sexuality and informs the related male or female, binary understanding of gender identity and expression." The queer theory, therefore, "provides a lens for extracting the various factors that feed into heteronormativity and for understanding how structural elements contribute to certain individuals and families being entitled over others" (Few-Demo et at., 2016: p.76). The above discussion provides a valuable starting point for queer theology as the theoretical framework utilized in this study.

3.3 Queer Theology

Queer Theology, "then, is properly identified as that theology which has Foucaldian and Butlerian understanding of the free-floating relation between sex, gender, and desire and seeks to reflect theologically from that perspective" (Stuart, 1999: p.376). It attempts to expose "the otherwise concealed and denied presence of gay and lesbian protagonists and activities" (Edgar

& Sedgwick, 2007: p.278), and asks "fundamental questions about the political nature and even coherence of the supposedly normal and dominant categories of heterosexuality" within the context of the church (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2007: p.278). Patrick Cheng (2011) offers a helpful three-part definition of Queer Theology: first, Queer Theology is LGBT people 'talking about God'. In other words, Queer Theology is a short-hand term for theology that is done by and for LGBT people. Second, it is LGBT people 'talking about God' in a "self-consciously transgressive" manner, especially in terms of challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender. The third definition is 'talk about God,' which challenges and deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity (Cheng, 2011: p.9-10). Cheng's definition of Queer Theology is the most relevant to the objectives of this study, given the emphasis it places on challenging binary distinctions and erasing boundaries.

Cornwell argues that Queer Theology rises to resist and challenge societal norms, affirms those of the LGBT community who have had a long history of being condemned by the traditional Christian church, and aims to interrogate "the 'biblical truth' about human sexuality" (Cornwall, 2011: p.10). Queer theologians draw to the teachings of the Bible and the Christian church for inspiration rather than inventing a whole new religion. The boundaries surrounding gender and sexuality are then questioned or eliminated using a new interpretation of those beliefs (Jones, 2013). Queer Theology helps us to find resources to challenge and disrupt the reality of accepted sexuality within the context of the Christian faith. It also offers possibilities or tools to help us better understand how and where "unusual" sexualities fit within a Christian view and that queer people have a right to serve God and participate in their faith communities without fear of being discriminated against. Isherwood explains, "queer theology is a political and sexual queering of theology that goes beyond the gender paradigms of the early years of feminist theology and also transcends the fixed assumptions of lesbians and gay theology" (2011: p.423).

3.4 The Development of Queer Theology

The late Marcella Althaus-Reid (1997; 2000 & 2004) is possibly the theologian most closely associated with queer theology (Althaus & Isherwood, 2007). Her theological work may be best described by the title of one of her books: *"Indecent Theology: Theological Pervasions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*" (2000), where she reflects on sexuality from the perspective of Argentinian liberation theology. Althaus-Reid tries to comprehend God regarding those who work and lead lives that society views as ungodly or unholy. Althaus-Reid begins by critiquing and challenging orthodoxy ("decent theology"), as well as mainstream liberation and feminist

theologies, to present a God on the side of the marginalized (p.174 cited in Hawthorne & Auga, 2017: p.378-379). Later in the book, she turns to sexual fetishes as a resource for doing theology that is liberating. She proposes doing a theology "without underwear" to recover the voices and experiences of those who are economically, racially, and sexually marginalized (2000: p.1-6). She argues that "only in the longing for a world of economic and sexual justice together, and not subordinated to one another, can the encounter with the divine take place. But this is an encounter to be found at the crossroads of desire when one dares to leave the ideological order of the heterosexual pervasive normative. This is an encounter with indecency and with the indecency of God and Christianity" (2000: p.200).

Black *Izitabane* women are considered unethical, unChristian, and sometimes un-African by their faith communities. Since queer theology is a theology for *Izitabane* persons seeking to recognize and challenge some of the stigma or prejudice within the faith context, this means that it operates as an indecent theology. Both methods take place at the margins of Christian decency and not at the center of theological discourses conversing with power, and both take the body experiences of marginalized people as the starting point of doing theology (Althaus-Reid in Althaus-Reid & Isherwood, 2007). Both require transgressing traditional, political, and social structures. For Althaus-Reid, our bodies and our desires are important when doing theology: as she writes, "The Argentinian theologian would like to take off her underwear to write theology with feminist honesty, not forgetting what it is to be a woman when dealing with theological and political categories" (2000: p.200). In the introduction of the book, Althaus-Reid writes: "Should a woman keep her pants on in the streets or not?" (2001: p.1). It is through this short example that Althaus-Reid proposes doing a theology "without underwear" in order to recover the voices and experiences of those who are economically, racially, and sexually marginalized (2000: p.1-6).

Indecent theology, influenced by liberation theology, expands the discussion of sexuality and theology. Indecent theology, she explains, is "a theology that problematizes and undresses the mythical layers of multiple oppressions in Latin America, a theology which, finding its points of departure at the crossroads of liberation theology and queer thinking, will reflect on economic and theological oppression with passion and imprudence" (2000: p.2). According to Althaus-Reid, indecent theology, enables us to "find or simply recognize God sitting amongst us, at any time, in any gay bar or in the home of a camp friend who decorates her living room as a chapel and does not leave her rosary at home when going to a salsa bar" (2003: p.4). In and through indecency, she explains, we find God, freeing God and thus ourselves from

oppressive norms- the freedom that must be continually fought for and that must be economic, gendered, and sexual (Daniels, 2016: p.305-306). It is from this perspective of indecent theology that I have chosen to represent the struggles of marginalized black *Izitabane* women in African faith communities while embracing God's place in the lives of black *Izitabane* women. In doing so, I negotiate a safe space within African faith communities in which black *Izitabane* women can affirm both their sexual identity and their Christian identity.

Althaus-Reid's other book, "*The Queer God*" (2003), further develops a conception of God outside of traditional Christian thought to challenge the oppressive nature of heteronormative orthodoxy. According to Althaus-Reid, this process requires honesty about sexual experiences, reading them against the grain of heteronormative institutions of the church, and deep engagement with queer theory and non-heteronormative theologies (cited in Schneider & Roncolato, 2012). Althaus-Reid's intention in this book was "to find God's face in loving relationships outside the borders of decent theology, and in the context of the Other as the poor and excluded. Promiscuity as a queer theological category makes us think about love and also economics. She posits that by queering theological, "we mean the deliberate questioning of heterosexual experience and thinking which has shaped our understanding of theology, the role of the theologian and hermeneutics'' (2003: p.3-4). In her essay "*Queering Theology*" (2004) Althaus-Reid described queer theology as "a movement and an alliance of people who question the contextual construction of theology… it takes seriously the queer project of deconstructing heterosexual epistemology and presuppositions in theology but also unveiling the different, the suppressed face of God amidst it" (2004: p.5).

Since "*Indecent Theology*," there have been several works that have examined Queer Theology from a more systematic perspective (Cheng, 2011: p.37). In 1993, Robert Goss, a former Jesuit priest and gay activist, published a book titled "Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto," where he places Foucault's theory and methodology at the center of his theological framework. In the book, Goss aimed to free those with marginalized sexualities and gender identities from the shadows of the church. He considers a God who affirms and embraces all bodies for who they are, regardless of their sexuality. Goss takes a look through church history to expose how Jesus has been de-politicized and de-sexualized. In doing so, he imagines Jesus as a queer Christ for all outsiders to demonstrate how Jesus himself went to the margins of society and took account of the knowledge found there. He emphasizes that this knowledge, found at the margins, might better inform us of who we are as sexual human beings. His work

offers *Izitabane* persons a voice at the theological table and shows that one can be both *Isitabane* and Christian.

Elizabeth Stuart, another prominent queer theologian in this field, provides a synthetic survey of *Izitabane* men and women theology. Stuart's "*Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with Critical Difference*" (2003) develops from the work of figures such as Michael Foucault (The Construction of Sexuality), Carter Heyward (lesbian Women Theology), and Judith Butler (gender construction) called believers to move beyond a focus on gender and sexual identity. Stuart suggests that queer men and queer women, as well as their opponents in the churches, have too quickly adopted the modern construction of sexual identity and cut themselves off from a Christian tradition that is far more "queer" in that it refuses to accept the stability of "gender" and sexual desire. She argues that, instead, queer Christians should embrace the early Christian tradition, which teaches that ultimately gender and sexual identities have no importance. Stuart further argues that there is a place for a queer theology that seeks to subvert conventional thinking on gender, sexuality, and embodiment (Hegdes, 2011: p.212). However, importantly, her theory, in contradistinction to much within the broad spectrum of queer women, queer men, feminist, and gender theory and theology, is not primarily a discourse of or about sexuality and gender (Stuart, 2003: p.102). Instead, it seeks to find a way to liberate all people from their notions of embodiment rather than to seek rights and a place for some section of people (2003, 2003: p.89).

We may say that it seeks to liberate us from the bonds of sexualized discourse and is described by Stuart as "an anti-identity theology" based on an "unnatural development" from "the fissures within gay and lesbian theology" (Stuart, 2003: p.89). For Stuart, while queer men and queer women- and we may add feminist- theologies interrogated theology through theories of gender and sexuality, queer theology returns to being theology by interrogating these concepts from the lens of the Christian tradition (Stuart, 2003: p.102), where, in particular, the new identity found in baptism questions all of our previous assumptions of who we are (Stuart, 2003: p.108). A key aspect of Stuart's theology is the concept of hospitality (Stuart and Isherwood, 1998: p.57-62), which she believes is central to the Christian tradition and queer theology (Cheetham, 2011: p.212). Another critical aspect of Stuart's thought is the way religious thought, in her case, the Christian tradition, allows standard identities to be blurred or transgressed, that is, as she puts it: "Christianity is essentially queer in its attitude to identity" (2003: p.101). Stuart employs Marcella Althaus-Reid, whose method of "indecent theology" seeks to counter the mainstream ethos of liberation theology in terms of its continuation of gender roles. From

Althaus-Reid's work, Stuart cites the reference to Santa Librada, a figure who fuses Jesus and Mary and has ambiguous gender, whom both represent a "transvestite epistemology" and is the patron of those on the run from the police (Stuart, 2003: p.102), making him/her a rather unusual "saint."

Elizabeth Stuart outlines three characteristics of Queer Theology that we find to be helpful. First, "it rejects a metaphysic of substance" and deconstructs gender and sexual identities. Second, "it sees Christianity as engaging in Queer Theory long before there was such a thing; it has always subverted the mainstream discourse of self and gender and identity. This is particularly evident in the incarnation and Trinitarian reflections that show that Christ always stood outside the norm, troubled the categories, and essentially queered the world. Third, "it uses the breakdown of the metanarratives to attempt to re-enchant the world. If sexuality is unstable, so is all 'reality' and doctrines and stories" (2003: p.102). Fourth, though it begins with sexuality, queer theology is not really about sexuality in the way queer men and queer women's theology is. Queer theology approaches its work with the insight that sex and sexuality are not stable categories. From that starting point, it progresses to the ontological structure of relationality and flux, as well as an intuition about the subsequent queerness of divinity (Stuart, 2003: p.4).

Others, like Patrick Cheng, use previous queer Christologies to construct a Christology of radical love. His book "*Radical Love: Introduction to Queer Theology*" (2011) calls for a dissolution of binary categories/erasing boundaries in order to liberate persons that are commonly rejected or condemned by religion. Cheng argues that queer theology is built on a foundation of radical love. He writes: "Radical love, I contend, is a love so extreme that it dissolves our existing boundaries, whether they are boundaries that separate us from other people, that separate us from preconceived notions of sexuality and gender identity, or that separate us from God" (p.x). That is, radical love lies at the heart of both Christian theology and queer theory. Thus, queer theology challenges traditional Christian theology to eliminate boundaries of essentialist groupings of sexuality and gender identity (Cheng, 2015: p.154 - 158). It draws upon experience as a source for theology. It is premised upon the belief that God acts within the specific contexts of our lives, and experiences have been excluded from traditional theological discourse. Thus, queer experience is an important, if not critical, source for doing theology from the queer perspective.

In "*Queering Christianity: Finding a Place at the Table for LGBTQI Christians*" (2013), Cheng, in collaboration with Shore-Goss, Bohache, and West, examines the history and contemporary state of *Izitabane* [queer] theology, examining its relationship to traditional Christian policies, practices, and theology. The authors draw from their own lived experiences providing examples of the impact of exclusion on queer individuals and also giving examples of inclusion and its impact. The book lays the groundwork for dialogue between traditional churches and adherents of *Izitabane* [queer] theology. Cheng et al. offer practical suggestions for Christian congregations that wish to put aside exclusionary practices and policies. They propose "the incorporation of inclusive language for worship and the inclusive lectionary and bible for scriptural readings," arguing that the inclusion of queer-identifying religious bodies and inclusive language "undermines some of the mimetic heteronormative worship prevalent in most churches that reinforce residual patriarchal theologies. It subverts the misogyny in the traditional masculine language in the lectionaries, prayer books, and hymnals" (Cheng, 2013: p.15-16). According to Cheng et al., this mission of inclusion is not just the integration of queer-identifying religious bodies into a heteronormative Christianity; instead, its mission is to include the widest diversity of queer-identifying religious bodies into a queer Christian praxis of faith as well as the respectful inclusion of heterosexuals into a community where all differences are welcomed because we are all the beloved children of God. This inclusive vision breaks down binaries of heteronormative Christianity by establishing the common ground of God, welcoming all equally to the table, and celebrating our unique differences as gifts brought to the worship community (2013: p.15-16).

Gay theologian Gerald Loughlin articulates another contribution of queer theology in his 2007 book, "*Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*." It is a thought-provoking collection of essays by theologians exploring the intersection of theology, sexuality, and gender identity. In his introduction, Loughlin states that Christianity, as well as the study of it (theology), is radically queer. It has always been a queer thing…. For theology runs counter to a world given over to material consumption, that understands itself as 'accidental,' without any meaning other than that which it gives to itself, and so without any fundamental meaning at all" (Loughlin, 2007: p.7). For Loughlin, to name theology as queer "is to invoke 'queer' as the strange or odd, the thing that doesn't fit in." Loughlin explains that "theology does not fit the modern world; and, if it did fit in too snugly it would be forgetting the strangeness of its undertaking; to think 'existence' concerning the story of a first-century scholar" (p.7-9). Loughlin follows the lead of several queer and non-queer theologians who understand the radical change of God as queer

in the incarnation of Christ (cited in Shore-Goss, Bohache, Cheng & West, 2013: p.11). His work explores "in greater depth the queerness of and in Christian lives, Christian community (the church), tradition, the origins of faith, modern history, and doctrine" (Daniels, 2016: p.300).

Over the past decade, a growing number of queer scholarships within the African landscape have developed that apply the sources and strategies of queer theory to explain how non-normative sexualities and genders are constructed, represented, and lived in communities across the continent, including in relation to religion and faith communities (Matebeni, 2014; Msibi, 2011; Tamale, 2011; Epprecht 2004 & 2008; van Klinken & Phiri, 2015; West et al. 2016 in Reygan, 2016). These scholars have also helped explore the potential for developing queer theology in Africa. Queer scholars in Africa have adopted the term "queer" and used it as an entry point for understanding the vulnerabilities of *Izitabane* Africans. For example, West explains that "though we have taken account of queer theory and queer theology in its Euro-American forms, we have been intent on discerning what queering sexuality might mean in and for African contexts. The neoliberal (in both economic and theological terms) individualized notions of queer theology that tend to predominate in Euro-American discourse are inadequate to African contexts". West goes on to say that for African context, "the intersection of postcolonialism and queer theory is a more productive nexus than the intersection of postmodernism and queer theory" (West, 2018: p.127-128).

According to Ekine and Abbas, the term queer in the African context "underscores a perspective that embraces gender and sexual plurality and seeks to transform, overhaul and revolutionize African order rather than seek to assimilate into oppressive hetero-patriarchal-capitalist frameworks" (2013: p.3 cited in (van Klinken, 2018: p.502). Queer theology than "build on, and engages with, African traditions of liberation theology, specifically applying these issues of sexuality" (West cited van Klinken, 2018: p.205). Van Klinken commenting on this in the context of his study on the place of religion within African faith spaces, adds that the vital principle of liberation theology is granting an epistemological privilege to the poor, and similarly, in queer theology is to grant an epistemological privilege to people with non-normative gender and sexual identities (van Klinken, 2018: p.205). In "*Autobiographical Storytelling and African Narrative Queer Theology*" (2018), Adrian Van Klinken discusses the theological legitimacy of *Ubutabane's* desire in the African context. He clearly emphasizes the importance of writing and creating a theology that goes further than the current dominant hegemonic theology that professes homophobic discourse.

His other work on gay communities of faith in Zambia, titled "In the Image of God": Reconstructing and Developing a Grassroots African Queer Theology from Urban Zambia" (2015), focuses on creating an alternative and positive theology. Van Klinken interrogates current understandings of the *Imago Dei* that either ignore sexuality or exclude same-sex loving people in African theology. These studies pursue strategies for rethinking and normalizing Ubutabane desires within Christianity, based mainly on interpreting *Image Dei* and God as radical love. In 2016, Davids, Matyila, Sithole, and van der Walt published "*Stabanisation*," a discussion paper about disrupting backlash by reclaiming Izitabane voices in the African church landscape. The paper begins by critically examining the African contextual faith landscape and reflecting on examples of both progress and emerging backlash regarding the full inclusion of LGBTI people in African communities (2016: p.1). The authors propose "*Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology*." Similar to queer theology, "*Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology*" calls for theology by LGBTI people and for LGBTI people in Africa- "in the process, disrupting the traditional status of authoritative voices when it comes to theological discourse as well as the dominant direction of theological reflection and engagement" (2016: p.1).

Its purpose is to engage with the backlash of *Izitabane* people by reclaiming the term "*Izitabane*" which has frequently been used in a discriminative manner to undermine and shame *Izitabane* people. *Isitabane* (singular) or *Izitabane* (plural) is the Zulu word most frequently used in communal spaces to discriminate, undermine, and shame Izitabane people. Just like the word "queer," the word "Isitabane" is negatively perceived in our society and connotes the derogatory elements that fuel discrimination as it undermines the dignity of a human being and constitutes a dehumanizing stance. *Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology* calls for theological reflections done by those starting from the lived experiences of those who often negatively identify in the African context with the term *Isitabane*. "In the process, disrupting the traditional status of authoritative voices when it comes to theological discourse as well as the dominant direction of theological reflection and engagement." In the process of doing theology, the authors broadly propose that "*Izitabane Zingabantu Ubuntu Theology*" calls for an embodied reclaiming of all that is life-affirming within faith landscapes, re-imagining community and the engagement with the sources of faith and remembering communal sacramental identity (Davids et al., 2019: p.2-p.10).

West, van der Walt & Kaoma, in their article "*When faith does violence: Reimagining Engagement between churches and LGBTI Groups on Homophobia in Africa*" (2016), propose

that the theological process shaped by the inclusion of *Izitabane* persons and their lived experiences is essential to the development of queer theology in Africa given that religion is often not a safe for sexual and gender minorities. These authors emphasize that "we cannot do theology without these realities. Putting it differently, rather than calling for the development of a new theology of sexuality and/or ties (an object to be produced), the call is for the development of a sexual theology appropriating as its starting point the embodied lived experiences of minority sexualities (a theological process)" (West et al., 2016: p.2). Furthermore, these authors suggest that we must address both the Bible and the toxic texts used against *Ubutabane* and the Bible in general. Borrowing from Lings (2013), West, Van der Walt & Kaoma argues that "rereading the toxic so-called *Ubutabane* texts demythologizes them and enables queer Christianity to talk back to the Christian establishment" (p.3). Central to much of their argument is a faith that moves beyond homophobic violence. They insist on the reclaiming of the body in the process of doing theology and appropriating the body as a site of revelation (West et al., 2016: p.5).

The development of queer theology in South Africa, while relatively recent, has had fertile liberatory soil to nurture it both from the years of anti-apartheid theological struggle and in the South African Constitution, found on the principles of human dignity and equality for all and with a transformative approach to correcting discriminatory practices of the past and preventing future discrimination. The scholars and theologians cited above are just a sample of many who have paved the way for the study of embodied religion by interrogating and resisting the normalization of power, gender, and sexuality. They have done the complex and careful work of examining how power produces and reinforces norms that shape our identities and mapping the way that power works through various religious beliefs and institutions. Through the use of Queer Theory, they have managed to take dominant Christian discourses which render *Ubutabane* sinful, sick, and harmful to the common good and transform it into a theology that argues that a person's sexuality provides the point of contact between God and themselves (Stuart, 2017). They have helped expose the norms and ethos of Christianity that limit Izitabane people's participation in faith and show how to create interpretations of the Bible based on the lived experiences of *Izitabane*-identifying religious bodies.

Some draw on queer theory and queer theology to contest the idea that religious identity and *Isitabane* sexuality are inherently contradictory. South African queer theologies have helped reshape *Izitabane's* engagement away from a secular, tow-down Western discourse to open opportunities for a bottom-up intersectional approach around social justice that drinks from the

wells of South African contextual and prophetic theology. In an African context, this is an essential shift since the *Izitabane* struggle is often positioned by conservative religious voices as being a Western imposition. The work done by scholars such as West, Van Der Walt, and Kaoma challenges those in power in the church to enable Izitabane-identifying religious bodies to engage with God.

3.4.1 Four Sources of Queer Theology: *Queering the Scripture and Tradition*

The quest for transformation and equality in queer theology has emerged in recent decades through the implementation of four areas of Christian influence used mainly through Protestants and Catholics, namely: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience (Canales, 2022: p.7). According to Cheng, each of these aspects "is important because, on the one hand, theology has never been simply about reading the Bible Literally (that is, scripture) nor simply about what the church authorities have taught (that is, tradition). On the other hand, theology has never been simply a matter of drawing upon philosophy (that is, reason) or equated with the human experience of the divine (that is, experience). Rather, theology is a synthesis of all four sources, and each of these sources acts as a "check and balance" for the other three" (2011: p.11). In this section, I focus on three primary sources of queer theology, namely Scripture, Tradition, and Experience, and how to use these three sources to engage with issues of sexuality in the African faith context. My primary interest is the way the church is embodied and felt through these sources and how the mechanism of religion can play with the notion of 'communities of care' for black *Izitabane* women seeking to reconcile perceived oppositions between Christianity and Isitabane identity.

3.4.1.1 Queer Scripture and Queer Tradition

The church forms from the ground in which scripture and tradition emerge and together, in turn, make up a coherent source of revelation, the supreme norm for the life of the church. From an orthodox point of view, the church, Scripture, and Tradition are seen as a comprehensive unity with interdependent parts (Stylianopoulos, 2008: p.21). Florovsky explains that the "Scripture is given to us in tradition… Tradition was, in fact, the authentic interpretation of Scripture. Moreover, in this sense, it was co-extensive with Scripture… The tradition was actually "Scripture rightly understood." Moreover, Scripture was the only primary and ultimate canon of Christian truth… Scripture belonged to the church, and it was only in the church, within the community of right faith, that Scripture could be adequately understood and correctly interpreted. It was not enough just to read and to quote Scriptural words- the true meaning, or intent, of scripture, taken as an integral whole, had to be elicited.

One had to grasp" (Florovsky, 1972: p.48-76). Tradition, on the other hand, is defined by McGrath as "an active process of reflection by which theological or spiritual insights are valued, assessed, and transmitted from one generation to another" (2016: p.219). According to McGrath, the "Scripture" was silent on several points - God then "arranged for a second source of revelation to supplement this deficiency: a stream of unwritten tradition. This tradition is passed down within the church from one generation to another" (McGrath, 2016: p.220).

The Scripture has been used throughout the existence of the Christian church to condemn *Ubutabane* and oppress Izitabane persons (Cheng, 2011). The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1-9 is a prime example. The story is often argued to be a text that condemns same-sex acts: Genesis 19 "describes the men of the city attempting to forcibly have sex with two angelic visitors to the city, who have appeared in the form of men" (Allberry, 2017: p.1). Within the African context, African religious leaders opposed to *Ubutabane* have employed this scripture as proof that *Ubutabane* is "un-African and un-Christian" and as the basis for anti-LGBT rhetoric or homophobia. It "has been that Sodom was destroyed (or at least one of the reasons it was destroyed was) because of the *Ubutabane* desire of the men in that city who wanted to rape Lot's guests (who were angels sent to destroy Sodom)" (Harshman, 2017: p.3). It is suggested that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because God wanted to get rid of *Isitabane* persons who infested the city (Gunda, 2010).

It has also been observed that "the destruction that comes upon Sodom immediately following this incident [of wanting to know Lot's visitors] implies that these *Ubutabane* intentions of the men of Sodom were responsible for it" (Pashapas, 1998). Another scripture is found in Leviticus 18:22, 20-13: 18: 22 reads, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman," and 20:13 prescribes the punishment in Israel for breaking the code, stating, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." Leviticus 18:22 is viewed as the most straightforward verse on the condemnation of *Ubutabane* activity in the Old Testament. The above Scriptures, also referred to as "text of terror" or "clobber passages," are widely used by many Christians to condemn *Ubutabane* through the interpretation of the bible, stating that the Bible is evident in its position (Gunda, 2010; Togarasei, 2009).

Queer theology aims to re-claim, re-read, and re-interpret these and other Scriptures in a creative way that moves LGBT persons from the margins; and challenges the dominant heteronormative interpretation of the Bible (Frateur, 2018: p.42). It "destabilizes dominant

conceptions of what the Bible claims to say" about *Ubutabane* (Hornsby & Stone, 2011: p.3). For example, the narrative in Genesis 19 has been reclaimed and re-interpreted by queer biblical scholars. Queer biblical scholars and theologians argue that the narrative is not about the condemnation of *Ubutabane*. It is to condemn the breaking of the hospitality code (Robert, 2019: p.60). In the case of Leviticus 18:22, 20-13: 18: 22, Tonstad claims that: "the expressions of same-sex eroticism that appear to be condemned in Scripture are not discussing what we know now as *Ubutabane* or queerness. Leviticus is concerned about upholding boundaries between pure and impure in general and draws those lines in places that are generally unfamiliar or unconvincing to most of us…. Levitical codes worry about boundary transgression: things that do not belong to one category or another are generally forbidden". Tonstad also reminds us that Levitical codes are "written within a patriarchal context in which women (and women's sexuality) are assumed to belong to men, rape can lead to marriage, and giving birth renders a woman unclean" (2018: p.20).

In addition, queer biblical scholars turn to other Bible Scriptures often overlooked in this discussion of same-sex relationships. The examples of David and Jonathan (found in Sam, 20:16), Ruth, and Naomi, who shared an intense commitment, are especially popular among queer ancestors. Miller explains that "after defeating Goliath, David met a man, Jonathan, about whom he would later lament, "Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women." For Miller, "David's words express deep love and devotion, ensuring that he, along with Jonathan, would continue to slay giants long after he perished. At present, queer biblical interpreters use David's lament for Jonathan and other biblical passages to argue that queer biblical characters exist" (2017: p.42-43). Tonstad similarly opines that David loved Jonathan with love surpassing the love of women, and David was loved and chosen by God. As a further example, Tonstad reported that Ruth and Naomi are two women who share an intense commitment to one another.

According to Tonstad, some think Ruth swears an oath to Naomi that where Naomi goes, Ruth will follow, thus creating at least an antecedent for a vowed Izitabane women relationship. Jesus' most intimate relationship was with another man, the man whom Jesus loved (2018: p.24). Tonstad further suggests that finding antecedents in biblical and Christian symbolic histories can reassure LGBT Christians and nonbinary people that what Nancy Wilson calls "our gay and lesbian tribal texts" has always been part of the history of the people of God (2018: p.24). To this effect, queer biblical scholars recognize that "the Scripture seems to hold

strong emotional bonding between members of the same sex to be the cause of celebration, not fear" (Nelson, 1994: p.80).

Rereading these texts also offers other more redemptive interpretive options. For example, if Genesis 18-19 'really' is about hospitality and not *Ubutabane*, then perhaps this text can be read for inclusion of hospitality towards strangers' sexualities. At the very list, the text speaks to the role of protecting the stranger from the established culture of the time. Just as Abram and later Lot defended the stranger from abuse, he also negotiated the protection of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Regardless of where the church sees itself in that story, the need to stand with the vulnerable is critical to biblical interpretation and appropriation. However, if we are to move beyond homophobia, we must not allow the churches to determine which biblical texts are about homosexuality. Biblical texts that speak to inclusion must be appropriated, as must, for example, the inclusive silence of Jesus on *Ubutabane* … By reclaiming the biblical basis of our struggles, we re-experience God anew in the context of the cries of those oppressed because of their particular sexuality (West et al., 2016: p.3-4).

Additionally, queer theology draws upon tradition- that is, church history as well as the teachings of the church in creative ways (Cheng, 2011: p.14). Like scripture, tradition is seen as historically anti-queer. The traditional Christian understanding of marriage defines it as a divine union created between one man and one woman, and this context is ideal for family life (Bentley, 2012: p.1). Many African faith communities share this attitude. However, over the past decades, different queer biblical scholars and theologians have revisited Christian traditions from an LGBT perspective, using "the same theological categories in the same manner as T-theology: examining church history, studying various theological dogmas and doctrines, and trying to discern the *sensus fidelium*" (Canales, 2022: p.8). Works by scholars such as Derrick Bailey have been used several times by different scholars to address the teachings and history of the Christian church. In his book "*Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*" (1955), Bailey challenges the traditionally negative view of the Christian theological tradition toward LGBT people (cited in Cheng, 2011: p.14).

Another book by John Boswell, published 25 years later "*Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*" (1988), is used to demonstrate that Christianity was not widely homophobic in the early church, with anti-gay ideas only taking root in the church in the 12th and 13th centuries (Cheng, 2011: p.15). The opposition that did arise during the third to sixth centuries was not principally theologically. Instead, it was mainly based on the demise of urban culture,

the increased government regulation of personal morality, and general church pressures toward asceticism. "Following this period of opposition, however, ecclesiastical hostility to homosexuality largely disappeared once again. For some centuries, there was no particular Christian antagonism toward homosexuality, and legal prohibitions were rare…. Once again, though, hostility appeared late in the twelfth century as part of the general intolerance of minority groups and their presumed association with religious heresies. A closer look at the tradition tells us that there were periods of remarkable acceptance" (cited in (Nelson, 1992: p.63-64).

In 1994, Boswell published another book, "*Same-sex Unions in Premodern Europe*." In this book, Boswell claimed that queer rites were sanctioned throughout the history of the Christian church before being lost to homophobia. He also discusses numerous examples of traditions that involve *Izitabane* couples. By claiming the Christian tradition, scholars such as Boswell and Bailey have located Izitabane experiences directly "within the history and teachings of the church. As such, we can draw upon this work as a source for constructing our own theologies" (Cheng, 2011: p.16). Queer theology calls for a careful reading of the Scripture and the church's Tradition to better understand Christian teachings on same-sex relationships. The Scripture is read in a specific sexual way that departs from hetero-normativity; moments of sexual resistance in church Traditions are identified, or even alternative church traditions; the profound homophobia of theology and the sexual assumptions in doctrines are exposed, and neglected areas of attention in theological discussions are discovered (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood, 2007: p.308-309). Queer theologians understand gender variance and queer desire as something that has always been present in human history, including in faith tradition. As such, the assumed heterosexuality that frames theologies is questioned while arguing for the potential of "dissident, marginalized epistemologies in thinking God," which can transform how Christianity and the church are understood and practiced (Althaus-Reid, 1999: p.271).

3.4.1.2 Queer Experience

Another critical source of queer theology comes from the lived experiences of queer Christians. As is the case with other contextual theologies, queer theology is based on the belief that God acts in the specific context of our lives and experiences, despite the fact that *Izitabane's* lives and experiences have been excluded from traditional theological discourse (Cheng, 2011: p.18). As such, queer experiences of encountering God are significant in understanding theology and the making of theology from a queer perspective and within their social context (Isherwood and Stuart, 1998: p.10). In recent years, queer theologians such as Carter Heyward

(1989), Laurel Dykstra (2000), and Robert Shore-Goss (2000) have shared their perspectives on user experience as a source of theology. Heyward, an openly Isitabane women theologian, wrote about finding God in her sensual and embodied connection with nature while walking with her dogs (1989). Dykstra, an openly bisexual theologian, wrote about how she is always living in "in-between spaces," how her sexuality and spirituality are closely connected, and how her experiences help her to live and love joyfully like Jesus (2000). Shore-Goss has written about his erotic love for Jesus in constructing a queer Christology (2000). By writing about their experiences of encountering God in their respective social contexts, each of these scholars has shown that experience is the central source for 'talking about God' and doing theology (Cheng, 2011: p.20).

With respect to this source of queer theology and African faith communities, allowing black *Izitabane* women to tell their religious experiences is crucial in understanding how African faith communities and religious leaders have been harmful and how black Izitabane women continue to suffer at the hands of religious leaders and the church. Most importantly, to develop new theologies that challenge and counter-balance popular depictions of Ubutabane as being 'un-Africa' and 'un-Christian.' Theologies are written in such a way that African *Izitabane* people can locate themselves within them, and Izitabane life stories are the starting point for this (van Klinken, 2018: p.209-211). Theologies that do not discriminate or exclude non-normative sexualities. Theologies that welcome and represent everyone into God's kingdom. Theologies show that there is a place for Izitabane-identifying religious bodies in the church and that the church is where they can find their place of inclusion in Christianity—doing theology in a manner that attempts to close the knowledge gap in faith communities about sexual and gender diversity and how faith communities can become welcoming and affirming spaces.

Van Klinken's article "*Autobiographical Storytelling and African Narrative Queer Theology*" (2018) is a perfect example of this particular source of theology. In it, Van Klinken suggests using storytelling within churches: He argues that storytelling is not only a method for developing a culturally relevant theology but also brings to the fore the perspectives and experiences of people and communities that otherwise would not be part of the theological discourse, granting them an epistemological privilege. Further, stories provide insight into how people negotiate their sexual and religious identities and how they understand themselves in relation to God (Van Klinken, 2018). These three sources are essential in creating a safe space for black *Izitabane* and enhancing the engagement between the church and faith communities

in South Africa primarily because the scripture and tradition have been used to oppress black *Izitabane* women. At the same time, creating theologies of sexuality requires grounding theological work on "LGBTQI+ sexualities in the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ Christians" (West et al., 2016: p.3).

3.4.1.3 Queer theology in African faith communities

As alluded to earlier, the first source of theology is the Bible. The Bible and the way that it is interpreted are imperative to how black *Izitabane* women make meaning of their multiple identities. On the other hand, embodied experiences of faith and spirituality, both in individual rituals and in everyday life practices, are an integral part of religious identity formation (Ingalls et al., 2013). As black, *Izitabane* women, and Christians, the way that they understand God in relation to these identities is influenced by how African faith communities read the Bible and the way that they are treated within faith communities. Therefore, their experiences are particularly crucial to consider, and the Bible within the African faith landscape interpretations need to be reclaimed and carefully assessed when constructing any kind of theology that strays from traditional Christian teachings. Liberating interpretative options for Izitabane inclusion and alternative discourses that challenge the heteronormative heteropatriarchy of the bible within the African context must be developed (Reygan, 2016: p.1). Stylianopoulos's assertion that "to know the nature of the Bible is to acquire insight into its origins, contents, character, purpose and saving value" (2008: p.21) is pretty accurate for this study.

This chapter has addressed a methodological question: How can Queer Theology be used as a tool to enhance the engagement between black *Izitabane* women and African faith communities in South Africa? In attempting to answer this question, this study engaged with queer theological work, specifically scholars using lived experience to reconcile diverse and sometimes contradictory identities to challenge and expose expectations of behavior and identity in religious spaces. Thereafter, three sources of queer theology are engaged so as to reclaim non-normative sexualities and genders, both globally and across the African faith landscape. Queer theology is helpful in engaging religious leaders and faith communities around issues of sexual and gender diversity. This approach addresses religious homophobia by involving queer experiences, queer traditions, and queer scriptures. It highlights challenges faced by gender and sexual minorities in faith communities. It conceptualizes how faith communities can engage with black *Izitabane* women on issues of sexuality and the policing of non-normative sexuality and gender in faith communities.

Furthermore, queer theology helps us identify how religious discourses and practices in faith communities, particularly those that assume that identity is stable and fixed, further perpetuate the oppression that black *Izitabane* women face because of their sexual or gendered identities or practices. Moreover, Queer theology helps us identify resources within religious traditions, texts, beliefs, rituals, and practices to interrogate and challenge the idea of fixed identity and recognize norms for what they are, productions of power. Queer theology also allows us to broaden our focus beyond black *Izitabane* women's identities to examine critically the way identities and practices are formed and normalized, seeking to uncover the repressed history of Izitabane people. Rather than seek to add *Izitabane* people into religious narratives, Queer theology sought to question the very narratives and practices that exclude these identities in the first place.

CHAPTER FOUR
RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

4.1 Introduction:

The issue of violence, gender, and sexuality in the landscape of religion and within the African context received a comprehensive theoretical foundation in the preceding chapters. However, the main focus of this study is to explore the role that can be played by faith in establishing communities of care for black Izitabane women who are facing homophobic and hate violence. Vaus defines research design as the "overall strategy and analytical approach that you have chosen in order to integrate, coherently and logically, the different components of the study, thus ensuring that the research problem will be thoroughly investigated" (2006). This study is qualitative and is located within an autoethnographic design. In this chapter, I unpack and demonstrate how and why methodologies and techniques were applied in the current study, thereby allowing the reader of the study to engage and critically evaluate the study's overall validity and reliability. In this chapter, I answer two main questions: (1) How was data obtained or generated? Moreover, (2) How was data analyzed? These two questions are important because the methods that were chosen affect the result of the study and, by extension, how I interpret their significance.

4.2 RESEARCH METHOD AND APPROACH

4.2.1 Qualitative Research:

The present study explores the lived experiences of black Izitabane women in order to challenge faith communities to take up the full inclusion of black Izitabane believers. Thus, a qualitative method of inquiry was adopted. This approach was adopted because it focuses on researching "into an experience" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: p.50 cited in Mandez, 2013: p.279). According to Merriam, the underlying assumption of qualitative research is that reality and truth are constructed and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which they live (Merriam, 2009: p.13, cited in Mendez, 2013: p.280). Denzel and Lincolns provide a clear and substantial definition of qualitative research focusing on the process and context of data collection. According to these two scholars, qualitative research is: "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalist approach to the world… this means that qualitative researchers study

things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (Denzel and Lincolns, 2000: p.3). This definition of qualitative research, as elucidated by Denzel and Lincolns, is integral to this study. In this section, I discuss how this method relates to the present study.

Qualitative research engages a range of methods that imply a humanistic stance in which phenomena under investigation are examined through the eyes and experiences of individual participants (Cresswell, 2013 & Merriam, 2009). This approach "is useful for providing detailed descriptions of phenomena and generating insight into social issues" (Flick, 2007: p.162). In queer studies, qualitative research methods are employed to deal with a variety of complex, interlinked issues such as sex, gender, and sexuality. A qualitative research method was considered more suitable for this study mainly because this approach of inquiry enabled me to privilege voices, personal narratives, and the lived experiences of black Izitabane women, placing these experiences at the center of the study. As Rothman explained: "In qualitative work, we often strive to give voice to people who might not otherwise be heard. We quote, describe the person, the setting" (2007: p.12).

A significant characteristic of qualitative research study involves collecting data by having direct conversations with people in different fields and getting close to them, observing them behave and act within their natural setting, and then bringing their own lived experiences to the research process (Cresswell, 2007; Limb & Dwyer, 2001). I am a beneficiary[11] of the Uthingo Network[12] in Pietermaritzburg; thus, it was not difficult for me to identify and approach the potential participants for data collection. Almost all forms of qualitative research studies tend to be more flexible and inductive, offering unique advantages in quantitative inquiry. Qualitative research collection methods allow researchers to adjust the study approaches based on what is discovered throughout the research process (Cresswell, 2009: p.203). Furthermore, in qualitative research, the researcher's personal experiences and the researcher are vital instruments and an essential and critical part of the inquiry (Willig, 2013). As a black Isitabane woman, I believe that other Izitabane people share my experiences of the studied phenomena in South Africa.

Another defining attribute of qualitative research is that it allows for multiple sources of data. Qualitative researchers regularly gather different types of data, such as reports and interviews,

[11] For the purpose of this study, "beneficiary" means that I benefit from the Uthingo Network
[12] Uthingo Network is a registered non-profit organization (NPO) and a chosen research field for this study

to capture direct quotations about an individual's perspectives and lived experiences, rather than relying upon a solitary information source. The data is then reviewed and organized into different themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). According to Guest, Namey, & Mitchell: "The process of collecting qualitative data provides an additional advantage when it comes to face validity. For one, a researcher is not artificially constraining the responses and trying to fit them into predetermined buckets. Survey questioning is almost always an immutable scripted process in which data collectors are explicitly instructed to repeat the question verbatim if a participant does not understand it to ensure reliability across interviewers. Qualitative questioning allows for more flexibility, and an interviewer is typically permitted to ask questions in a different way to make sure the participant has understood it well" (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013: p.22). For this study, I collected data. One focus group discussion and nine individual interviews were conducted in person, allowing participants to engage and answer in their own words.

Furthermore, according to Korstjens & Moser, the process of conducting qualitative research requires researchers to be sensitive to "the natural contexts in which individuals or groups function, as it aims to provide an in-depth understanding of real-world problems. In contrast to quantitative research, generalizability is not a guiding principle" (2017: p.275). Korstjens & Moser go on to say that "the 'reality' we perceive is constructed by our social, cultural, historical, and individual contexts. Therefore, a researcher looks for a variety of people to describe, explore, and explain phenomena in real-world context" (Korstjens & Moser, 2017: p.275). Nelson et al. similarly argued that the "choice of research practices depends upon the questions that are asked, and the questions depend on their context" (1992: p.2), "what is available in the context, and what the researcher can do in that setting" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: p.4). To sum up, qualitative research can be used to bring both justice and healing: a "restorative view of justice that is based on indigenous ways of healing… Qualitative research scholars have an obligation to change the world, to engage in ethical work that makes a positive difference" … The method allows us "to improve quality of life… for the oppressed, marginalized, stigmatized, and ignored… [and] to bring about healing, reconciliation, and restoration" (Denzin, 2010: p.109- p.725).

4.2.2 Autoethnography

In this study, I use personal narratives as a source of knowledge to add to the literature on black African Izitabane women's experiences. Grounded in active self-reflexivity, which alludes "to the careful consideration of the ways in which researchers' past experiences, point of view, and

roles impact these same researchers' interactions with, and interpretations of, the research scene" (Tracy, 2020: p.2), autoethnography is a technique that acknowledges the researcher's experience as essential in and to the research process. The term autoethnography denotes an approach that combines autobiography (telling about one's life) and ethnography (studying culture) by using lived experience as proof with which to investigate cultural phenomena. This method differs from traditional ethnography, a social qualitative research method where the researcher involves participant observation and interviews to understand the group's culture better. Autoethnography acknowledges and capitalizes on the researcher's lived experience, insider knowledge, and subjectivities. In autoethnography, the focus of observation and analysis shifts from the outsider perspective to the insider perspective. The researcher is actively involved as a member or subject of the culture under investigation and is present during the study's reporting. This approach allows the researcher to have a voice and the opportunity to address cultural questions from a first-person perspective using "I" (Harrison et al., 2022).

4.2.2.1 Defining Autoethnography

I agree with the definition of autoethnography used by Wall, who defines this method as a unique qualitative research method that begins with a personal story and is written from the retrospective viewpoint of a person interpreting his or her own past. This method emerges "from postmodern philosophy, in which the dominance of traditional science and research is questioned and many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimated" (Wall, 2008: p.39). Ellis & Bochner, in their first edited collection, *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing,* convincingly define autoethnography as "… an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural", a tool that is used to analyses people's lives (2000: p.739). Similarly, Adams et al. state that "autoethnography consists of three characteristics or activities: the "auto," or self; the "ethno," or culture; and the "graphy," or representation/writing/story" (2022a: p.3). As a research method, autoethnography rejects the deep-rooted binary oppositions between the researcher and researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and personal and the political (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008: p.450-459). Instead, autoethnography acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, as opposed to avoiding or assuming they do not exist (Jones et al., 2013).

Examples of this emerging method demonstrate that autoethnographers value personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, stories, and observations to understand the social context they

are studying (Rapp, 2018, p.27). Autoethnographers challenge "canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treat research as a political, socially-just, and socially-conscious act" (Ellis et al., 2020). Ellis presented a powerful argument for autoethnography in the *Handbook of Autoethnography* as more than a methodological approach or a simple "way of knowing about the world." Instead, Ellis argues that autoethnography: "Has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally and reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves 'observing', that we interrogate what we think and believe, and that we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and what we want to be. And in the process, it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living" (Ellis 2011 cited in Jones, 2013: p.10).

Ploder and Stadlbauer come to a similar conclusion and insist that the process of working with and through our own experiences is guided by a search for emotionally productive and, thus, epistemically rich elements (2016: p.754). The aim of using autoethnography in this study was to develop a deeper understanding of the researcher's life as part of the studied population and to allow participants and readers to view how black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg live their lives, as well as to contribute to a deeper understanding of life in general. By providing my personal experiences, I become a physical subject in the world of other black Izitabane women who may or may not be part of the present study and who have also experienced marginalization and exclusion and are at risk of physical violence and sexual harassment because of who they are. Such positioning facilitates the production of knowledge and meaning around the existence of black Izitabane believers and issues of faith and violence in post-apartheid South Africa. It allowed me to gain a "deeper understanding" of issues of sexuality and religion, challenge and dismantle normalized conceptions of sexual identity and analyze multiple forms of heteronormativity. In addition, by sharing my own embodied personal experiences as a black Isitabane woman, I aim to provide a safe space for the participants to share their stories and challenge the marginality and invisibility of black Izitabane women in traditional research. I created a space for vulnerability with the individuals whom I interacted with. As emphasized by Guillemin and Gillam, in allowing study respondents to share their

stories of experiences, the participants necessarily reflect on those experiences and thus make meaning of them (2004).

Furthermore, Freeman, in *Rewriting the Self*, suggests that autoethnography is a "process of refiguring the self in a way that moves beyond what had existed previously" (Freeman, 1991: p.277 cited in Hamdan, 2012: p.587). Furthermore, autoethnography is a valuable method used to "extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived" (Bochner, 2000: p.270). Adams and Herrmann make the claim that: "To illuminate and interrogate cultural beliefs, practices, and identities ("ethno"). Autoethnographers engage in rigorous self-reflection in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between self and cultural life. At its core, autoethnography assumes that personal experience is infused with social norms and expectations. The "ethno" component also requires manuscripts to engage the purposes and practices of ethnography, such as referencing/critiquing extant research, identifying patterns of talk and action, interviewing others, doing fieldwork in "natural settings," analyzing popular discourse and grand narratives about a topic, describing meaningful epiphanies and aesthetic moments, and/or providing insider access to contexts in which cultural outsiders and other research methods could never provide" (Adams and Herrmann cited in Dahal, 2023: p.3).

In autoethnography, the amount and variety of research materials are not always predetermined prior to fieldwork, as is the case with the ethnographic tradition. Instead, the goal is to collect a wide range of autobiographic data, including documents, interviews with others, memories, photographs, audio and video recordings, documents about themselves, artifacts, and so on. Thus, fieldwork and the notes generated during the researcher's prolonged presence in a social world are the primary sources of research material in both ethnography and autoethnography (Hokkanen, 2017: p.26). According to Mandez, "The data resulting from using this type of introspection on our personal lives and experiences can be in the form of a poem, a narrative, or a story" (2013: p.281). Chang, while advocating autoethnography for its value, cautioned potential autoethnographers of the following pitfalls that they should avoid in doing autoethnography: "(1) excessive focus on self in isolation from others; (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and (5) inappropriate application of the label autoethnography" (Chang, 2008: p.54).

Chang has written a valuable and influential book on autoethnography titled "*Autoethnography as Method*," which anchors autoethnography in qualitative social science. According to Cheng, "autoethnography is a highly personal process … because the personal experiences of researchers themselves are the foundation of autoethnography ... Autoethnographers carefully examine how they have interacted with other people within their socio-cultural contexts and how social forces have influenced their lived experiences. Therefore, in a public light, autoethnographies reveal their author's personal, professional, relational, and socio-cultural identities" (2013: p.107). Chang claims that autoethnographers investigate sensitive, contentious, and personal topics using their experiences as primary materials (data). Additionally, autoethnographers "are uniquely qualified to access personal data that may be off-limit to other researchers" (2013: p.108). Chang goes on to say that "the purpose of autoethnography, is not only to tell personal stories. It intends to expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of the researcher's personal experiences" (Chang, 2013: p. p.108).

Chang's explanation of autoethnography provides an exciting method for conducting the present study. In this study, I share my journey of navigating life as a black Isitabane woman in post-apartheid South Africa in the form of snapshots. I connected my narrative with my critique of the homophobic Christian religion that celebrates heteronormative performances of gender and sexuality. I offer a social critique of the dominant discourse that negates Izitabane's sexual orientation and prevents them from exploring and expressing their sexual orientation. Consequently, individual stories became a vehicle for social critiques through which readers will gain an understanding of black Izitabane women's social realities and of the social powers contextualizing lived experiences (Chang, 2013). Although autoethnography as a research method was a foreign and complicated tool for me to utilize, reflecting on my own life was a phase of the research process that was crucial and that later allowed me to interact with the study participants and consider how "our lives and experiences converge and diverge" (Phillips & Kara, 2021: p.10). Additionally, I was able to interpret my experiences and represent them through writing.

4.2.2.2 Conducting or disseminating an autoethnographic research study

The issues of validity, rigor, and repeatability are interpreted differently within the autoethnographic research study. Leigh et al. demonstrate that "validity is gained by the researcher being critically reflexive (that is, reflecting on events, the thoughts and feelings associated with those events, and their part in creating them along with the impact and

implications for those around them), self-aware (that is, conscious of thoughts, feelings, bodily reactions, and responses to events and to others), and honest about their vulnerabilities, privilege, and position in the work they are doing (this is often termed positionality in research)" (Leigh et al., 2022: p.21). This is where the concept of embodiment comes into play, as it is used to refer to the totality of thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations, images, and proprioceptive awareness that arise from the body and mind. Embodied awareness allows the researcher to access data about themselves, the world around them, and how they respond to other people, and this then becomes part of the reflexive research process. Regarding autoethnography, an embodied approach allows the researcher to observe and apply how their body responds to the topic under study.

While some critics may dismiss autoethnography as nothing more than self-indulgent navel-gazing, narcissistic, introspective, individualized (Atkinson, 1997 cited in Mandez, 2013), and no different from autobiography, fiction, or memoir and as an invalid theoretical framework, autoethnography fills a significant position in the field of qualitative research because it allows for diverse forms of knowledge, expression, and conception (Allen et al., 2015: p.34). According to Evans-Winters, the aim behind this self-awareness is to ensure that researchers continually '[exhibit] reciprocity and vulnerability in the research process' (p.7). This self-awareness extends beyond the process of gathering data for an autoethnographic study and includes the analytic process. Evans-Winters proceeds to say that this allows the researcher to demonstrate how data analysis can likewise "be soul work that serves to heal thyself" (Evans-Winters, 2019: p.7 cited in Leigh et al., 2022: p.22). My interest in using my embodied, emotional experiences as a component of the study method reflects the recent "embodied turn" that has made the body a central focus in disciplines including gender, sexuality, and religion studies, particularly within the African context. As Ahmed & Stacey have shown in *Thinking Through the Skin,* "bodies are no longer assumed simply to be given in and to the world but rather understood as both the locus of thinking- the site from which thinking takes place - and as the object of thought- as being already subjects to interpretation and conceptualization" (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001: p.3).

As a black Isitabane woman, I embody in my identity and in my body the phenomena that I am researching and writing about. Thus, in this study, embodiment is also understood from the standpoint of the experiencing agent rather than an impartial observer (Hokkanen, 2017: p.25). Through embodiment, the body was used to generate insights, draw the researcher's attention to the information received by the body, and bring the voices of the research participants to

light (Kitzis, 2023). I discovered that this framework allowed me to write in a manner that exposes emotions while making the way for my research background. It also enabled me to expose the unjust, gendered, and sexualized nature of African faith communities. Through autoethnographic writing, I was able to embark on a journey with other black Izitabane women to make sense of our lives and experiences and to confront the system of power and authority in organized religion. Instead of focusing on the participants from an outside perspective, autoethnography enabled me to share stories that were drawn directly from my lived experiences, subjective, personal, and resonated with the project members.

In sum, autoethnography is a form of participatory, observational, and reflexive research method that uses writing about oneself in conversation with other people to shed light on the many facets of human social, emotional, theoretical, and cultural praxis (i.e., action, performance, accomplishment). In other words, autoethnography is a form of narrative research and writing based on observation and data-driven phenomenology with the goal of producing compelling, striking, and evocative (showing or bringing forth strong images, memories, or feelings). Autoethnography involves the writer or researcher in creating imaginative narratives about a culture that are shaped by the writer's own personal experiences and intended for a variety of primarily academic audiences. It is used by researchers inspired by narrative descriptions and evocations of the richly textured nature of lived experience. Autoethnographers seek to create compelling tales that shed light on specific phenomena encountered in the research scene (Paulos, 2021). Using autoethnography allows me to turn a reflexive lens inward and reflect on the realities and the struggles that come with identifying as an Isitabane woman in South Africa.

4.3. DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Researchers that use autoethnography as a research method often rely on various approaches to collecting data and research tools that are common to other forms of qualitative research, including interviews, focus groups, conversational engagement, narrative analysis, artificial analysis, journaling, participant observation, field notes, archival research, thematic analysis, and storytelling (Muncey, 2010: p.5). They then write captivating stories to describe, interpret, evoke, and analyze the lived experiences of the researcher and the participants, if applicable, about the topic under investigation (Bochner, 2007). Most researchers opt for a multi prolonged layered, hybrid approach – such as drawing on numerous methodological research approaches that are common in qualitative analysis – as they explore a social phenomenon and craft

captivating narratives about human social or cultural phenomena (Poulos, 2021: p.5). For example, Silverman, in his dissertation titled *Uncertain Peace: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Intrapersonal Conflicts from Chabad-Lubavitch Origins* (2017), used numerous techniques of data collection, including self-observation, in which he documented notes of his observations of his inner battle throughout his day on a smartphone and then later transferred them to a spreadsheet log.

In the present study, *Homophobic Hatred and Violence in Pietermaritzburg: Drawing on Experiences of Faith to Establish Counter Communities of Care for Black Izitabane Women*, the process of collecting data was done explicitly through the following steps: (a) writing my own narrative based on my personal experiences in relation to the studied phenomena which was shared in a focus group discussion; (b) one focus group discussion with nine black Izitabane women; (c) a one-on-one interview session where participants were asked to share their experiences and perspectives about the studied phenomena. Autoethnography was first used to explore my experiences as a black Isitabane woman in order to sensitize myself to the topic of my investigation. I then used the six snapshot stories that came out of my autoethnographic account as a springboard for the focus group discussion with nine black Izitabane women. The purpose of the focus group was to provide participants with opportunities to reflect on their ideas about the purpose of the study. At the same time, one-on-one interviews were intended to engage individual personal experiences, perspectives, and interpretations**.** The merits of conducting interviews commence with the fact that they are a comprehensive method of finding out or deriving answers to concrete questions that I may have for my participants. Using these techniques allowed me to validate findings across methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The following section explains how my narrative was written and analyzed

4.3.1 Writing a Personal Narrative

Ryan provides a definition of narrative that highlights facets of casualty, characters, point of view, and conclusions – components I focus upon through my own narrative analysis. Ryan explains that "a narrative text is one that brings a world to the mind (setting) and populates it with intelligent agents (characters). These agents participate in actions and happenings (events, plot), which cause global changes in the narrative world. Narrative is thus a mental representation of a world and of its members" (Ryan, 2004: p.337). It is a process by which individuals organize their experiences into "temporally meaningful episodes" (Ellis, 2000: p.195). According to Kyratzis and Green, narrative inquiry involves "a double narrative

process, one that includes the narratives generated by those participating in the research, and one that represents the voice of the researcher as the narrator of those narratives (1997: p.17). Bleakley points out that narrative "takes the story as either its raw data or its product" (2005: p.534) and "can provoke identification, feelings, emotions, and dialogue" (Marechal, 2010: p.43). Clandinin provided additional clarity, stating that narrative is employed to study human lives and is considered as a way of honoring lived experiences as a source of essential knowledge and understanding (2013: p.17).

Narrative inquiry "represents stories ways of knowing and communicating" (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997), and "have the power to affect change in a society by enhancing the transferability of research findings, presenting research findings with impact because they are engaging and memorable for readers" (Johnson, Wildy, & Shand, 2023). For my purpose, it made sense to utilize a narrative approach since autoethnography is likewise a type of narrative research (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022: p.200). The method enabled me to portray the events that occurred with regards to my sexuality and faith and to offer study participants and the reader access to what Muncey refers to as "the inner story that cannot be told by other more conventional means" (2010: p.56). For this study, the first narrative account was written when I was drafting the study proposal over a period of six months, with few revisions. A method that I followed was to reconstruct and chronologically list reflections about experiences and perceptions that pertain to my research topic (as shown in figure 4.4.1): Being acquainted with Christianity; The Journey of Coming Out as Isitabane: Seen, Heard, and Loved; Split Between the Two Worlds: A 'Good Christian Girl' Gone Isitabane; Recreating and Reclaiming My Sexuality and Christian Identity; A Condemned Body: A Testimony of Lost Hope**;** Sense of Self and Positioning.

As I reflected on and analyzed my personal experiences, I tried to focus on the following research questions:

1. What are the causes and consequences of homophobic hatred and violence as experienced by black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal?
2. How do black Izitabane women draw on faith as they navigate homophobic hatred and violence in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal?
3. How can Queer Theology be used as a faith resource to enable the formation and development of counter communities of care for black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal?

This exercise required me to interrogate my personal experiences of faith, God, my sexuality, grief, religion, the Bible, and acceptance; the literature on homophobic and hatred violence against black Izitabane women; the narratives and experiences of other black Izitabane women as they embody Ubutabane and faith; and the general cultural attitudes that promote homophobic and hatred violence – all contrasted to a predominant 'African' cultural ideology that pretends to value diversity and openness. The exercise also included continuously journaling, noting feelings, questions, and memories about my experiences. Chang suggests that this is an exercise of generating data in which the researcher reflects on particular, noteworthy incidents and portrays how those incidents have aided in cultural self-discovery. The researcher also describes the situations surrounding those incidents and explains why they hold significance in their life (Chang, 2008).

The chosen snapshots capture the anxieties, choices, and progress I made in understanding how to construct, reveal, and claim my dual identities as Isitabane and a Christian. I present these six snapshot stories as the first step of data collection and to reflect on my struggle with the studied phenomena, making use of external data sources such as photographs, a song, a narrative, and memories to re-tell these critical moments from my life. Muncey suggests that using various sources of evidence, such as artifacts, is "important [for the legitimation of autoethnography] if memory and its distortions appear to be critical features of the process" (Muncey 2005: p.1). In a similar manner, Cooper and Lilyea suggest that "it can be difficult to know what is 'true' and some memories may be vague while others are vivid" (2022: p.200). In addition, there is a consideration of what to include – some things seem too raw, too personal, too vulnerable, or maybe there is a question about relevancy. A suggested approach is to "over-include" information in the data collection stage of research, which allows you to be more intentional about what to highlight during the analysis and writing of the story or final presentation (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022: p.200).

Willig, on the other hand, notes that using memory work has allowed: "Researchers to focus on the role of the body in the formation of a sense of self and identity because it works with descriptions of scenes or events that are rich in circumstantial detail. The method is designed to assess how a situation was experienced rather than how it was explained or accounted for by its participants. Such a focus on "being in" a situation [as opposed to "thinking about it"] implicates both body and mind. It provides a way of studying what is sometimes referred to as embodied subjectivity" (Willig, 2001: p.133 cited in Brown et al., 2011: p.549). Bochner & Ellis add that if we approach memory not so much as "objective reality" but as an indication

of what holds meaning for us about the topic we are exploring, we can draw upon these memories with confidence as indicative of significant aspects of the experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016 cited in Cooper & Lilyea, 2021: p.200). Crawford and colleagues (1992) and Willig (2001) note a number of critical stages in memory work, which I followed in order to construct my narrative. They note the importance of choosing a 'trigger' which, according to Willig, "is a word or short phrase which is expected to generate memories that are relevant to the topic under investigation" (2001: p.128). Despite that, scholars such as Chang believe that "memory is not always a friend of autoethnography" because memory "selects, shapes, limits and distorts the past" (Chang, 2008: p.72).

I believe that my narrative remains helpful in demonstrating the experiences of navigating life in South Africa as a black Isitabane woman and a Christian. The challenges and frustrations are clearly articulated, which may have been difficult to discern through other methods of inquiry. The process of doing autoethnography in conjunction with the data from the focus group discussion and individual interviews is further discussed in chapter five. I wrote this narrative to evoke embodied responses from the study participants. It is an unapologetically subject narrative that aims to allow the reader access to my experiences with the studied phenomena. It is an autoethnographic account, as indicated by the laid down by Ellis and Ellingson: "…if you viewed your project as closer to art than science, then your goal would not be so much to portray the facts of what happened to you accurately but instead to convey the meanings you attached to the experience. You'd want to tell a story that readers could enter and feel a part of. You'd write in a way to evoke readers to feel and think about your life and their lives in relation to yours. You'd want them to experience the experience you're writing about" (Ellis, 1999 cited in Custer, 2014: p.5). While writing my autoethnography, I found being open and truthful helped me build trust with myself and the study participants.

Writing this narrative and speaking about my experiences was one of the most challenging stages of this project. Trying to write my own story and come to terms with my sexuality, trauma, and how I have been dealing with rejection was difficult to process and manage. These are issues that I have avoided for a long time, and I have tried to numb the feelings that came with these experiences through various means. However, I chose to write about these experiences so that I could share them with other black Izitabane women, ask them about their experiences, and write about them afterwards. This process was challenging due to various life obstacles that caused delays and alterations to the fieldwork. From losing two of my dear

friends, my aunt getting sick, and discovering unexpected health complications to healing and going through a period of uncertainty and insecurity in the work that I am doing.

***Figure 1**: Snapshots of Personal Experience as Base for Data Collection*

Identified personal accounts	**The main things to interrogate**
1. Being Acquainted with Christianity	Christianity is a significant part of my life, my upbringing, and my identity. My experiences with faith, both good and bad, have had a profound impact on my journey and personal development. In this snapshot, I reflect on how I became acquainted with the religion of Christianity, what I learned from the religion, and the reasons behind my enduring identification as a Christian.
2. The Journey of Coming Out as Isitabane:	At the age of17 years, I came to the realization that I was attracted to women. At that time, I struggled to understand the significance of this discovery. In my community, discussing Ubutabane was strongly discouraged, leading me to internalise my emotions. In this snapshot, I reflect on my journey of self-discovery and self-disclosure.
3. Split Between the Two Worlds: A 'Good Christian Girl' Gone Isitabane	While my family accepted me despite my sexuality, reconciling my religious and sexual identities in a black heteronormative society has been a challenging journey. The social responses to my developing sexuality left me feeling isolated and labeled. In this snapshot, I reflect on the tension between being Isitabane and being a Christian, and not fitting in anywhere, piled on top of the traumatic experience of losing my grandmother that I was already dealing with.
4. Recreating and Reclaiming My Sexuality and Christian Identity	During my time as a university student in Pietermaritzburg, I experienced incredible personal growth. My studies and experiences allowed me to explore and articulate how my personal journey has influenced my research interest. Throughout my time at

	the university, I grappled with and sought to understand my identity as an Isitabane woman. In this snapshot, I reflect on how moving to university to pursue my studies provided me with an opportunity to explore my sexuality and how I tried to recreate, reclaim, and integrate my conflicting identities.
5. A Condemned Body: A Testimony of Lost Hope	As it has been established, I was raised in a religious household, and being part of a church was always important to me. In this snapshot, the exploration focuses on my journey of continuously trying to find a church and how I immediately came to a decision to leave the church.
6. Sense of self and positioning	In this last snapshot, I take a moment to reflect on my journey with Uthingo Network and how becoming a part of the network has positively impacted my journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance, especially when it comes to my sexuality.

4.3.2 Focus Group Discussion

While using autoethnography to collect data allowed me to use my own experiences, it is essential to note that in this study, participants are also knowledge producers; their voices and perspectives are privileged and used as key tools in my research to guide my findings. Consequently, reflexivity is a crucial tool used in this present study. Reflexivity is one of the main contributions of feminist scholars to research. It is a way researchers can find themselves and consider the way their own "biases, feelings, choices, and multiple identities" impact the research process. It eliminates power dynamics between the researcher and the study participants (Maguire, 2008). I decided to do one focus group discussion with nine black Izitabane women using the following snapshot stories as a prompt to engage questions about Christian faith, violence, and sexuality. These snapshots were later combined with conversations and observations I had with the participants:

1. Being acquainted with Christianity;
2. The Journey of Coming Out as Isitabane: Seen, Heard, and Loved;
3. Split Between the Two Worlds: A 'good Christian girl' gone Isitabane;
4. Recreating and Reclaiming My Sexuality and Christian Identity;

5. A Condemned Body: A Testimony of Lost Hope;
6. Sense of Self and Positioning.

According to Denzin and Lincoln, focus group discussions have the potential to produce rich data as participants interact and compare their experiences (1994). To form a focus group discussion, I turned the original stories [my own narrative] that were shared myself into creative snapshot stories, choosing specific themes from the stories to share with the participants. These snapshot stories were shared with nine participants and used as discussion prompts for the focus group discussion. The intention was to invite and allow participants to share whatever emotions that were brought up by sharing my own experiences with them. The goal of sharing these events "is not to present learned lessons but to trigger cognitive processes within the recipients." They do not present final analyses and study "results"; however, they remain open to various readings and interpretations. This choice was made deliberately in light of the conviction that life stories never involve only the individual who experienced them but always offers points of connection with the stories of others (Ploder & Sadlbauer, 2016: p.754).

The data generated with the autoethnographic snapshots is collated along with data generated with the focus group and the individual interviews to form separate data sets. I then analyze the data sets reflectively and thematically. My objective within the data analysis exercise is to identify themes and issues that resonated with me as a researcher-participant and that were reflected in data sets. As you continue reading this study, you will see that in addition to using a creative approach to gathering data for this study, I also used creative ways to construct my autoethnography. I also incorporated a song and quotes along with the images you will find throughout the text. In addition, by sharing my own experiences around coming out and the integration of spirituality and sexuality with the study participants, I hope to bring participants closer to my world and make them feel safe sharing their experiences with me and the readers.

4.3.3 Individual interviews

This study's last set of data was collected through individual interviews with nine black Izitabane women. According to Chang, interviews are not a method commonly associated with autoethnography due to its focus on the researcher's own life (2008: p.106). Bell, on the other hand, disagrees with this generalization and argues that interviews, unlike questionnaires, offer the researcher the opportunity to investigate and explain and can additionally reveal data and attitudes that a written response might conceal (2005: p.157). Similarly, Wall maintains, "We study how we live our lives in conjunction with others in a social setting, and interviews are a

decent approach to understanding that specific situation and our co-participants" (2006: p.151). However, interviewing indeed takes on a slightly different flavor in autoethnography. An interactive interview technique was adopted to gather information from the participants further. Kiesinger, Tillnann-Healy, and Ellis call this 'interactive interviewing' and define it as an interview in which all those participating act as both researchers and research participants (Ellis, 2004: p.64). The interactive interview technique provides an "in-depth and intimate understanding of people's experiences with emotionally charged and sensitive topics" (Ellis et al., 1997: p.121).

Adams expresses that interactive interviews "are collaborative endeavors between researchers and participants, research activities in which researcher and participants- the same- probe together about issues that transpire, in conversation, about particular topics" (such as homophobic violence) (Adams, 2008 cited in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2020: p.279). The emphasis in these research contexts is on what can be learned from interaction within the interview setting as well as on the stories that each person brings to the research encounter (Mey & Mruch, 2010). This approach is most useful when all participants have had experience with the topic under discussion and is particularly suitable when researching personal or emotive topics that benefit from reciprocity and building trust. For a subject as delicate and intricate as homophobic hatred and violence, individual interviews are especially effective. They enabled participants to share things that they may not want to talk about in a group environment. They provide an opportunity for clarification and flexibility to explore the participant's experiences and perspectives… the fundamental purpose of the research interview is to listen attentively to what respondents have to say, to acquire more knowledge about the study topic (Gill et al., 2008: p.292).

For the present study, the interviews with the participants were conducted to investigate the lived experiences of black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, to demonstrate the possibility of alternative approaches to accommodating black Izitabane women, and to gather information that will assist in transforming the stance of African faith communities regarding Ubutabane. Lastly, individual interviews were used to add to data gained through focus group discussion by providing in-depth individual accounts of Izitabane women's lived experiences. Each participant was invited to share their reflections, events, and thoughts relating to the following interview guide with seven different research questions:

1. What is your understanding of the word Isitabane, and what does it mean to you? When did you first hear this word? What was your reaction when you first heard the word?
2. How has been your journey in the discovery of your sexuality as a black Isitabane in post-apartheid South Africa? Please share as much as you are comfortable.
3. Have you ever experienced violence because of your sexuality? Kindly share as much as you are comfortable.
4. What has been your source of support in the navigation of your sexuality?
5. Is or was the faith space helpful or harmful in the process of navigating your sexuality as Isitabane? Please elaborate.
6. How did your experiences as an Isitabane shape how you navigate faith spaces?
7. In what way, if any, did your experience of faith influence how you perceive yourself as a black Isitabane? Please elaborate.

Because this study is conducted within a community of people whose thinking reflects these issues, the study questions were workshopped with a group of my peers under the Gender and Religion Program as well as by my supervisor. Thereafter, questions were workshopped with facilitators at Uthingo Network, who provided me with an insider's perspective on issues that could affect the research process and the quality of data. I translated all these questions into isiZulu because all nine participants were isiZulu speakers. These questions were handed to each participant on the day of the interview.

4.4 FIELDWORK

4.4.1 The Research Setting

The present study is conducted at Uthingo Network, a registered non-profit organization (NPO) and a safe place for many black Izitabane women. Uthingo Network is located in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. Pietermaritzburg falls under Umgungundlovu District Municipality. The city includes some of the province's poorest (some considered rural areas). Rural areas are usually associated with strict traditional values, firm cultural norms, and strong religious beliefs which promote the subordination of gender non-conforming, thereby encouraging homophobic violence and social exclusion (Mampane, 2020; Muller, 2016; Jugde, 2015; Naidoo & Karels, 2012; Mkhize et al, 2010; Anguita, 2012). Since its inception in 2003, Uthingo Network has done pioneering work primarily with young, unemployed, and marginalized Izitabane residents of Pietermaritzburg and its surrounding

areas. The organization has a small number of dedicated employees who contribute to all aspects of the Network's programs, including event planning, counseling, training, and general office support. According to information provided by the network's website, the organization started in response to the need for Izitabane persons to have a safe space where they could meet and openly talk about their lived experiences as Izitabane, as there were no such spaces or facilities in Pietermaritzburg.

From these beginnings, the organization has formed into a functional organization that offers a large number of projects and administrations to the Izitabane community. The organization collaborates with the community as a whole to create a more welcoming and enabling environment where Izitabane persons can get services, be treated with respect, and not be afraid of violence or discrimination. More than that, the organization offers education and prevention programs dedicated to celebrating diversity, challenging social norms, promoting equality, and inspiring members of the community to end homophobic violence ultimately. It transforms communities and demands change for black Izitabane. It welcomes, inspires, and educates. Each interview took place in a common living area decorated with LGBTQ-friendly posters, positive messages about Ubutabane relationships and sexuality, and many books. The environment is perceived as not only affirming sexual and gender diversity but also representing a physical space in which Izitabane are welcomed and celebrated. For each interview, the researcher was assisted by a partner organization of Uthingo Network in terms of setting up the venue and arranging for counseling where necessary. During the study, I visited Uthingo Network offices a couple of times; even during COVID-19, I kept in touch with some of the staff from Uthingo Network.

4.5 SAMPLING

Dahlin-Ivanoff stresses the importance of choosing the proper representation of participants who, at the same time, can adequately answer research questions (2015: p.86). The participants should have experience, opinions, and knowledge about the phenomena being studied (Odell & Udd, 2020). The sample for this study includes nine Izitabane individuals, with the youngest respondent being (18) and the oldest being (35) years old (the mean age of respondents was (23) years old). I interviewed black Izitabane individuals aged 18 to 35 because South African history may impact their experiences with race, gender, and sexual orientation. Participants that were contacted come from different townships across Pietermaritzburg, including (Dambuza), (Northdale), and (Caluza). They all have varying levels of education and were

approached and selected through a local Izitabane support group, Uthingo Network in Pietermaritzburg.

4.6 RECRUITMENT

The sample was generated using the purposive sampling method to allow for the exploration and understanding of homophobic and hatred violence. In other words, participants were selected because they occupy a defined position in a structure or social order, and so have a distinct perspective to offer about the study objective (Etikan, 2016). The purposive sampling method enabled me to recruit potential participants for the current study from a reliable source and encouraged participants to ask questions about the study. To recruit potential participants for the current study, I emailed the Uthingo network director during the proposal's writing stage to seek permission to recruit participants through the network. In the email, I explained the purpose of the study and the criterion for participating. The Director then provided a letter allowing me to use Uthingo Network as a site for data collection (Addendum 1). Thereafter, I was provided with a list of potential participants in this study, including Izitabane. Emails were then sent to each participant to explain the study's purpose, inviting them to join the study. Ultimately, eleven Izitabane expressed interest in participating in the study, but only nine met the established criteria.

After establishing contact with the participants, the participants were asked five screening questions: 1) Do you self-identify as an Isitabane woman? 2) Are you between the ages of 20 to 35? Have you been to or are you part of a church? 3) Are you an active member of the Izitabane community in some way or a beneficiary of the Uthingo Network? 4) Have you experienced homophobic hatred and violence? Are you African (specifically identifying as Black)? All the participants who answered "yes" to all of these questions were then briefed about the purpose of the study and given a chance to decide whether they wanted to continue participating or not. Thereafter, I contacted each participant and arranged a convenient time to conduct one focus group discussion and the interview in a one-on-one session. Before data collection commenced, all the participants were provided with a copy of the Informed Consent Agreement (Addendum 2) and instructions to read and sign. This form informed the participants of my original research intention. With the participant's permission, each interview was audio-recorded through a digital recorder and transferred to a password-protected laptop directly after each interview. The focus group discussion lasted between 2 and 3 hours and did not include the review of the Informed Consent Agreement and an opportunity to ask questions about the study. The individual interviews ranged in length from (15) minutes to (50) minutes.

4.7 ETHICS

4.7.1 Ethical Consideration in Conducting Research with Black Izitabane Woman

Conducting research with marginalized and stigmatized populations has been proven to be a difficult task (Mollard et al., 2020; Meezan & Martin, 2003). The task requires extraordinary consideration and vigilance to ensure confidentiality and preclude exploitation (Meezan & Martin, 2009). The first step in this study was to approach the University of KwaZulu-Natal Research Ethics Committee, where I am affiliated, and seek input on how I should conduct this study. Acquiring ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal proved to be a significant challenge in carrying out this study. The study was classified as "high risk," and the process of obtaining clearance took several months. Throughout the research process, the conditions of the ethical clearance were strictly adhered to. The fact that all participants were over 18 years old, participated voluntarily, did so anonymously, and signed consent forms before participating was one of the most critical aspects. The Uthingo Network permitted the research to be conducted in their offices. Trained counselors, who were fluent in all the relevant local languages, were provided by the Network and were present at the location where the researcher was conducting sessions.

4.7.2 Ethical Consideration in Autoethnography

One of the fundamental features of autoethnography is its emphasis on the self, and it is this specific feature that can present problematic ethical implications with even greater complexity (Ellis, 2007, cited in Mendez, 2013: p.282). Ellis briefly discussed ethical considerations in personal narrative or narrative ethnography, mainly when speaking of others in the telling of one's own story: the individuals who play a critical role and those referenced in passing. She asked whether the author was granted permission to portray other characters or provided them with the opportunity to contribute their perspectives to the narrative (Ellis, 1999, 2000 cited in Wall, 2008: p.49). Some autoethnographers use the third person to disguise or give a sense of distance from the events and the individual being referred to (Mandez, 2013). Some employ composite characters to recount the experiences and to protect and hide the identities of individuals concerned. The use and development of composite characters "turns the focus from individual participants to the larger issues faced by groups" (Cook, 2013: p.182). It is one way to address our anxiety as researchers committed to challenging oppressive structures and practices in research (Cook, 2013).

While using composite characters was an option for me, I chose not to utilize this method because I wanted to share my story as it appeared to me at the time I wrote it or as it happened.

I gave myself the freedom to describe critical periods of my life in the first person. So, I decided not to disguise my identity or my experiences. However, the actual names of the characters in my account have not been used. They have been referred to by their role in my experiences. For instance, because my account focuses mainly on my journey with faith and the church, my engagement was mainly with the pastors and congregants, and I refer to them as "pastors" and "congregants." In addition, the faith communities have not been identified. Another possible shortcoming of doing an autoethnographic study "is that in their drive to become as close to the participants as possible, the fine line that researchers draw between themselves and their participants will be blurry" (Smith, 2005: p.72). For example, by sharing too much with the participants to get more information, the participants may try to put themselves in a friend role. Participants may start questioning and probing the researcher's personal experience.

To properly and responsibly carry out this study, I followed Behar's advice to act as a participant, but not forgetting to keep my eyes open (1997: p.5). I taught myself to come up with different techniques to study and consider each participant individually. My relationship with each woman was unique. This also meant keeping an eye open to my inner feelings, even those that are comfortable to admit and especially share (Murphy; 2007: p.169). There was one unanticipated and very positive result from this study. All participants were eager to participate and felt that this study was important for them. This factor not only boosted data collection but also added hugely to the participant's self-esteem as well as my self-esteem. Participants responded honestly and answered all questions with careful consideration. They were all committed to meeting for both the focus group discussion and the individual interviews, and they were full of meaningful conversation. In the following section, I provide a summary of the analysis process I undertook before deciding to present the study findings. The analyses seek to honor my own experiences and the message that I am trying to convey, most importantly, the analyses honor the voices of black Izitabane women. I recognize that words and stories play a crucial role in meaning-making enterprises and have the power to resonate with people (Marechal, 2010; Johnson et al., 2023). My analysis began with my autoethnographic account.

4.8 DATA ANALYSIS

Strauss and Corbin describe an analysis as "… the interplay between researchers and data" (1998). Robson suggests that the central aim of data analysis is to reduce data, and the process consists of several stages, including examining, categorizing, and presenting the evidence to address the original goal of a study (1993). Rabie, on the other hand, points out that "the process

of qualitative analysis aims to bring meaning to a situation rather than the search for truth focussed on quantitative research" (2004: p.657). Krueger & Casey suggest that the "analysis begins by going back to the intention of the study and survival requires a clear fix on the purpose of the study" (2000). Coffey builds on this concept and suggests that "analysis is not about adhering to any one correct approach or set of right techniques: it is imaginative, artful, flexible, and reflexive. It should also be methodical, scholarly, and intellectually rigorous" (1996: p.10). To analyze data for this study, a blended qualitative research approach was adopted. Narrative inquiry/analysis was used to analyze my autoethnographic account, as discussed in Section 4.4.1, while thematic analysis was used to analyze black Izitabanes' critical reflections on their experience, aiming to produce a thick description of the participants' lived experiences.

4.8.1 Analysing a Personal Narrative

According to Cooper and Lilyea, analyzing your data is arguably the most challenging part of conducting research. The challenge comes from 'seeing' (what you wrote, what you experienced, etc). Cooper and Lilyea continue to cite Heifetz et al. (2009), who argued that: "This is both a strength and weakness to this model and the ability to operate both on the 'balcony' and on the 'dance floor'" (Cooper and Lilyea: 2009, p.200). These authors feel that this "is a skill that can be developed to help the autoethnographic researcher navigate this challenge" (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022: p.200). Cooper and Lilyea provide several existing qualitative research tools and techniques such as General, descriptive qualitative research, Ethnographic research, Narrative inquiry/analysis, and Art-based qualitative research that can be used by autoethnographers to be able to better 'see' (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022: p.200). These methods and tools of data analysis generally combine two components: introspection and cultural analysis, and have been described as zooming in on personal, embodied experiences and zooming out on broader cultural concepts and frameworks (Chang, 2008).

In conventional research, data analysis is understood as a distinct stage in the research process, however, in an autoethnography, the analysis of data is an ongoing event, evolving and maturing over time. It is something that is happening during the process of the study, in one form or another; throughout the whole research process (Richards: 2003: p.268). This is true in this study. With each reading of my personal narrative, every assessment of a written artifact, and self-analysis, and with an additional self-introspection, a 'vulnerable self' was exposed (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: p.7) thus improving and enhancing the process of the exploration is enhanced. In an autoethnographic qualitative study, the triangulation of these methods forms

the analysis of data. Both data gathering and data analysis go hand-in-hand as theories and themes emerge during the study. Ellis and Bochner assert that data analysis in a personal narrative involves a process in which the researcher emotionally recalls past events (2000).

4.8.2 Analyses of Interviews and Focus Group Discussion

Alongside the analysis of my own autoethnographic account, I undertook an analysis of data that was collected from other black Izitabane women. For this exercise, I draw upon narrative thematic analysis. This approach was selected because it is flexible, offers theoretical independence, and searches for themes that concisely describe the phenomenon studied and its relations to the social context (Terry et al., 2017). Naeem et al. defines thematic analysis as a research method that is used to identify, interpret, and report patterns or themes within data. It often leads to new insights and understanding (Naeem et al., 2023: p.2). Naeem et al. further highlight the importance of not letting our own preconceptions interfere with the identification of key themes when using thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023: p.2). Gibbs (2008) provides the following six-step framework for thematic analysis that was followed to ensure validity and reliability in this study. The first step is:

- **Transcription, data familiarization, and selection of quotations**. This step includes looking for events (what happened), experiences (images, feelings, reactions, meanings), and accounts (explanations, excuses). This is the initial phase of the thematic analysis process. It involves the transcription of data and familiarizing oneself with it. Researchers dive deep into the content to discern initial themes and important sections. They then select quotes that bring the data to life and aptly represent diverse viewpoints and patterns pertinent to the research objectives.

The second step is:

- **Identification of Keywords**. In this step, the primary researcher prepares a short summary to identify the beginning, middle, and end of the story. This phase involves a close examination of the data, be it from interviews, focus groups, or visual content. Researchers identify recurring patterns, terms, or visual elements and designate them as keywords. These keywords encapsulate participants' experiences and perceptions and are directly derived from the data.

The third step is:

- **Code selection.** This step includes coding thematic ideas and developing a coding frame. Coding, short phrases or words, known as codes, are assigned to segments of

data that capture the data's core message, significance, or theme. This step simplifies complex textual data by transforming it into a theoretical form and assists in identifying elements related to the research questions. Keywords play an essential role in coding as they form the backbone of the analysis and help to convert raw data into insightful, manageable units.

The fourth step focuses on:

- **Theme development.** This step involves looking for thematic ideas and organizing codes into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships, thereby offering insights into the research question. In this step, the researcher transitions from a detailed analysis of codes and categories to a more abstract interpretation by creating themes. These themes go beyond merely being recurring elements because they embody patterned meanings that link the research questions and data;

The fifth step shifts the attention to:

- **Conceptualization through the interpretation of keywords, codes, and themes.** Emotive language, imagery, and feelings are highlighted. This step, conceptualization, involves understanding a defining concept emerging from the data. Researchers identify social patterns and refine them into definitions that align with their research. they utilize tools like diagrams or models to understand the relationships among these concepts. The quality of these definitions is assessed based on clarity, accuracy, reliability, applicability, and their contribution to theory and practice;

The last step:

- **The development of a conceptual model**. In this final step of thematic analysis, a broader thematic structure is developed (which may or may not be theoretical). This process involves creating a unique representation of the data and it is often guided by existing theories. The model serves to answer the research questions and underscore the study's contribution to knowledge. The step signifies the conclusion of the analysis; it encapsulates all the findings and insights derived from the data. Gibbs (2008)

Gibb's six steps served as a roadmap for me to accurately process data. They enhanced "the rigor of the research process and the depth of research findings" (Naeem et al., 2023: p.2).

4.9 CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, ethical issues such as sampling frame, recruitment of participants, confidentiality, and informed consent were discussed. A wide range of data collection sources,

including photographs, memory work, systematic introspection (Ellis, 2008), and reflections from a data collection exercise, were adopted. The chapter begins with an introduction and explanation of the adopted methodology, and afterward, the writer walks the reader through the data collection process and data analysis. The outcomes of the chosen data collection tools will be provided in the following chapter. In this chapter, I combined both personal and cultural background information that establishes a solid direction for my personal experiences as well as portraying my journey. The chapter presented a powerful autoethnographic account of personal experiences of violence, identity formation, and faith. Using autoethnography enabled me to explore my subjective and cultural experiences as well as those of my participants. Autoethnography allowed my personal experiences to become valid data. I was able to research, explore, and use a relatively new genre for the purpose for which it was intended. Autoethnography freed me to write reflectively, thoughtfully, and introspectively about a very personal subject close to my heart. Completing this autoethnography contributed to my healing because, as Behar (2003) commented with reference to her experiences, it helped me to come "a full circle, or better, the circle widened, stretched, opened for me" (2003: p.342). I believe I enriched and added credibility to the research and exploration of marginalized and very specialized populations by using autoethnography.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter presented and discussed three techniques that were used to collect data for this study, namely, a triangulation of data between autoethnography, a focus group discussion, and individual interviews. This chapter presents data that was gathered using these three techniques to shed light on the key motivation behind this study, which was to learn how African faith communities can become a community of Radical Hospitality for black Izitabane women who are surviving homophobic hatred and violence in Pietermaritzburg. To answer the main purpose of this study, the secondary guiding questions of this study were:

1. What are the causes and consequences of homophobic hatred and violence as experienced by black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, Kwa-Zulu Natal?
2. How do black Izitabane women draw on faith as they navigate homophobic hatred and violence in Pietermaritzburg, Kwa-Zulu Natal?
3. How can Queer Theology be used as a faith resource to enable the formation and development of counter communities of care for black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal?

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section, Section 5.2, provides a personal and autoethnographic account of the author's experiences to shed light on the studied phenomena. Autoethnography is the lens through which I made sense of, explored, and analyzed my own experiences. The six snapshots, as briefly introduced in chapter four, are presented and reflected on, making use of artifacts such as photographs, a song, a narrative, and memories. This section is presented in a first-person, subjective voice, which invites readers and participants to place themselves in my world. Section 5.3 presents data that was gathered from a Focus Group discussion. This section combines reflections of my narrative with conversations and observations I had with nine black Izitabane women. Section 5.4 presents data from Individual Interviews. Both data from the focus group discussion and the individual interviews are supported by short extracts from the external data sources that were consulted. Finally, Section 5.5 focuses on six resonant themes that speak to the complexities of black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg. The following section begins with my narrative. In this chapter, I share my own stories at length, and then I am going to share the stories of the

co-participants because this is what this study is about. It is about sharing and capturing uncut and unfiltered stories of black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg.

5.2 An Autoethnographic Account

> *"We start with ourselves and then include representative stories of others' journeys on a narrative inquiry path" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xiii)*

It is beyond the scope of this study to share all the critical events on which this research is based. What follows are snapshots of the prominent events that took place in my life and that are framing this study. Although many different techniques are worthy of further individual analysis, such as metaphors and journeys, I believe that the snapshots are the most profound in providing insight into the events that describe these important experiences in my life. Snapshots characterize important events in my life that demonstrate my need to feel safe and to find belonging. It should be noted that some of the events discussed in this study took place a few years before I decided to reflect on them as part of this doctoral research. I was not involved in doctoral studies at the time of the events, nor did I have any plans to do so. I decided to use these events as the focus of my research after it had taken place. I highlight that, as much as some of these experiences have been personally challenging, I believe they are important, educational, and liberating. I choose to use these experiences to give voice to women who, in general, are a segment of the population that is marginalized and excluded. What follows is a narrative summary of events along with external data sources.

Snapshot One

Being acquainted with Christianity

> *Christianity is a significant part of my life, my upbringing, and my identity. I believe I would not be where I am if it wasn't for my experiences with faith, good or bad. Additionally, I hold a strong connection to the Roman Catholic church and it is ultimately where my journey with faith began. There are so many memories of things that happened that have marked the Roman Catholic Church as a place that is filled with my becoming, and there are different ways that this place has impacted me. The church is one of the spaces where so many of my core memories, those that I constantly reflect on and hold dear to my heart as I live on, occurred for me, and they exist for me to reflect on. In this snapshot, I reflect on how I became acquainted with the religion of Christianity, what I learned from the religion, and why I have identified as a Christian throughout my whole life. I reflect on what I was taught about God and how I understand his love and mercy.*
>
> *I am a black Isitabane woman who was brought up in a devout Christian family in Impendle, where religion was the ultimate answer to all questions you might*

have had in life. Growing up, my late grandmother, who raised me as a Catholic, ensured that I was actively involved in the life of the church and that I understood and followed the essential Christian values embraced by the church. Every Sunday, we would spend at least three hours at the church and dedicate at least one day a week to various church activities. My grandmother believed that being involved in a faith community had a lot of benefits for a Christian and that the Bible is the one and only source of truth that we must always go to for guidance and that we must always stay faithful to what it has to say. Every Saturday, she made sure that my siblings and I attended Bible study, where we were taught values that were meant to shape our characters and guide us in becoming 'good Christians,' as well as grow our relationships with God and serve Him in all that we did. When writing my autoethnography and reflecting on my faith experience, I thought about two things that I learned when I was growing up. A song that we used to sing after Bible studies and a prayer that my grandmother taught me. These two items remind me of my first encounter with the church and with faith. An encounter that will remain with me for a lifetime:

Siyabonga, Nkosi Yethu (Thank you, our King)

Ngobu-si-gci-ni-le (For You Have Protected Us)

Sesi-ye-ma-kha-ya Ethu (We Are Going to Our Homes Now)

Hamba Nathi Nkosi (Come with Us King)

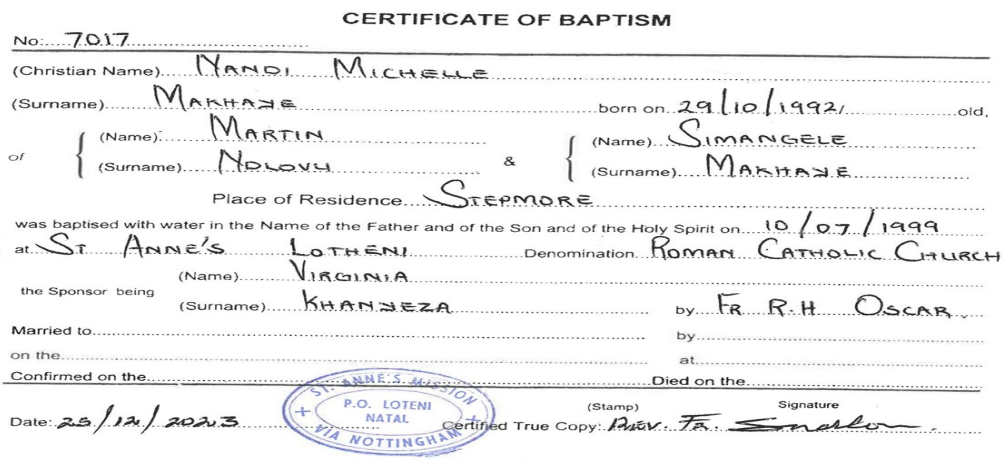
Amen!!

Figure 1

Nkulunkulu Baba, Besisacela Ubusise Lokudla Esikuphiwa Nguwe Egameni LikaJesu Christo Amen!! (God Bless the Food We Are About to Eat in Jesus's Name, Amen!!!)

Figure 2

These are some of many 'artifacts' that have been engraved into my brain and in my heart, unlike anything else. After all, they were part of my daily life. I heard them all the time – a song after Bible studies and a prayer before every meal. As I grew up, the church became a very important part of my life. At the age of seven, I received the Sacrament of Admission, also known as Baptism then at the age of thirteen, I received my first Holy Communion; and at the age of eighteen, I received the Sacrament of Confirmation as a sign of my dedication to the Christian faith. I remember the day I received the Sacrament of Baptism. It was one of the happiest days of my life. I remember this day because my mother bought me a new outfit to wear on that day. I remember waiting at the altar with a group of other kids who were also waiting to be Baptized. Being Baptized gave me a sense of belonging. It made me feel seen and recognized as part of the church and deserving of being in the presence of God. It was an incredible and special experience, one that I'm grateful for and one that I hold dearly to my heart.



CERTIFICATE OF BAPTISM

No: 7017

(Christian Name) NANDI MICHELLE

(Surname) MAKHANZE born on 29/10/1992/ old.

of { (Name) MARTIN & (Name) SIMANGELE
{ (Surname) NDLOVU (Surname) MAKHANZE

Place of Residence STEPMORE

was baptised with water in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit on 10/07/1999

at ST ANNE'S LOTHENI Denomination ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

the Sponsor being (Name) VIRGINIA
(Surname) KHANYEZA by FR R.H OSCAR

Married to by

on the at

Confirmed on the Died on the

Date: 29/12/2023 ST. ANNE'S MISSION P.O. LOTENI NATAL VIA NOTTINGHAM (Stamp) Certified True Copy: Rev. Fr. Signature

Figure 3

I never really questioned why my grandmother wanted me or my siblings to participate in the church life; I merely found myself going there every Sunday for church services and sometimes on Saturdays for other activities such as assisting with cleaning and attending youth meetings. I often found myself being moved by the endearing way that our pastor spoke about the love of God. Plus, the way that each Bible verse was always accompanied by a story helped me to follow along. Our pastor often lightened tense moments with stories about life and history. This made me feel like I was in the right place, not only learning about God but also about myself, as many of the sermons were introspective. Our pastor always challenged us to live a more selfless life. After each sermon, the pastor would urge us to devote our time to serving God by doing good. To also strengthen and celebrate our faith together. The church space wasn't simply a place of worship, but a safe space for many people from different backgrounds to come in and build relationships. The church was about building up more than one part of the congregant's life to be stronger in order to meet that ultimate goal.

Looking back, I think going to church every Sunday with my grandmother and being around my grandmother, someone who believed in God her whole life and someone who appreciated Sundays and going to church, planted the seed in me. Seeing how that woman believed in God and seeing just how confident she was in believing made me want to be part of a church community. As a child, I kept absorbing her contentment and satisfaction, turning it into information on which I based my opinion of the church and God. I began to view the space as a source of love and support. I knew that if I was going through something, the church was the place for me to go.

I also believe that everything that I was taught as a child and in my teen years. influenced how I viewed religion for most of my life. These include healing, loving, accepting, forgiving, and welcoming. This is who God is, and this is what God wants from us as Christians. God is love. He acknowledged and welcomed those who are pushed to the fringe of society for a variety of reasons. This was continuously taught and practiced in our church. Our church welcomed everyone; even people from other churches were welcomed.

Everyone was kind and hands-on. Whenever someone was sick, the pastor would pray for that person and their family. When we didn't have Okweshumi [contribution to the ministry] on Sundays, the elders in the church would give us money without expecting us to pay it back. So, it was inspiring for me to be part of a faith community that constantly preached about selflessness and where everyone took care of one another. This dedication by the church is what thrilled my heart and inspired me to want to do good and give back to my community.

Snapshot two

"Coming Out" as Isitabane

I was 17 years old when I realized that I found women attractive. Back then, I had absolutely no idea what this meant. This was mainly because, in my community, Ubutabane was definitely something to "not talk about". I did not even know what the words 'Isitabane' and 'Ubutabane' meant or that they existed. When I was growing up, these words had been tabooed in my community; in my house, the topic never came up, and at school, Ubutabane was never talked about. At church, we were taught that Ubutabane is against the Bible. When I was growing up, I observed that talking about the topic could have adverse consequences- not only for you but for those around you, including your family. Overall, the topic came with a lot of stigma, and I did not want to bring it up. Terms such as sissy-boy (female-boy) or umjita (slang for a male) were used to label persons who behaved soft or 'different' in any sense. In this snapshot, I reflect on my journey of self-discovery and self-disclosure. I begin this section with a picture of myself receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation. This picture displays the opposite of who I was becoming inside (Figure 3).

Figure 4

Growing up, Ubutabane was simply not a part of our worldview. It was and, to a certain extent, still is a highly sensitive and often shunned topic. On the few occasions when it did occur, it was quickly established that it was neither desirable nor acceptable. So, when I realized that I found women attractive and began to think of myself as Isitabane – I decided that was going to be my best-kept secret. No one was ever going to find out. I felt ashamed for possessing such an attraction. I was always afraid of what people were going to say if they found out. I knew that if I didn't hide my sexual identity, I would never be fully accepted. I promised myself not to entertain these desires and to commit myself to praying so that I could be freed from my sinful desires. During the process of writing this autoethnography and reflecting on my journey of self-discovery and

self-disclosure, I thought about a book that I had read when I was in matric a year after my self-discovery. This book changed a lot for me, including my perspective of Ubutabane and Izitabane. When I was in matric, as part of the syllabus, we were given a Zulu novel titled "Bengithi Lizokuna" (I Thought It Would Rain) written by Dr. Nakanjani Sibiya to read and review in front of the class. The novel deals with a highly sensitive and often shunned topic of Ubutabane and was an eye-opener for me. Even though the book focuses on transgender bodies, it left me with so many questions and random thoughts about Ubutabane and Izitabane, but I chose to keep them to myself. As a believer, I knew that I had to ignore my feelings and keep my distance from Izitabane.

However, no matter how much I tried to ignore my feelings for other girls, they were there. Every morning and every night, waiting for me to react. I was always curious about what they meant to me. I had so many questions and looking for answers. I prayed hard and asked God to 'fix' me. I believed that the only thing that was going to help me was praying and forgetting about my sexuality. I was wrong. The more I prayed, the more I thought about these feelings. Sometimes, I fantasized about being with a woman for the first time. I'd pray more. As a 'good Christian', all these thoughts made me feel like I was doing something wrong, something that should not be done. Things started getting harder and harder for me as I battled with these feelings and tried to maintain my image as a 'good Christian'. I was embarrassed to share this with anyone, especially my family. I just felt like a good Christian just shouldn't struggle with something like this. I felt like I had no one to turn to. I was alone, confused, and had no understanding of what I was experiencing. Everything that I was taught and that I knew was within a straight, heteronormative Christian world, and what I was experiencing was coming from a completely different universe. These feelings were even more painful than worrying about whether or not I would suffer in hell when I die.

Over time, I chose to be honest with my mom about both my desire to be with other women and the internal conflict I was experiencing. I was suffering, alone, and tired of pretending to be someone I was not. Instead of asking God to 'fix' me, I thought it was best for me to focus on building genuine connections with my family, especially my mother. It wasn't easy to share any of this stuff with her because it was new to me. I had no idea what the repercussions would be. Was she going to accept me? Or was she going to kick me out of my home? Both these questions reflect what is termed "internalized homophobia" and being uncomfortable with my sexuality such that I had to worry about keeping this a secret. To my surprise, my mother gave me a safe space to share my vulnerability. She listened to me and embraced me. I remember my mom confessing, "Bengivele ngazi mntanami, kodwa bengfuna wena ungitshele. Uyingane yami futhi ngiyakuthanda" [I have always known my child, but I wanted you to tell me. You are my child and I love you]. The fears I had built up over many years about opening up and revealing my sexuality as Isitabane slowly melted away. Fortunately, my mother started showing signs that she accepted me no matter what. She has proven to me countless times that she meant it when she said she accepts me. She has never stopped fighting for me, and I will always be grateful for her.

A few years later, my mom called me to her room and gave me a book (Figure 5) titled "Bengithi Lizokuna" (I Thought It Would Rain), not knowing that I had read it when I was in high school. I remember my mom jokingly said to me, "Ngikuthengele nali ibhuku, ngyazi uzolithokozela". "I bought this book for you. I'm sure you will relate", to which I replied awkwardly laughing it off. Even though it was just a small gesture, it meant the world to me. It made me feel seen, like she had accepted me. The fact that she thought of me when she saw the book meant something to me. This is a luxury and blessing that I still cherish to this day. All in all, my mother's love and acceptance made me believe that it was okay for me to be who I was and that talking about my feelings was not as bad as I had feared. Gradually, I started gaining more self-confidence that maybe my sexuality wasn't a sin. After some time of having come out to my mother, I started disclosing my sexuality to my immediate family, and most were not surprised because "they've always known". They all did the same, loved and embraced me. I remember my uncle saying, "I grew up with people like you; you are not special." I was surprised because my uncle is a typical Zulu man. He's all about culture.

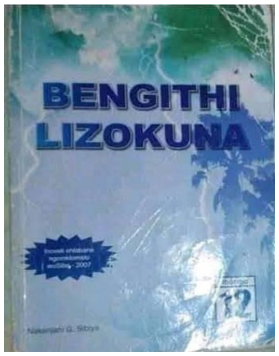


Figure 5

With everything considered, my experiences of disclosing my sexuality to my Christian African family have thus far been positive; I was always met with acceptance, though I'll never know what thoughts remained unexpressed. The love that I got from my family changed my perspective and gave me the confidence to push back against the normative discourses that had been imparted to me throughout my life. Their acceptance was vital to me more than anything else because I felt that if I had their love and support then I could conquer anything. I firmly believe that their love and support contributed to my self-acceptance.

Snapshot Three

Split Between the Two Worlds: A 'good Christian girl' gone Isitabane

While my family accepted me despite my sexuality, my journey of trying to embody both my religious and sexual identities in a black heteronormative society was the result of a long pathway. It was a difficult journey for me. Social responses to this new developing identity made me feel different and unwelcomed. I had to make a choice between leaving one identity or claiming and embracing both identities. I had tried to choose only one identity before but

it didn't work. In this snapshot, I reflect on this journey. I reflect on how I faced criticism from both fellow Christians and those outside the church. I reflect on the heteronormative system and conservative culture that permeates many African communities, including the community where I grew up that seeks to 'other' black Izitabane women and produce a pattern of closeting whereby black Izitabane women like myself feel uncomfortable about exploring and embracing their sexuality. In this snapshot, I reflect on the tension between being an Isitabane woman and being a Christian piled on top of the traumatic experience of losing my grandmother that I was already dealing with.

Figure 6

After 'coming out' to my family, I began to embrace my Isitabane identity and the person that I was becoming. I began to embrace the masculine side of my sexuality by slowly changing my appearance to coincide with what a 'typical' Isitabane woman would look like. I remember asking my brother to give me some of his old clothes, and I remember my grandmother buying me three pairs of blue, red, and grey boy's underwear. I was excited. I remember asking my big sister to buy me what you would typically refer to as clothes for "males". At school, I didn't like wearing my school uniform. I was more comfortable with wearing tracksuits or pants. During this time of trying to explore who I was becoming, I was met with rejection, violence, marginalization, and a whole lot of other things. I was often told that my attraction for other women was "just a phase" and that I was going to outgrow it. Some people told me that I just needed to find the "right man", and some even tried to save me from Ubutabane's tendencies'. These negative experiences never made me feel good. They created a tremendous sense of conflict in me and indeed attributed to the idea that being Isitabane and Christian is "incompatible" and a "contradiction".

For quite a while, I was uncertain about how to situate my sexuality within religion, also believing that everything that happened in my life was because I was doing what was perceived to be "against God." There were times when I was convinced and believed that my religious identity was more important than my sexuality, there were times when I chose my sexuality, and there were times when I wanted to discard both identities and just be me. Most times, I tried to maintain distance between the two identities by keeping my sexuality a secret. I told myself that if I wanted to be a better Christian, then I had to either be

careful about publicizing my sexuality, ignore it, or hide it. Looking back, harmful beliefs about Ubutabane and the fear of being judged and rejected by my community discouraged me from exploring my sexuality. As a black Isitabane woman and particularly a masculine-presenting Isitabane, I felt silenced and even discriminated against. The only time I felt I was free to be myself and wear what I wanted was when I was at home with my family. During this time in my life, I had to learn to perform and maintain a public and private life regarding my sexual identity. When attending church or even school, I was not free to express myself fully through my clothing because women were not allowed to wear pants both at school and in my church. I feel that the church silenced this part of my being.

I was constantly worried about people finding out about my sexuality. On the surface, I was probably the same old Nandi. But deep down, I was hurting. I wanted to live an everyday life and not hide who I was. I was struggling. I developed significant anxiety and physical health problems; and quite honestly, I started to question if I wanted to live. I had been told that this kind of 'sin' was unforgivable. God despises Izitabane, I've been told. So clearly, God must despise me. Many times, I saw my sexuality as something that would never give me peace and that I needed to remove or ignore. When Ubutabane was occasionally mentioned in religious sermons, I remember my fellow church members seated around me nodding in agreement that a relationship between people of the same sex was against the natural law and that celibacy was the only path for individuals with disordered tendencies, like myself. The church did not see Ubutabane as complementary to the Christian faith. It was always hard to sit through these sermons. I started to hate going to church.

Again, the praying began. I spent years praying and asking God to show me what I had to do to change and more years policing my movements to stay invisible and away from hate. The more I prayed, the more I became curious about Ubutabane, and the more I became aware that I am Isitabane and there was no running away from it. Things got worse when my grandmother passed away. The load just kept getting heavier. It was the very beginning of a difficult journey for me—one where I intensely wrestled with my faith, with myself, with grief, and with God. The church, a place that had once my home since birth, slowly began to turn into a dark and lonely place where I no longer fit. I started building walls of silence to protect myself psychologically. These walls slowly transfigured into prison and to self-hate.

Snapshot Four

Recreating and Reclaiming My Sexuality and Christian Identity

And then there was the day I moved to Pietermaritzburg to start a new life as a university student. I had just lost my grandmother, and I was moving to an entirely different world, all by myself. I was alone, in pain, and trying to figure out my new life. I didn't have friends to talk to about what I was going through. The only thing I had was my faith. I felt like I needed a safe space to be vulnerable, deal with my emotions, and explore who I was becoming. I needed something to distract me from all the pain and the loneliness I was feeling. So, when I was doing my second year, I decided to start looking for people like me,

which led me to CHASU (Campus HIV/AIDS Support Unit). I felt like this was the perfect place for me to be myself. My university years in Pietermaritzburg as a graduate have provided me with incredible opportunities to develop a critical sense of self, including my articulation of how my personal experiences have shaped my research inquiry. Throughout my schooling in this institution, both my sexual identity and my religious identity were being shaped and reshaped. In this snapshot, I reflect on how moving to university to pursue my studies provided me with an opportunity to explore my sexuality and how I tried to recreate, reclaim, and integrate my conflicting identities.

When I moved to live in Pietermaritzburg, I met and socialized with people from different backgrounds, religions, and worldviews, some of whom thought that being Isitabane was fine. Many of the people I met at university didn't even care about Ubutabane. Everyone was just minding their business and doing their own thing. But despite finding people who were open-minded and more accepting, I kept my sexuality to myself. I remember attending my first lecture at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg Campus). I entered the lecture room and felt both a flurry of excitement and a wave of heated fear. I was excited and scared. After all, this would be my first time being alone and completely independent in a university setting. During the first year, I was just living in the shadows: no friends, no extracurricular activities, nothing. I was always in a constant state of skepticism, uncertainty, and vulnerability. These feelings were difficult for me to tolerate. I wanted so badly to find my place within the world, but I was afraid of being judged and rejected by this new community.

It became increasingly challenging for me to live my life without my family. My family knew who I was, and they accepted me. So, I decided to start looking for people who are like me, which led me to CHASU (Campus HIV/AIDS Support Unit). CHASU is a university-based non-profit organization that focuses on raising awareness of the different factors that affect people's psychological and physical health. The unit has five forums, including a forum for people of diverse gender and sexuality. The forum was established by Izitabane to provide opportunities for Izitabane persons and allies to meet and socialize with one another. At first, I wasn't sure about getting together with strangers, but eventually, I mustered up the courage to join the Forum. I decided to give it a try, and I'm glad I did. After joining the forum, I felt as if everything was going to be okay. It didn't matter who I was; I was going to be accepted, just like many had been before me. Joining the forum allowed me to find and be around people who were like me. Being part of CHASU and Uthingo Network provided me with a sense of connectedness and belonging. Both these spaces provided me with the tools to enhance my life as Isitabane. They have also helped me to develop ways to integrate both these identities healthily and intelligently.

I had no idea that joining these two spaces would lead to one of the happiest and most memorable moments of my life. I was proud of how far I had come despite living in fear and isolation for so many years. It was one of the greatest joys I've ever experienced to finally be acknowledged and supported for who I really am. These spaces gave me an opportunity to build relations with people with whom we shared similar experiences, learn of their experiences, and become part of a "community". They helped me with my journey of self-

acceptance and also in supporting other Izitabane who are also struggling with their sexuality like me. In the last few years, I have been very overt in the area of homophobia, among other things. Every chance I get, I speak out against the exclusion of Izitabane bodies openly and without fear. Being part of these spaces provides a sense of relief, knowing I'm not the only one, and I have also made friends with whom I can share my thoughts, feelings, and difficulties. CHASU and Uthingo provided me with a safe space to deal with all the emotions and to just think about my journey as Isitabane.

Despite having found CHASU and Uthingo, I continued to feel more and more alone and isolated. I got the support and guidance, but something was still missing. The pain of losing my grandmother and being away from home was taking its toll. I felt like something was missing from me. I felt like there were still other parts of me that needed healing. I needed help and I knew that I needed to do something. But I had tried almost everything, including therapy. Nothing seemed to be helping. It took a while, but after months of reflection, I knew what I had to do. I knew where to go. A church!

Snapshot Five

A Condemned Body: A Testimony of Lost Hope

As it has been established throughout this study, I was raised in a religious house, and being part of a church was always important to me. Despite my unpleasant experiences with religion, going to church has always been an important part of my life. It was not easy for me to just give up on something that has been part of my whole just because a few people had an issue with Ubutabane. I started searching for a church, hoping that one day, I was going to find one where I would feel safe to express myself and to fill this void inside of me. I felt like I needed a safe space to be vulnerable and deal with all my other feelings. So, going to church seemed like a good idea and the only solution. I felt like if I found the church, everything was going to be okay. In this snapshot, the exploration focuses on one incident that happened in 2013. I explore how in my search for a church, a malicious and homophobic pastor at the church exposed my sexuality to fellow church members. By sharing this account of a critical incident that examines power and hierarchy in black faith spaces, I show how faith communities privilege and protect the heteronormative discourse and how black Izitabane women are excluded in the process. I capture the impact of homophobic and heteronormative discursive practices on faith, well-being, and identity.

In 2013, I was walking back to my room from attending lectures when I bumped into this man giving out fliers. I believe he was a student because he was inside the university premises. This man, mid-20s, black, African, was giving out fliers to students, and he gave me one, and I took it. On the flier, there was a picture of a man wearing a cross around his neck. Besides this man, there was a woman wearing a Western African traditional outfit. Below was also the name of the church written in big words, including time, date, address, and a piece of Scripture. He then asked me to come and join the service that was going to be taking place the following Sunday. I asked him the location of the church. He replied, "The address is on the flier, and transport will be provided for students.

I will be part of the group that will be leaving from the main gate. You can join us then we will leave together," pointing in the direction of the M1 gate. "Please do join us" he insisted. I ask him about the dress clothes. "There is no dress code just wear comfortable clothes". When he said that there was no dress code, I was relieved because I had stopped wearing skirts and dresses. I took the flier, and I assured him I was coming. I was already looking for a church so it wasn't a difficult decision to make. I remember this day very well. I was upset because I was in an argument with my partner at the time.

When Sunday came, I woke up early, got dressed, and made my way to the main gate to join other students who were also going there for the first time. Knowing that there were other students who were going to this church for the first time made me feel a bit safe. I had planned to sit at the back alone, and I had planned to leave as soon as the pastor said Amen. I was new and I didn't want anyone to notice that there was Isitabane in the church. As we walked up the concrete steps, the sound of the worship team singing gently blew into my ears. I tried to smile as I was greeted by the ushers, following families, couples, and friends. I walked in and picked a seat in the back. I had never thought of the church as anything other than a place of comfort. Even with all my experiences with religion, I still believed that the church was a place for comfort and a place where I was supposed to be, but that was clearly about to change. As I sat down, I felt my stomach roll a little bit inside me as I was wiping my sweaty forehead with my handkerchief. I hadn't been to church as fully myself before. Back home, things were different. I was not allowed to go to church as Isitabane. They didn't have to say it, but I knew that was not possible. I was expected to wear skirts, blouses, and dresses and I had to leave Ubutabane at home. But that day I was wearing pants and there was no one to tell me that I couldn't.

As I was sitting down, other members of the church were also making their way to their seats. I looked around, kind of perplexed at the things I was seeing. Everyone was laughing and smiling with one another, greeting fellow church members with big hugs. What really surprised me was that no one was dressed in church uniform and there were no seating arrangements. Everyone was just wearing their clothes; even the pastor was dressed in a suit and everyone seated where they wanted to sit. Where I come from, the choir sits separately, young girls and boys on the other side, old women on the other side, men on the other side, etc. In front of me was a church transformed, so I thought. I immediately felt the knot in my stomach loosen. There was something different about the space. There was an air of friendship, a welcoming aura that, to my surprise, drew me to sit in the front of the church, not the back corner as initially planned. The band kept singing and playing instruments. I listened as they carried on singing, feeling the knot loosen yet again as the music comforted me.

The greetings slowed down, and the talking ceased. Now, there was only the beauty that comes from many voices joining together to sing the exact words. People were dancing and praising. I was also dancing while trying to understand the complex hymns I was singing. Unity had taken hold of everyone in that room, and though I knew I was an outsider, I didn't feel like one. After two songs, the Pastor stepped up to the microphone, bible in hand. He was a middle-aged man, maybe in his late 30s or early 40s. He wore a black suit and was accompanied by his wife. Between the dress code and being accompanied

by his wife to the altar, this church already felt like a completely different world than I had expected. It appeared to be a very fresh take on practicing religion, modernized and efficient. A few minutes later, the pastor began to speak. I adjusted in my seat and listened. He introduced himself, his wife, and the church. He then welcomed everybody, and the service commenced. When the service was almost over, the pastor invited all those who were new and those who needed prayers to come forward. I remember not feeling like I needed prayer for anything specific but, at the same time, feeling that I needed to go to the altar. Even though I was still dealing with a lot at the time, the only thing that was on my mind that day was my relationship that was about to end, but I was not ready to talk to God about that. I watched people making their way to the altar with their hands in the air, praising God. It was refreshing. I got up and followed everyone.

When the pastor started praying for us, one by one, people started falling down everywhere and I just stood there waiting for my turn. When he came across me, he just stood in front of me and stopped praying. He started making comments regarding my physical appearance based on what I was wearing and how I presented myself (dressed and presented as a masculine Isitabane woman). I knew immediately what he was getting at, but I didn't want to say anything. I raised my head to take a look at him. His face was clouded with judgment, his voice was dripped with disgust, and his eyes darted away in discomfort. He looked and me and said: "What are you? Are you a man or a woman? Why are you dressed like a man?" Before I could answer, he said that he wanted to pray for me alone when he was done praying for everybody else. He said this was his duty as a Christian. He didn't stop there. He told the congregant that Ubutabane is a sin: "Beloved, do you know that this is a sin?" He pointed at me. He continued saying that God was against Ubutabane and that Izitabane were not going to heaven: "Ubutabane is a condemned; the Bible says so beloved! Anybody who is a true Christian knows that Ubutabane is wrong!" I looked around the church and everyone was staring at me and nodding, signaling to agree with what the pastor was saying.

I wish I could tell you that I stood up for myself and called him out for what he was saying. I didn't, actually. I found no strength to do so. I just remained silent. I attempted to cover the flush of shame and embarrassment by quickly leaving the church. Hearing someone who is supposed to be a leader say all those things to me in front of people was traumatic for me because it meant that in order for me to be accepted, I had to change my sexual identity, or believe that it could be changed. Something inside of me died that day. I felt humiliated. I felt betrayed by the person who invited me to that church. I was Isitabane and it was clear that Izitabane were not seen as human beings in that space. From that day, I started to doubt myself and my decision to embrace both my sexuality and my religious identity. I felt that maybe I wasn't ready to do so. I was trying but I was often met with rejection, leading to self-doubt and self-hate. Once again, I was confronted with feelings of shame and bitterness. I started to question God and his purpose for my life. If he loved me then why did he make me Isitabane? I asked myself if everyone saw in me what the pastor said, that I was a sinner. This experience brought back many emotions. For a very long time, I started to believe that I was indeed being punished. This experience

affected how I conducted myself. I became extremely introverted and excluded myself from people.

In those few months after having to leave church, I cried and prayed a lot. My heart was broken and I was looking for guidance and comfort. I felt disappointed in my fellow church members and in the faith leader because they did not provide the safe space and support that I was looking for. Instead, I faced judgment and criticism. For a while, I cut all ties to church and religion. The stress of being subjected to harassment and rejection began to take its toll on me physically and mentally. I fell into a dark hole of despair. I started self-harming. In December 2015, I spent two weeks in a hospital in Johannesburg, admitted for severe anxiety and depression.

Snapshot Six

Redefining Faith: A Turning Point

I'm a black Isitabane woman.

An Africa. A Christian.

I am no longer ashamed.

I am no longer afraid.

Everything started to make sense. Everything that I was experiencing was for me to experience and this meant that only I had the power to deal with all of it. It was time for me to face all my fears, the hate, the pain, the rejection, all of it. It all happened for a reason, and yes, it was all unfair but it didn't help to dwell on it. It was heavy for me to carry and it was destroying me inside. So, I knew what I had to do. I had to accept who I was becoming, and I had to accept the struggles that came with both my identities- struggles that, according to Adam, "never end but rather continue over the course of Isitabane person's life" (Adams, 2011: p.8). I am Isitabane, and I am no longer ashamed of it. My sexual identity and my religious identity are very important and essential parts of who I am. In this snapshot, I reflect on how I made the decision to fully embrace my sexual orientation, realizing that it is not Christian to hide who I am. This decision saved me from living a lie and a life of hypocrisy and denial. Here, I reflect on this journey of healing, finding belonging, and using my own lived experience to liberate other black Izitabane women.

Being constantly condemned by my religion caused me a lot of uncertainty and doubts about my faith and sexuality, and as a result, I was constantly forced to re-frame what both faith and my sexuality represent to me. I choose to celebrate both identities and this has helped me deal with hate and feelings of isolation. As I have stated, I was raised as a Christian, and my Christian identity is important to me but not more than my sexual identity. Both identities are essential to me and for people to know who I am, what I am, or where I come from. I believe that being respected and loved for who I truly am is more important to me than my religion. Identifying as Isitabane does not obscure or corrupt my faith in Christianity. By claiming and embracing the positive aspects of my religion, I found meaning beyond conventional doctrines. I will always acknowledge that faith has been an instrumental source for some of the positive

experiences with regard to understanding my sexuality, accomplished through a declaration that God created me this way and that being Isitabane is a gift from God that I must appreciate and enjoy. My sexuality is not something that I chose but found myself with; it deeply shapes my understanding of myself and provides a basis on which I can reconcile my sexual and religious identity.

In addition, faith empowered me to renew my relationship with God and once again assisted me with looking past the shortcomings of institutional religion. Another way that I had the option to accept my Isitabane identity was accomplished by proclaiming that I was born Isitabane and that my sexuality is part of my identity or core sense of myself. In embracing these beliefs, I validated my existence, my sexuality, and my religious identity. Indeed, it has been argued that this is a strategy that most Izitabane Christians adopt to affirm their sexuality. Now that I am reflecting on this aspect of my life, I believe that God deliberately created us the way we are and there is nothing wrong with Ubutabane or being Isitabane. Knowing that God loves me helps me deal with a lot of attacks against my sexuality, including the biblical texts that are often used against Izitabane. In addition, I believe that my faith is an integral part of myself and because I had a better understanding and acceptance from my family of my sexuality, I was able to reconcile my sexuality with my religion, and this led to greater self-acceptance. I am finally starting to be comfortable with being not just Isitabane but Isitabane of faith.

I choose to embrace who I am without sacrificing one identity for the other. I choose to celebrate my sexuality as an integral part of who God made me to be. I choose to celebrate my sexuality as part of my faith. I choose to search for what God wants for me, not what other people think God wants for me. This is not a written answer from God, but it is peace. I chose to open up my heart and mind to new things that I thought were impossible. Because of sexuality, my view of God's love has expanded. I welcome God into all the pieces of me. I have known about God all my life, and now it seems as if God is inviting me to know about Him. To love Him. To walk with Him. To be in a relationship with him. At this moment, I believe God is trying to position Himself before my eyes so that I can finally see that I am made in his image - and that he is worthy to be trusted. After many years of struggling with my sexuality and my faith, I know now that the Scriptures in the Bible have been mistranslated into many different languages and for many different cultures and these are open to translation. I now know that the Bible, where there exists much condemnation for many things that we as humans love is also the same Bible where I find peace. Where I also find the good news that God loved and died for people like me so that I could live forever. I don't need to know much more than that.

This is my journey as a black Isitabane of faith living in South Africa. My journey with faith has been back and forth as shown above. I believe that it has changed and evolved over the years as I have tried to explore my relationship with religion so many times. My journey is filled with feelings of resentment, frustration, and feelings of isolation. Reflecting on these experiences allows me to speak about Izitabane identities that are never spoken of and also to acknowledge that the church is an extremely emotional space when it comes to my journey of becoming. I know that many people do not have the same experience as I did when I came out to my family. I will always acknowledge

and be grateful that I have met the people in my life, for whom I feel very fortunate and privileged. I sometimes worry that my life might not have turned out the way it did if I had chosen to keep things inside and remain in my head rather than letting myself be seen and heard.

While I do, at times, lose myself stressing about the religious implications of living my truth, it's a lot more sensible with my family and friends behind me. I can say without hesitation and with real faith that I am a child of God. I am loved by God, and being Isitabane is the way I was created. I believe that God is on my side and that I am blessed by God. My sexual identity is very much part of my religious identity. Reflecting on my lived experiences of faith in this study has allowed me to find ways for both myself and the church to heal, grow, transform, and contemplate new possibilities. I think the church is best positioned to fight against homophobia and heterosexism. It is my hope that the church will engage on this issue with the same dedication and passion that it showed against the injustice of racism, so that we may rehabilitate the gospel of Jesus Christ in the eyes of many who have been deeply hurt and whose testimony will be explored in this study. These experiences shared here not only redirected my life but also changed the person I was into the person I am now.

5.3 The Unfiltered Voices of Black Izitabane Women Part I (Focus Group Discussion)

Personal stories have become ways to learn about the development of our identities: who we are and how we got that way (Kahneman, 2010). The concept of personal stories is further discussed by Linde (1993) who maintains that stories are an essential tool in the communication and negotiation of our sense of self with others. According to Linde, we use stories to make sense of the world and to share that understanding with others, so telling personal stories becomes a way for us to both define and project ourselves. Further, we utilize stories to claim or negotiate group membership and to demonstrate that we are worthy members of these groups, understanding and properly following their moral standards. Finally, stories address the widest of social constructions, since they create presuppositions about what can be taken as expected, what the norms are, and what common or special belief systems can be used to establish coherence (Linde, 1993: p.3). Through storytelling, individuals can create empathy and understanding, fostering connections and solidarity among marginalized communities (hooks, 1989). In this section, I present stories of women who have endured heterosexual norms, stories that may have been at one time considered taboo, as historically Ubutabane identity has been considered. I present these stories by applying the same technique of autoethnography that was used to structure my narrative which allows me to present these stories as they are.

The time has come, for not only are these stories ready to be told, but perhaps, more importantly, they are also ready to be heard as they are. These stories include coming-out stories and stories of identity formation, the participants' family history with religion, stories of violence, spirituality, sexuality, institutionalized religion, resistance, and perception of how these women are being treated by their fellow congregants due to their choice of sexual orientation. These stories by individuals whose voices have been traditionally silenced reveal new possibilities and these new possibilities take us beyond the limiting categories of identification and start building welcoming and inclusive communities by actively building meaningful relationships and engaging in dialogues with black Izitabane women. These stories challenge dominant negative narratives that seek to marginalize and erase black Izitabane women's voices. As I present these findings, the integrity of these women remains my number one priority. For each narrative, the participant's chosen ID number identifies the participant whose narrative follows.

5.3.1 Demographic Profile of Participants

Table 1: Participants' Identities

Demographic variable	Frequency
Raised Religious Identity	
Christian	**9**
Current religious Identity	
Practicing Christianity/religion	**3**
Non-Practicing Christians	**6**
Sexual identity	
Black Isitabane women	**9**

The sample consists of nine black Izitabane women from different townships across Pietermaritzburg, including Imbali, Edendale, Azalea, Northdale, and Scottsville. These women were all approached and selected through a local Izitabane support group, Uthingo Network in Pietermaritzburg. The demographic information collected was: (1) Participant's current age; (2) Participants' church affiliation or denomination; (3) Participant's social location. All the women were raised as Christians, but their levels of religiosity varied, with some attending church regularly and others attending church services only occasionally. These

women likewise reflect a range of religious denominations, including Roman Catholic Church, Methodist, Born-Again Christians, Apostle Church, and Nazareth Baptist Church, and non-traditional as well as some who attended church inconsistently and did not claim a specific denominational affiliation. Participants were given pseudonyms and identification numbers, and all identifying information was removed to ensure anonymity. Some shared that they occupied roles in the church, such as being youth leaders, and some shared that they were members of the choir or just members who were eager to share their stories with me. *Isitabane, Ungqingili, Gay, Homosexual, and Lesbian* were the terms that were used by the participants in this study to describe their sexual orientation.

Table 2: Participant Information

Number	**Pseudonym**[13]	**Age**	**Religious Affiliation or Denomination**	**Social location**
Participant #1	Amahle	28	Mahon Evangelical Church	Urban
Participant #2	Ndile	22	Nazareth Baptist Church & Zion Christian Church[14]	Rural
Participant #3	Nqubeko	21	Wesley Methodist Church & Rapha Fellowship Centre[15]	Semi-rural
Participant #4	Seko	23	Nazareth Baptist Church	Rural
Participant #5	Ayabonga	19	Roman Catholic Church	Semi-rural
Participant #6	Themba	19	12th Apostle Church	Rural
Participant #7	Kazi	18	Wesley Methodist Church	Urban
Participant #8	Zondi	35	12th Apostle Church	Semi-rural
Participant #9	Nosi	26	Home Worship[16]	Urban

5.3.2 Overview of Proceedings

The interviews for this study were conducted at Uthingo Network offices in Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg. This site was chosen because it is known by many Black Izitabane women and it is considered a safe space for Izitabane. The location is fenced and the building is

[13] Pseudonyms used when referring to another participant or when describing themselves
[14] Mother attends the Nazareth Baptist Church and father attends Zion Christian Church
[15] Grew up attending the Wesley Methodist Church and is currently attending Rapha Fellowship Centre
[16] Mother attends Roman Catholic Church and father is a Muslim.

decorated with positive messages and portraits of Izitabane. One focus group discussion took place on Saturday, the 11th of November 2023, at 04:00 pm. The original time at which the focus group discussion was supposed to start was 03:00 pm. However, one participant who had expressed interest in the study was running late because she had an exam that day. The discussion was then moved to 04:00 pm. It was fitting to do the interviews during this time of the week because the space that was utilized was not open to the public on weekends which means participants could share their lived experiences openly without concern for confidentiality or judgment. When the participants arrived, everybody gathered inside the boardroom that we were using for our discussion. I was very fortunate that all the women who confirmed that they were going to participate showed up. Once everyone was seated, I introduced myself and then welcomed the participants. I then explained my reasons for doing the study and gave everyone a few minutes to decide whether they wanted to continue participating in the study.

A few minutes later, the group convened and everyone expressed that they were still willing to take part in the study. Upon expressing an interest in the research, everyone was given an information sheet about the study to sign and return to me. The information sheet includes details about consent and confidentiality as well as the areas that the study would cover; childhood experiences of religion and how they developed their Christian faith, how they became aware of and came to accept their sexuality, their experiences of coming out, their experiences of violence, their involvement with faith communities, and how they felt these identities interacted. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the study, I emphasized that participation was voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw at any time. Thereafter, I began the focus group discussion by introducing each snapshot theme followed by my reflection on faith, and allowed the group to engage and share their experiences in relation to that particular snapshot. The narration of the stories was accompanied by a song, a prayer, photographs, and memories. These stories were about my own lived experiences as a black Isitabane woman in South Africa.

After introducing the first snapshot theme, the participants began to feel comfortable and started opening up and sharing their own stories. As they engaged with each snapshot theme, they reflected on the paths their lives had taken. As the discussions progressed, emotions heightened, reaching a climax of intensity. However, the overall mood shifted positively towards the end, with participants expressing hope for a better future despite past challenges, leaving the atmosphere with a sense of happiness and optimism. It was truly empowering to

see a group of women coming from different backgrounds, coming together to share their stories. After our group discussion, the women who were part of the group expressed their appreciation that I sought to provide a platform upon which to participate in this conversation.

All the interviews for this study were conducted in IsiZulu, however, participants did code-switch now and then during the interview. There were also times when participants used terms or expressions that I was not familiar with. In those moments I would request help or clarification from the responder to ensure that the participants' narratives don't lose their context. The following section presents stories that were gathered during a focus group discussion. I adopted the same technique that I used to present my autoethnographic narrative. I begin with the participant's stories of experiences of faith, followed by experiences of coming out and self-discovery, and afterward, how these women have found empowerment and transformation. These stories present an opportunity to explore the experiences that tend to be ignored.

5.3.2.1 Theme 1: Being Acquainted with Christianity

> *"... when I came out, I realized that I could no longer go to church because you know how Catholic people are. But I do believe yes, I believe". (Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)*

The first snapshot theme that was shared with the participants focused on my journey to faith - how I was introduced to Christianity and the church. A prayer [Figure 1] and a song [Figure 2] were shared to support this snapshot. I chose and used this snapshot as a prompt to explore how religion has shaped the experiences of black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg. It addressed not only important experiences that shaped the lives of these women but also looked at their religions and worldviews. As far as religious upbringing, all the women were brought up as Christians and grew up attending mass regularly (see Table 2.01). As adults, these women remain faithful to their religion. Likewise, the participants acknowledged the discrimination and violence within Christianity. The policing of dress code in faith spaces, mannerisms, and heteronormative cultural practices, such as *Ukukhethwa*[17] were also identified and acknowledged as factors that impacted how black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg navigate their faith. Despite this reality, faith remains an important part of all these women as demonstrated in their stories below:

> **Participant #1:** *The church and religion are something that I was raised with. When they spoke about our family history, my great-grandfather was*

[17] *Ukukhethwa* is a complex cultural practice that is most common amongst Nazareth Baptist Church whereby a man chooses a virgin in the church and pays lobola for her.

Umkhokheli [the leader of the church]. *So yes, I was born in the church. There was a time when I was battling with my feelings. We all go through that stage of doubt and stuff. There was a time when, although my family was not hostile and even in general, although I wasn't out they didn't have that thing that "We don't like Izitabane in this house". No, they didn't have that attitude. For me trying to fight these feelings, the church was the place to go to because I knew that if I went to church, then I would change. So, I had internalized all those things although the environment I was in wasn't hostile to the point that I wanted to change. So, yes, going to church is important at home and we do go to church…. So, yes, we do go to church, but if you don't want to, you don't want to*. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #2: *I can say that I am in between the Nazareth church and the Zion church because on my mother's side of the family, they are Zions, and on my father's side of the family even though there are a few who are Zions most of them are Nazareth. I stopped going to church before I even realized that I was into girls you see. At that time, I didn't mind wearing a skirt or dress until I realized that no this was not for me. I can say that when I'm at home, there's this thing that even when you don't want to go church you have to go to church by force. Every Sunday, we all knew that even when you didn't want to go to church, you would wake up, bathe, and go to church. When I realized that I was living this life I saw how people looked at me even though they never said anything to me directly. I decided right there and there that being crucified by these people [the church] was not working out for me. So, I decided to just stay at home and worship God by praying all the time and yes, I still believe in God.* **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #3: *Growing up, I used to go to a Wesleyan Church [also known as the Wesleyan Methodist Church] until I was fifteen years old. At fifteen years old, I decided to join a Born-Again Church [Reformed churches] and until now, I still go to this church. So, my reasons for leaving are not that maybe I was discriminated against. No. I just changed the church. Religion is still a big part of my life*. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #4: *At home they are Nazareth. So, they have very strict laws. Girls are forbidden from wearing pants. Ey, I don't go to church anymore. The last time I went was in 2016. I stopped because Ngakhethewa*[18] *and stuff. That was the last time that I went to church. I just pray at home that's it.* **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #5*: At home, we are Roman Catholics. I grew up going to church until I realized that I belonged to this certain community. I was no longer comfortable with wearing dresses and dressing feminine you see. So, in 2018, when I came out, I realized that I could no longer go to church because you know how Catholic people are. But I do believe yes, I believe.* **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #8: *I'm an Apostle. There are different types but, we are called the Twelve Old Apostolic Church [TWOAC]. I grew up in the church almost like everyone else here. My grandpa was one of the church founders. He was a*

[18] Ibid

leader, so growing up as a little kid with no clue about my sexuality at that time, it was exciting until I grew up and discovered myself. It wasn't my choice [going to church] but I loved the idea of believing. It found a place within me, but as I grew up, it didn't become the place for me. I still am a churchgoer by force but it's very hard right now. I still believe in God. I guess because of my grandpa, I still have that thing that even though I'm an Apostle, there are a lot of other religions that I want to explore. I've tried some and felt comfortable, but there's that thing that maybe I was raised in the Apostolic. There's that thing that says Apostolic Apostolic. But yes, it wasn't my choice and I love believing, unfortunately. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #9: *My experience with religion and faith is very different from everyone else. At home, I live in a blended family such that my dad is from Malawi, and he is a Muslim, and my mom is a Roman Catholic. She grew up as such, and then later, she became a Sangoma [Traditional healer]. So, as you can see faith and religion have been such a complex topic when I was growing up because you never really go one side. You can't be a Muslim completely because some of the Zulu traditions are against the Muslim culture, or what happens in my mother's church is against my father's church, you know. So, my experience has been very interesting because now, growing up, we couldn't pick a side. It felt like you're going to choose this one and abandon that one to the point where one of my brothers is a Christian and one of my brothers is a Muslim and then me and my sister …. we haven't chosen a faith. So now it's kinda [kind of] like the ideals of the Roman Catholic church and the ideals of Muslims they are imbedded at home. So, growing up and figuring out my sexuality was difficult because of those ideals that are there at home regardless of the fact that I go to church actively or not. So, for me, I didn't really pick a side that I feel has disadvantaged me as I grew up and as I met my partner. She goes to church and I don't, and it almost feels like, in certain circumstances, I cannot identify with her experiences because I do not have them, you know. So that has been quite a struggle and understanding what to disregard and keep in my life that has also been a struggle as well. But otherwise, faith has found a place in my life in my own kind of way. With my sexuality, though, I don't think I will ever go to church as a Muslim because I can see that it's very constricting. also, as someone who is spiritually gifted, it's very constricting as well.* **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

5.3.2.2 Theme 2: The Journey of "Coming Out" as Isitabane

"… I was confused. I was still young and didn't understand what was happening. I tried dating a boy but it was a project that was never submitted. It didn't go well so I left it… It wasn't easy…." (Participant 4 Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)

The second snapshot theme focused on a black Isitabane woman's perceptions, lived experiences, and perspectives of "coming out" as Isitabane woman in a socioreligious heteronormative Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. This theme provoked valuable stories about family and community response towards Izitabane and Ubutabane, early messages, and understanding about race, religion, culture, gender, and sexual identity. In this snapshot theme,

participants shared and reflected on their unique journeys of "coming out" and embracing counter-normative sexualities. They reflected on the difficult challenges that they have met in the process of navigating their Isitabane and Christian identities in the context of faith, family, and community in general. A combination of religious beliefs, society, and fear of family rejection discouraged these women from exploring and coming to terms with their feelings. In addition, these women employed different strategies to deal with the homophobic, heteronormative discourses that pervade many faith communities, including keeping their sexuality a secret and or building an image that fits the heteronormative standards like wearing make-up and getting into an intimate relationship with the opposite sex. Confusion, feeling scared, hurt, feeling lost, and alone, self-doubt, rejection, and depression are all emotions that were described by the participants. The participants recognized that although their journey has not been easy, they have learned to accept and embrace their sexuality. These stories present an opportunity to explore the experiences that tend to be ignored.

> ***Participant #8:*** *I didn't really come out as well because I was scared of my family. You know, when you listen to people talking about Somizi or when they see a girl walking differently, you hear them [my family] saying, "Isitabane. Akazazi ufunani" [That's an Isitabane, this person doesn't know what they want], "Ayikho lempilo" [There is no such life] you know. Growing up, I didn't really know I was like this, you know, but I saw it growing up, and only when I was like, ow# I feel different, and it's what they're always talking about. How am I going to tell them? So, it was never easy. I think I was fortunate enough that after matric I found a job. After finding a job I found my place. So, I was no longer scared that they were going to kick me out when they found out about my sexuality. Finding a job, I found it in Durban; my home was in Hammarsdale, and life just became different. I was turning 21 when the whole family actually saw who I really was you know. Almost very similar to your experience [referring to me]. My mom didn't raise me as well. She had me when she was young so my grandma has always been a part of my life. At that time, my mom was around, but our relationship was not the best. It's my 21st birthday, and my friends are there just like it is in this room. I remember my mom asking them why they were wearing baggy jeans. Most of them liked baggy jeans. "No, they're just cool, don't mind them," I replied. Later, as it was a party, we got drunk. I had a girlfriend back then. I remember we were at the petrol station, and my mom came through the garage to get me, and ey we were smooching [kissing] wild. She's like, "Woo" [shocked] you know. At that time, alcohol was part of the family but my mom wasn't a drinker. That day, she drank so much they had to carry her to bed, you know. It was ... for her when we talked about it, it was traumatizing for her but then I had questions like when I was growing up when she said "Let's go do some shopping for Christmas or Let's go get you a present" I'd pick a toy gun, a bicycle, or a solder. I'm like "What did you think?" When she wanted to buy me clothes I'd pick dungarees or jeans. Like ay you're a girl here is a dress for you, and I'm like, "What did you think?" She's like "Oh my God!". She realizes that she was blind to it. She saw it. It*

took a long while before the family could be okay with it. I was disowned at that time, but luckily, I had my place, eThekwini [Durban], so it didn't really hurt … no, it did hurt. It just didn't matter at that time. But yes, they found out like that and maybe it took them three to five years to come around. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #9: *Ya so coming out. I'd rather talk about coming out to me and figuring out who I am because, at home, I haven't yet gotten the courage. As I said, they are very traditional. My mother is a Sangoma [Traditional healer]. You tell her and say, "Ma, you know this is what's happening" and she'd say: "Kukhona ispirit esimbi esikuhleli emahlombe asambe syokugeza Emfuleni type of thing" [You have some bad spirit and you need to be taken to the river for cleansing]. So, I think as I grow older and understand myself and understand who I am. I think my experience of being a feminine presenting Isitabane person is very different because, you know, I'm not growing up and wearing boy clothes, or I do have those moments where I'm dressed masculine, but it's rare, which made the situation much more confusing like "What is happening with you? You have these feelings, you know, but you're still feminine?" You know what you see in the media. Once a person embarks on this road of Ubutabane, you start dressing masculine, you have piercings, and if you were around in the 2000s, you saw revolution piercings and everything, and you know I didn't know what that was until I really decided not to judge myself. I think religion definitely played a role in me judging myself because at home it was a thing that "Uma ufuna ukuba Isitabane uzoya esihogweni" [If you want to be Isitabane then you're going to hell] you know. They would speak about Sodom and Gomora, whatever the case is, you know, and eventually, when I finally figured that out, I think it made me more confident in what it is that I believe in and how to walk the walk and talk the talk. But now, the journey, the uphill battle, is to talk to the parents.* **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #5: *For me, coming out did not surprise my family a lot because when I was growing up, they used to call me a tomboy, and my brother is gay, and I'm a lesbian [Isitabane]. So, my family believed that all of this had to do with the ancestors. So, all along in primary [school], I didn't pay attention to it, and then when I was in Grade 8, where we started learning about sexualities, that is when I realized that I belong to the other homosexual part. And then from there, I came out and I remember I was drunk that day. My family kept saying: "We can't wait to see your first boyfriend. We can't wait to see your first boyfriend," and that is when I told them that I don't like boys at all. I continued to drink and they ignored what I was saying. The following morning, my family called me and asked me what I meant when I said I liked other women. My mother was not there at the time, and they [my family] were not harassing me or anything. They were just asking. I think they were expecting me to come out. They then sat me down and told me that it was okay and they spoke to me about acceptance. They were talking to me nicely. Even though in my head I still have that thing that maybe they think it's just a phase. That's what I think. So far, they have been okay.* **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #3: *So, for me, from Grade 8 to Grade 12 I used to have 'wives' who were my teachers. I had like six. So, imagine I really loved them but no one knew about this. And I didn't realize that I was having feelings for other women.*

I didn't pay attention to that. So, as I have said, I used to go to a Wesleyan church, and when I was in Grade 10, I became a born-again Christian. So, when you're a born-again Christian, what they preach every day is "Mowuyisitabane uzoya esihogweni, Sodoma neGomora" [If you're gay, you're going to hell, Sodom and Gomora]. Okay, and then there was a time when we were in church, I didn't realize that they [fellow churchgoers] saw me, and one of them was like, "Ayingeke wena uyisitabane" [You're Isitabane], and I was actually hurt, and I started checking myself. "What is wrong with me?" I asked myself because I wear skirts. I really loved God and I was actually preaching. I really loved God – she emphasized. So, every time when I went to church I would apply makeup. Even now, I have a business for doing makeup because I started doing makeup when I was in Grade 10 so that in the church, I could be seen as more feminine. Even when I was wearing a skirt, they would point me out, I was tired, and I'd cry. I remember in Grade 12, this is when I realized that I do like girls I was like, "Yo, I am Isitabane!". I texted this one lady from the church who is from Cape Town because I was scared that if I confided in one of the local churchgoers they would tell on me that I am indeed Isitabane. I was crying. I fasted people. I prayed. I prayed. I prayed. I prayed. Still, that did not help. I was struggling to accept myself and feeling alone. But I realized that it's true my style of dressing is different. When I started to notice, the only person I thought knew, even though he never said anything, but I think he knew my brother. My brother knew because whenever he bought clothes, he used to buy me male clothes, and he used to give me his clothes when they didn't fit him anymore. I have cousins who are males but he would just buy for me like you see clothes that were trending he'd buy for me. He even bought me soccer boots. I remember when I first started playing soccer, my mother made me stop because she was like, "No, I don't like the way you're conducting yourself now". I was actually hurt. Even now, that hurts me. When I walk with my mom, she would actually be like, "Khipha isfuba uveze amabele" [Chest out and show your breast]. My mom worked a lot and I used to stay with my brother. My brother was studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and he stayed at one of the University residences and came back home on weekends. So, most of the time, I was alone. Then I also had to move to pursue my studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Isn't back home, I cannot be comfortable because I am born again. How can I be like "I'm Isitabane"? I started to embrace myself. I found a girlfriend, and I realized that, yes, "I am Isitabane". Immediately after I moved away from home, I started to feel comfortable. From there I stopped trying to change myself, how I walk, and how I dress. Because everyone was like my style is so different. Even now my mom keeps telling me to buy skirts. And I say no. So, I can say that I have accepted myself fully. People can see and I came out to my cousin brothers… ow my brother died unfortunately my real brother so yeah I'm left with my mom. Throughout high school, when I used to visit my mom where she works, her colleagues used to laugh at her and say, "Ngiyistabane [I'm Isitabane] because I would play with boys". Even at pre-school I used to play with boys. I think my mom is just ignorant. She can see and I've asked her many times what she would do if she found out. She would be like, "Noma kthiwa unemali engakanani ungabongena lakwami" [No matter how much money you have do not come near my house]. So, like I am saying, when I'm back home people say things like "Ahh wena uyisitabane" [you're Isitabane]. I don't care I know I am. I really want my mom to know, but I can't

because she has already lost a son. Imagine now I have to break her heart with something like this. But I will find it in me one day to tell her. So, all in all, everyone knows that I'm Isitabane and I love myself. People from the church can see but I do not care. They can say whatever they want I don't care. I go to church for God. And they have said a lot, and someone once attempted to make me their wife, you see. So, it's that. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #4: *My journey was not easy at all. The environment that I grew up in made it difficult for me to discover myself. I remember when I was in Grade 2, and I used to play with other girls. We'd kiss and stuff. Playing houses, I'd play the position of being a father. But then I remember when my feelings for other girls started getting stronger. I had a crush on my friend and it was tough because I didn't know how to tell her. I wanted to tell her but I was scared of losing her as a friend. At school, there were no people like me. At home, I knew it was going to be tough because they're strict, they're Nazareth. When they see people like me on TV [Television], they would say "Umsangano lo. Ayikho lento. Uyabona nje laykhaya singakuxebula" [This is crazy, there is no such thing. You see, in this household, we'd beat you up]. So, you decide to keep it a secret and go to your room and cry. When I was in grade 10, I decided to go to the clinic because it was getting tougher, and I was confused about what was happening. "Maybe it's a phase you see. Maybe all the women go through the same thing. It will pass" I convinced myself. I went to the clinic then they organized a social worker for me. The social worker had a conversation with me and took me back to my childhood and explained everything to me. The social worker made me realize that this was not something that started now but it was always there from when I was born. From there, I tried to tone it down a bit, but you can't hide who you are. You find yourself dressing differently, sagging even, and sometimes you tuck in your clothes. My mom, whenever she went to town, would buy me skirts, dresses, and pumps [shoes]. I'd take those things and put them away and say thank you. She'd shout and say: "Uhlezi ugqoke lesketi esiy-one" [You're always wearing this skirt]. I used to like denim skirts because those are better than the others. If it's a dress, "Yo yo yo, it's too much". Even my walk doesn't align with wearing a dress, and every time, people would ask me, "Why are you walking like you're going to fight?". You see, I took after my father with most of my body features. So yeah, it was difficult, and my mom was always shouting at me. She'd buy me pumps and those bags called handbags you see. This one time, it was my birthday and she surprised me with one. I was happy you see (laughter). You pretend as if you're happy but you're not. I took the bag and put it away. She'd shout at me. My mom is the type of person who is often disappointed and she pays a lot of attention to what other people think. I wanted to talk to them, but the only person I was able to tell was my aunt, and she suggested that I find a boyfriend - "Zama i-boyfriend kulabafana laba" [Try finding a boyfriend from these boys], she said. I was confused, I was still young and did not understand what was happening. I tried dating a boy but it was a project that was never submitted. It did not go well, so I left it. The year I decided to tell my family I got sick. I can say that a Sangoma [Traditional healer] revealed my sexuality. Yeah, it became easy like that. A family meeting was then called at home and they asked me to explain what was going on with me. It wasn't easy because I was not raised by my mom or my*

dad. They only met me when I was old. I met my biological family in 2013. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #2: *I don't know how to describe my journey, but I can say that the way I see it, from when I was a child, I never liked playing with girls; I was always playing with boys. I was always with my brothers. Heading cows, or doing chores that are supposedly meant for boys, I was always there. Playing soccer, I was there and always wearing pants. So, on my mother's side, I have never told them about the life that I'm living. The only person that I remember telling is my uncle's wife. She's the only person that I was brave enough to confide in. As much as my mother is not strict I have never been brave enough to sit her down and tell her that I'm living this life. Plus, I'm the only girl at home, so sometimes that makes me not want to tell her. My father passed on but I can say that his twin brother is the one who makes my life difficult. I don't think we will ever see eye to eye. So, the thing is, when I was in primary school, I didn't care about dating. I just enjoyed being around boys that's all. When I was doing Grade 8 I had my first crush on my class teacher. I don't want to lie I was really into her. When she was around I could not even focus on what she had to say. "What is going on with me? Is this really happening or it's a phase?" I would ask myself. When I was in Grade 9, it got worse and I realized that this was really happening. There was this girl who was in my class; I liked her a lot. I didn't know how to tell her because this thing of Izitabane was just not allowed in my family. I come from a rural area and people talk. I was afraid until I was in Grade 11 when I realized that this thing of paying attention to what other people say is not going to work for me. That is when I started dating. She was my friend. I don't know what happened but we started dating. I only realized when we were already in a relationship that it was happening. My mom started to suspect that me and this girl were in a relationship. I'd tell her: "No we are not, she's just a friend". I was scared of telling her the truth. So, I'd say: "Relax she's just a friend". One day, when I was still in Grade 11, my class teachers called me to the staffroom. They told me to start conducting myself like a lady and walk like a lady. I asked them what they meant by that because this is how I walk. I was born like this. Okay, I tried because I wanted them to let me go. After that day I stopped caring about what they were going to say. And then, one day, I decided to tell my mom about my situation, and she told me that I needed prayers. "What is this person saying?" I asked myself. I can feel this thing inside of me. When I moved to further my studies, I realized that actually I was also allowed to live my life and not hide because there are so many people like me. I found peace when I moved away from home. I found that there are people like me. There's freedom. Everyone is living their lives. There's no judgment. In October, one of my cousins died, so I had to go home. When I was in a taxi I received a Facebook friend request from my father's twin brother. "Why is this person sending me a friend request? What do they want?" I asked myself. I accepted the friend request. As soon as I accepted he started typing a message. I read the message while I was still in the taxi. This is the message that he wrote and sent to me: "Hlukana nokugila imikhuba emzini kababa omkhulu. Mawuqhubeka nalomkhuba ngizofika ekhaya ngikushisele impepho ngicele amadlozi akubulale ngoba ugila umkhuba. Lokhu ngazalwa ayikaze yenziwe lento uyintombazane wena awusindoda" [You need to stop doing what you're doing in my grandfather's house. If you continue doing what you're*

doing I will come home and ask the ancestors to kill you because you're doing what you're doing. Ever since I was born this has never happened. You're a girl, not a man]. This was the message. You know, I was quiet for a minute, and then I typed a response, but then I thought of my mother - UmaKhumalo [pseudonym – Mom Khumalo], who raised me better than that. I was hurt. I deleted the response. When I got home I asked myself whether I should tell my mother or not. I decided not to tell her because we were there to attend a funeral. Knowing my mother, she was going to confront him (my father's twin brother] and things were going to get worse. My mother is not the type of person who just sits and says nothing; if she doesn't like something, she will address it at the same time. When I got home my phone got damaged so that Saturday I had to go to town to return it where I bought it. On my way back from town, I was the only passenger in a taxi. This taxi was behind another taxi that was being driven by my father's twin. So, the driver asked him to take me because we were all going in the same direction. I confronted the driver and asked him why he didn't ask me first because I was just going to walk. They know that me and this person don't see eye to eye. Okay, my father's twin stopped and I got in his taxi. He was playing music. As soon as I got in, he turned the volume down. I realized right there that it was about to go down. I greeted him. He responded by saying "Ngitheni kuwena?" [What did I say to you?] That time I'm wearing pants. "Ngtheni kuwena? [What did I say to you?] He repeated. He then asked me if I had seen the message he sent to me. I said yes, I did. He said, "So what is going on with you?" I asked him what he meant. He then asked about a girl in my profile picture. I told him that the girl was my friend. He said, "Kulungile bengithi usuqalile futhi ngalezinto zakho" [Okay I thought you have started again with your Shenanigans]. He then repeated the same thing that he wrote in the message. My response was "If you think that is what you need to do then do it. I no longer care". Yes, that was my response and that was the last time we spoke. I only told my mother about this when I returned to university. She shouted at me and asked me why I never told her and I explained that I didn't want to cause more drama. And that was it. You see, the way he reacted when he [my father's twin] found out that I'm living this life made me realize that even if I sit them [my family] down and tell them, they will never accept me. My mother, on the other side, even though she has never said anything, some signs show that she has accepted me because when she buys me clothes, she doesn't buy skirts or dresses anymore. She buys pants. I think people that I can say that they have a problem with who I am is my big brother and my father's twin. Because even now, my brother doesn't want me to wear pants at home, but I wear pants regardless. This one day my brother was home and he was planning to go to town. My mother told me to bathe and go with him. I wore pants and he [my brother] said "Angeke uze ukhwele emotweni yami ufake ibhlukwe" [You're not getting in my car wearing those pants]. I said, "Okay, fine, it's your car. I will use public transport and we will meet in town. I will tell you when I get there". He didn't hesitate, he drove his car and left me behind. I went to the bus stop and I took a taxi to town. I told myself that it was okay, as long as my mother was okay. I don't care about what other people have to say. Because even my mother's friend knows. She used to call me GC [television actor who is Isitabane] and we would laugh as neighbors. I did not care. Even my grandfather, a person who is so strict in such a way that he doesn't want girls to wear pants but there has never been a day where he shouted at me for wearing

pants. Whenever he sees me because his children are all females, he sees me as a boy. He doesn't have a problem with this life I'm living. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #9: *I wanted to add to an experience that you had mentioned about being homosexual and whatnot or being Isitabane. I remember when I was in Grade 1, the very first time I went to school. I'm not afraid to go and talk to people as you can see. I got to school on my very first day I was seated next to this girl, Okuhle Shange [pseudonym – Okuhle Shange]. I claimed her I was like you're my friend from this day you're my best friend and no one else's. In claiming her we never built a friendship the way that friendship is supposed to be built. Isn't it growing up as girls, you do nails together, have sleepovers, and all of these things? I was uncomfortable; I did not want her to touch me, I would not sleep at her house, and I didn't want her at my house. I just loved watching her from a distance [laughter]. We continued being friends in my weird way. We were friends throughout the years until we were in Grade 7 where I made another friend – Ndumo [pseudonym – Ndumo]. I introduced Ndumo to Okuhle and they became the kind of best friends that girls are supposed to be. They were doing sleepovers at each other houses, painting nails, doing this and that together, and I never in my life had I experienced such heartbreak to the point where I cried tears when we were standing by the gate. We were prefects. I was deputy head girl and Okuhle was head girl. I was always next to Okuhle. When she was number one, I was number two; when I was number one, she would be number two. You know when Okuhle is wearing something purple, I'm wearing something purple. We are those kids you see. Everyone knew. One day, we were standing outside, and it was something so stupid. They were [Okuhle and Ndumo] on their way to the library and there was a book that was overdue. There was a letter that was sent stating that the book was overdue. So Okuhle and Ndumo are standing on one side and I'm standing opposite them. Okuhle gives Ndumo the letter and they talk and laugh. Ndumo gives the letter back to Okuhle, and instead of passing it back to me, someone who didn't see the letter, Okuhle decides to put it back in her pocket. I started crying and they didn't understand why I was crying over a letter. "What's so important about this letter? You know, and I was just like, "You know what, don't ever talk to me ever again". I started hanging out with a whole new group of friends. In Grade 7 I started from scratch and made new friends. It was like we were going through a breakup. Like I lived my own life and I didn't understand why was I so hurt until someone brought it up to me: "Don't you think that you like Okuhle beyond the fact that you want to be her friend. You love her and there's no way that you should be hurt. You're in primary school. Yall [You all] are making friends. You know she's gonna [going to] go off to a new school next year and leave you?". Which hurt me even more because they [Okuhle and Ndumo] were going to the same school at Girls High where they had gotten together. I didn't go to Girls High. I never got the opportunity to write. After all, I didn't apply in the first place because I couldn't afford it. So now I realize that the train is leaving for real. I distanced myself. I stopped talking to Okuhle, I stopped talking to Ndumo. Ndumo still thinks we're cool she tried to be my friend. She confronted me and asked me, "Why do we no longer walk together? We used to do this together. You don't like me anymore," and I was like, "I never want to talk to you again; you stole my best friend." To the point where we fought it*

became a big thing because people knew head girl and deputy head girl they're best friends. Now everyone knows that we're fighting. We're beefing and we can't stand each other but no one can ever really find what the source is. Only to find that okay I think I'm homo you know I think ngiyisitabane [I think I am Isitabane]. You know because you can't explain this thing and some people don't understand when I explain. So, eventually, I realized when I watched television that no man the things, the signs, the symbols the symbolism are similar to me and I identify so heavily with it. I started crying [she laughs] I was very upset, I was very sad that I've tried so hard to be such a good kid, I get good marks in school, I have friends, I talk, I'm doing this, I'm doing that but why would God curse me at that point. I thought it was a curse. "Why me?" you know. I've tried so hard but still, I can't shake this thing off that I feel for Okuhle you know this particular Okuhle who is going to leave with Ndumo and live a happy life. And then eventually I started "praying the gay away" because that was popular at the time "Pray the gay away" you know, go to church, pray at home, fast do whatever you know. And your experience of fasting [referring to one participant] reminded me of that. I tried very hard to say no to this because I still want a family and I'm sure they will disown me at home you know. Eventually, as the years went by I realized that "pray the gay away" has never worked you know eventually we were in Grade 8 which was the next year Okuhle came to me. She was like hey I haven't seen you. We were good again and all of a sudden, all the feelings came back and the heart was back bha bha bha I'm in love with you. But yes, nevertheless I ended up realizing from that that maybe I'm a little crooked you know. And then I decided to start asking questions you know try and figure out what exactly is going on with me because I keep catching emotions here and there. My very first was when I watched television even when we watched Dragon Balls I liked Boma [television character] the one with the blue hair, the girl. You know when I watch Winx not that I want to be Stella I want Stella you know [laughter]. And it was really hard you see and then eventually I realized through all these experiences that no, I belong to this group. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #6: *I came out in Grade 7. The first person I came out to was my cousin. We're almost the same age. So, we shared everything. We are comfortable together, so I was just like, "Okay, I have to tell you something". We were walking from school to buy ice blocks, still wearing our uniform. I was just like, "I think I am in love with women," and she was just like, "Oh, I knew. I was just waiting for you to tell me." And then for me, it wasn't a thing of having a crush on my teachers in primary [school]. No, it wasn't that. It was a thing of seeing opposite couples, opposite gender couples, and thinking to myself if I was the guy I would treat the girl much better. So, yeah [laughter]. "Ya, me and this girl, we deserve to be together because if I was that guy, I'd do way better than the guy". So, yeah that's my experience of coming out. Fortunately, my grandmother was still alive when I came out. So, it wasn't a thing of maybe at home they discriminate or anything it wasn't because my grandmother was very welcoming. At home, we saw different kinds of people. There was this... I'm not sure he or she identifies as what, but I think trans or gay, but we used to call them Monica. Monica used to dress very feminine, in heels he/she/they would say: "Oh, I'm pregnant" or "I'm on my period this month". So, I just feel like okay, well, and then I started to realize that no, I*

think I'm in love with women as well. So, I think the only person who hasn't accepted in a sense or like in between is my mother. My dad passed away. I've told my mom. No, she asked me [she tries to remember]. So, this one day I was on my way to school. So okay, I'm getting dressed, and when it was time for me to leave for school, she [mother] called me. "Come here. Are you a girl or a boy?" She asked. I was just like "I'm a girl". What kind of a girl? She asked. I was just like "A girl who loves other girls". This was in Grade 8. Yes. Fortunately, I went to an all-girls school, so like Ya, in a sense, it was heaven. And then she looked at me, and I looked at her, and then she didn't say anything. She [mother] liked buying me skirts. There's one skirt that she bought for me and I never wore it. She ended up returning it to the store and bought something for herself. I think when I was in Grade 9 she stopped buying clothes for me. She realized that buying me skirts and sandals was not for me, so from there, I came out to like everyone, and in Grade 8, I had my first girlfriend. She was way older than me. I feel that is like a staple event in every lesbian [Isitabane] person's life. It was a very confusing time for me because she was bisexual [a person who is in a relationship with both men and women] and there was this guy who was her ex. So next to my school, there was this school - it was a mixed school with boys and girls and this guy would come and visit her. He'd buy her stuff, so I was just like, "No, this is not going to work" because she would even put him as her profile picture, and I was just like, "What about me?" So then yeah [laughs] I moved on. But my experience of coming out wasn't filled with trials and tribulations. My family was very accepting and I was really surprised by that. Even my uncle who's like into tradition. I have never told him but he saw the way I dress and like last year or early this year... so I also have a cousin who's gay and also very feminine so my uncle sat us down and told us that he accepts us but "Only if you continue to pray and have a certain faith that you're tied to then I accept it". So, yeah. My mom is just the one who's in a rocky position. I think she accepts I'm not sure. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #1: *I came out in 2020, during COVID-19 [reaction from the participants]. I came out because I was almost 'outed'. So, to avoid that, I was like, let me just come out. At least my mom can hear this from me, you see. Okay, growing up, I was a tomboy because even if there's a family friend, they still call me 'boy'. That is my nickname. Sometimes she would call me 'Ijonga' which is another Zulu name for 'boy'. So that's how I grew up. Playing soccer with my cousins. I'm the only child. Growing up, like I said in the beginning, I grew up in a church. So, when I discovered that I have these feelings, I think it was like Grade 11 and stuff. I tried, I tried so hard. I remember, I think from that age up until now I think I have been saved [an expression used to refer to born-again Christians] like three or four times, I don't remember [laughter]. Because they say, "We must pray so that this thing will go away". So, from Grade 11 I had these feelings. I remember this one time in my church, there was a guest pastor. The guest pastor called all those who needed prayer to stand. I stood up and they started praying for me. From that day, I took all my pants because growing up, I wore jeans, takkies, and stuff, and my mom bought those things. So, after that day, I took all those things, put them in the box, and told my mom to take them and give them to one of the orphanages. I started buying skirts, I started buying dresses. At some point, I tried wearing heels. I couldn't walk on*

them [laughter]. I couldn't move. Ya, I only had one pair of heels. They were silver, and they had a bit of glitter. I think they're still somewhere at home. So, I changed my ward drop. Something about my personality, I don't decide without understanding exactly what it means for me. When I make a decision, I want to know all the information, all of it before even deciding. So, when obviously at that age, boys were approaching me, but I'd put them off because I wasn't sure. The following year after matric I moved to Newcastle. I took a gap year because one, I was not sure of what I wanted in terms of studying and stuff, and also, I just wanted to … because at home, when you reach the age of 18, you're old and there's no reason for you to be still living with your parents. If you ask for money at the age of 18 and above that is a loan you have to pay back. So, after matric, I took a gap year and moved to Newcastle because I didn't know at the time what I wanted to study. In Newcastle, I met up with an old friend from high school. We rented a place together and she was bisexual. I will say was because I'm not sure now. At the time I was in denial. We shared a room and we had two bunk beds next to each other. We shared everything. It was one room and the bathroom was outside. So, there was a time when she was waiting for her parents to deliver her bed. So, we had to share a bed [reaction from the participants]. She was studying at Majuba College and she was seeing someone at the time. At sharing a bed, I said to her you sleep on the other side I take the other side. When I woke up I was sleeping next to her. I'm not sure what happened because that night we were drinking. I woke up next to her. I don't know I was out of it. I was so high and stuff. So, I don't know what happened nor do I recall the experience of what happened. So, there was that awkward moment, and I was like you know what, until your parents bring your bed, I'm just going to move in with Lungelo. Lungelo also lived in the complex and he was friends with us. So, I slept in his room because he had two beds. I left all my things in my room but I just slept in Lungelo's room. Luckily, the bathrooms were outside, so it was easier for me to bath and then get dressed in my room, and then continue with my day, but until her parents delivered her bed, I slept at Lindelanis [pseudonym –Lindelani]. The following year, I made a decision and I moved to Durban. So, I moved to Durban. Even then it was because a friend asked me to move to e-Thekwini [Durban]. Let me emphasize that at this time I hadn't lost my sight as yet. So, I told my mom and tried to convince her that I was going to e-Thekwini [Durban] to study. This was not true. It was not that I wanted to go there to study but I had to tell her that in order for her to actually agree. She agreed to look for a place for me there and one of my aunts was also staying where I was going to be staying. So, it will be easier for me because I have family around. "You'll be safe, and if you need anything, you can go to her she said". Okay cool. So, to study, I went to CTC Central Technical College e-Thekwini [Durban]. But because the place my mom found for me was the same place where my aunt was staying I was not free to do anything because I knew that I may bump into her anytime. And then problems will start because she can be nosy sometimes. So yeah my freedom was restricted in that way. For a year I never attempted to be with anyone actually because I was still battling with this until I went to those churches or those churches where the pastors are our African brothers [churches led by foreign people]. So, I went to that church. My aunt also attended the same church, and again, like there was that thing of homosexuality [Ubutabane] is wrong and stuff. I remember I was at my aunt's place watching television, and

my uncle was talking to his friend, and he said you know, Jabu Hlongwane from Joyous Celebration kicked out this one guy from the choir because he was gay, and there was that conversation in the house. At some point, my uncle said, "What was this guy thinking that you can worship Unkulunkulu [God] yet you're committing obscene and stuff? I couldn't hear some of the things because he's Nigerian [uncle]. They were talking alone. I remember thinking at the time I was like "Ya it makes sense why? What was he thinking? I mean you're a sinner and you think God accepts your worship and prays. Who do you think you are?" I remember thinking about this and at that time I decided that you know what I'm going back to church. I'm going to continue wearing skirts. I decided to give my life to Jesus again. So that was like the second time. I gave my life to Jesus then for the rest of the year, which was like 2015, so for the rest of the year, I was busy with the church until when I was going to school. I met an old friend from high school. We met there by Smith, and we were like, "Hey, I haven't seen you in a long time". We hugged and stuff, and when I bumped into her, she was walking with a girl. I knew her sexuality from school. From there, we exchanged numbers, and we started chatting. I asked her questions like "Do you think this thing of yours is a stage or what's going on? Are you sure that this thing is not going to go away?" She shared her story with me about her family and stuff, her experiences, and all of that. I said okay fine. Her experiences were heartbreaking, so I was like, "Ay, I don't want to experience that because it's associated with the person she is". She was a victim of Gender-Based Violence. So, I was like, "I'm good, and I cannot put myself through such." I don't want to go off topic but as South Africans we have associated gender-based violence a lot with the straight community and we do not think that gender-based violence is based on everybody and homophobia is also gender-based violence. So, I was like, Okay, maybe gender-based violence is associated with homosexuality [Ubutabane], so this decision that I am taking regarding these feelings, I'm going to ignore them; they will eventually go away. It's the right decision". I continued hiding and stuff up until December when I was at home. I was super waisted [drunk] the whole festive season. You see when you're battling with a lot and you can't tell people what you're going through. You're going through depression, and I remember there was an itende [mobile church] in our area, and as I said, people know that in my household, we're church people; even my great-great-grandmother was a church person. My uncle is a pastor at the Assembly. So, it's that family. When I went into depression, I knew what was bothering me, and there was an itende [mobile church]. Even there, the pastor spoke about like, "If you're going through something when you do not know whom to tell, come and tell God. Run to the front!" I ran there. I gave my life to Jesus for the third time. I went back to school in 2016. Instantly, when I got to eThekwini [Durban], everything changed. I'm not sure what happened, but I think there was just a part of me that said I'm tired, like I'm tired of fighting because what's the point? How many times have I tried to give my life to God but this thing is still with me? "What can I do?" Let me experience this and feel it. Maybe once I've lived it, I'll hate it, and then I will stop or something. I just wanted to do something. I just wanted something to happen like assurance and stuff. I went back to school in 2016. At some point, I had like two girlfriends. I went hey why? The first girlfriend that I had, after being intimate with her, I was like, "Ow my gosh, this is amazing". I was like "This is amazing". So, then I do not know, guys, if other

people do experience this, but when you're in a relationship, it's like there's a flood of or a lot of people will throw themselves at you. At some point, I remember asking my classmate out, not realizing that she was straight, and obviously, she rejected me. So, I got a girlfriend and then my classmate wanted me. So, like I got excited a lot. As time went by, I tried to control myself, and that was the year that changed my life. I fell ill and unfortunately, I lost my sight. All along, I haven't really taken the time to just think about the life that I'm living and if it is really the life that I'm choosing. "So, is this permanent or what?" So, I'm just flowing. So, when I fell ill, I was with my girlfriend at the time, and I fell ill. I went back home, and for the rest of the year, I was ill. So, there was that long-distance situation. Then I think the following year, I moved to another place, I moved to Pretoria. There's something guy cousins always know about our secrets before anyone, so before I even told them, they already knew. So, when I moved from home to Pretoria I stayed there for like two years and stuff. My cousin knew, so I didn't have to come out to them about my sexuality. They knew, and they were okay with that. So, all along I lived my life and didn't think about what my parent would do if they found out about my sexuality. Yes, I have heard some of the experiences shared by other people, and they're heartbreaking, obviously, but I didn't picture myself or put myself in their shoes. I did not relate because I didn't know whether I was ignorant or I just didn't care. I didn't care; I was just living life, and because I was far away from home living my life no one was judging me. I just had that attitude. So, like I said, my cousins knew, my cousins from my mom's side because that's where I grew up. My dad, okay he was in the picture but you know dads. So, yea 2019 I came back home to do my first year at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and even there I was like, "Yoo# so many people so many girls [Amantombazane]. But now I had learned to control myself and I understood loyalty and stuff you see I had stopped playing games and all of that. Ya, experiences do teach us a lot. So yes, my first year I was in a relationship but it didn't last long. My cousins knew about the lady again they were fine. And 2020 I moved to Durban I was single at the time I think everybody may have experienced some sort of depression when COVID-19 hit and I was also going through that and other things. I remember talking to a friend and telling them that you know what I think I'm depressed. I want to come out to my mom but I don't know how. This was like at the beginning of COVID-19. It was before the virus reached South Africa. We were just continuing with life and stuff. So, after some time and you know I think I was okay. At the time I was living with a cousin of mine. He knew about my sexuality and when COVID-19 hit we evacuated from the university residences and we went home. I don't know what happened I guess my cousin, I would say it came from a good place because she was worried that I was depressed and had no one. She once heard me talking saying that I wanted to come out to my mom and tell her that you know what I'm gay. I think she thought that's what was making me depressed. When we were at home I remember she had left with my mom to go to town and when they returned my mom said Andile please tell me about Mfundo. Mfundo was a friend of mine the one I met eThekwini [Durban]. She was going through some financial issues… my mom was in her room reading a book and I sat next to her. [she defined this moment as a "scary moment"] When I talked to her it was a scary moment and I asked her to close her book for a moment so that we could talk and when I told her she just went quiet and there was this uncomfortable silence in the room. The

first question she asked was "When did this… how do you know that you're gay?" I was like because I didn't want to tell her that I had experienced this since Grade 7 and stuff. I was like "No I could feel that I have these feelings but I didn't know how and like I knew this when I was older and stuff". The second thing that she said was "Okay fine please don't come out because you understand that you are dependent on people since you're really not sighted and you need a lot of people to look after you. So please at least don't say anything. There is no need to tell other people. Not that I'm saying it's wrong but you can still live your life and not come out". Yeah, that was it. However, I think she still has doubts and hopes that maybe Andile will bring a husband one day. Sometimes I like to polish my nails and when I do, I remember the first time she saw me she was like "Are you changing?" "Changing from what mom?" I asked. She says, "No I just saw your nails". I said "I like them. They are beautiful isn't it?" Ya there was that. Even now she has doubts hoping I guess that I will change and become what she thinks is right. And Ya that is my experience. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

5.3.2.3 Theme 3: Split Between Two Worlds

The third snapshot theme that I shared explored the tension between having Ubutabane feelings and identifying as a Christian in South Africa. This theme highlights the impact of cultural and religious practices in shaping and guiding harmful beliefs about Ubutabane. The theme focused on experiences of violence and marginalization that black Izitabane women encounter in the process of navigating their Isitabane and religious identities. The women in this study recognized that in South Africa the perceptions of Ubutabane and Izitabane are often plagued with social myths and stereotypes that further disadvantage this community. The below stories provide us with a glimpse of the negative experiences that black Izitabane women are faced with in their communities as well as in their homes. The women participating in this study further describe the societal expectations that are placed upon them as women and how these expectations limit them from enjoying and exploring their sexuality. The assumptions about Ubutabane being un-Christian, against the African culture, and that Izitabane women are imitating men are also evident in these stories.

Participant #4: *My dad prayed for me at home. He [my dad] is a spiritual person. He wore Izembatho [a term that is often used to refer to clothes that are worn by traditional healers] after he discovered that I'm Isitabane. They [my family] put me in the center and prayed for me to take out the demon in me but nothing happened. They realized that nothing was happening. And then at school, there was my math teacher who used to pay a lot of attention to me. I think he wanted me. He liked paying attention to what I was doing a lot. I used to think that maybe he saw my potential and how dedicated I was to my schoolwork. When I was in matric, I did matric twice and when I returned in 2019, he called me and asked about my behavior. Because you can try to hide it but it always shows. Then he called me and tried to offer some advice. He is also a Nazareth. So, he approached me as someone who is trying to guide me*

on how to conduct myself as a Nazareth so that my family can be proud of me. Only to find out that this person had other intentions for me. The other day, we met in town, and he offered to give me a lift; I said okay. On our way home, he stopped his car and locked the doors [shocked reaction from the participants]. "Manje wena vele yini indaba yakho, why unjena because uright uyintombazane eright uphansi nje akekho umuntu weslisa ongeke akuthokozele ukuba nawe?" [What is your story, why are you like this because you're a girl and a good one? Men would be happy to have someone like you]. I told him this is who I am and there's nothing that I can do. He then tried to grab me and kiss me. I pushed him and he took out a knife and scared me with it. I told him to do whatever he wanted. I'm not going to change just because he doesn't like who I am. How he feels has nothing to do with me. I sat there and waited for him to change his mind. Eventually, he decided to let me go. When I got home, it was already dark outside. Luckily, I didn't get into any trouble with my father. It was difficult for me to tell my family so I kept it a secret until today. Then the other day in 2021, in December. At home, they have just installed a tap. Before that, we had to go to the river to do our laundry or to get water. It's a weekend. I decided to go to the river to do my laundry. So, a few days before that day I had a fight with this guy about a girl. I was just walking, and this guy said to me, "Yewena uzenza umfana and stuff ungazosijwayela kabi" [You're pretending to be a boy and stuff], and I said some things to him and I left him standing there. Then, on a weekend, I was at the river, and people who were at the river started leaving one by one. I was the only one left. I think he was around observing my moves. I was just focusing on what I was doing, and then boom, he showed up. I was startled because this person was wearing a mask. But after a few seconds, my mind came back, and I was like, "Okay, this is it. This is happening". I tried to calm myself so that if he tried something, I'd be ready for him. Then I heard him saying, "Why u-so? Why wenza lento oyenzayo?" [Why are you like this? Why are you doing what you're doing]. I kept quiet and continued with what I was doing while observing his next move. He grabbed me and pointed a knife at me. You see this scar [showing me the scar on her finger]. He nearly chopped off my finger. We fought. He tried to pull me to the nearest bush. We fought. But I was able to get away from him. I found a rock and I hit him with it. He fell and that's when I was able to escape. We don't know who he is and he was never found. Even his voice I don't think I can recognize it. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

Participant #3: *For me, this is a recent thing maybe like two weeks ago. I was very sick. Something that required traditional healers. My mother was also sick. It was my mother first then me. My mother nearly died, and I could see that she was dead, but this traditional healer helped my mom, and she was okay. That is when I started believing in these people because when my brother died, he was okay, but he died because a traditional healer came to help, and he died still. I hated them you see. I decided to trust the person who helped my mother. Okay, now I'm sick. This person [traditional healer] wanted to talk to me. I have depression you see. A lot has happened. This person said to me, "I saw you when you were at home. What are you?" He then told me to be comfortable. Fine that was my first time opening up to a person. I told him that I'm gay [Isitabane] and I also shared other things with him because he was like he can see that I'm always crying and stuff. I told him that it was because my brother*

died and a lot of people in my family had died. A lot! Years after years. Even this year. So, I told him that, and he was like, "I understand what you're saying, but you should move from stuff like this and that". And then he said, "Kulento yakho yobutabane wena kmele uhlatshelwe imbuzi uyocelelwa ukuthi ubuye ukuba intombazane" [With this thing of Ubutabane a goat must be slaughtered for you so that you can be a girl again]. "Abafana awubafuni totally?" [You don't like boys at all?] He proceeded to ask. I told him I didn't. He said, "Udinga umfana nje ostrong ozolala nawe uzoba right." [You need a strong man to sleep [have sex] with you; you're going to change]. I think because I also told him that when I was young I was raped. I told him that. He was like "It's because you're confused". You see, this person used who I am to make me believe that because I was traumatized, that's why I'm Isitabane. For a minute, I was like "What?". What makes this get to me is because he was like, "You have to stop this because, at the end of the day, you're the only one left kwa-Ndlovu [pseudonym – Ndlovu], and the generation is ending because you are choosing to date girls." "Ucabanga ukuthi ksele bani? [Who do you think will be left in your household] "Kini ksele wena nomawakho so isbongo syaphela sigcina ngawe" [It is just you and your mom and now your surname will come to an end because of you]. "You're like a generational curse because you're ending your family generation". It really fucked me up for some time [crying]. For some time, I was like, maybe this dude is correct, maybe I'm just confused and hurt, but then I came back to my senses. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

5.3.2.4 Theme 4: Recreating and Reclaiming Sexuality and Christian Identity

It has been hard to accept myself. I don't know. Sometimes we doubt ourselves mainly because there is no manual for this life thing, and it makes it very hard. ***(Participant #8: Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)***

The fourth snapshot theme that was discussed examines how black Izitabane women process their experiences of being Christian and Isitabane. The challenges of incorporating the dual identities of Christian and Isitabane were also explored. This theme highlights the patriarchal heteronormative nature of South African communities whereby a women's worth is measured by getting married to the opposite sex and starting a family through means of procreation. The below narrative demonstrates the challenges that black Izitabane women face when they are trying to reconcile their sexual and religious identities.

Participant #8: *Acceptance came really hard for me. It has been hard. I was born in 1988, and back then, this thing of gays and lesbians was very looked down on. Even if there was one person in my community who was gay or lesbian, everybody would pay attention to that person, and you would be like, "No". The experience would scare you before you even experience what they're experiencing. But I had to go through church. Ngakhethwa [the tradition that is practiced by men of choosing a virgin in the church and making her your wife]. At first, I refused. I was raised by my grandmother. My grandmother was like "Uyabona mtanami uyabo loyamndeni uzokphatha kahle. Uyababona*

omawakho abazwani I'd be happy ngife ngazi ukuthi ukwakho" [You see my child that family [boy's family] is going to take good care of you. You can see that there is no harmony in this house I'd be happy to die knowing that you have your own home] all of that you know. And as she was my everything, you know, and I'm like, "Ahh, my grandmother wouldn't lead me astray, you know, let me try this". I had already been chosen in the church. I tried it. I'm not gonna [going to] say, unfortunately. For me, I guess it was what led me to say, "Okay, no, man, this is not for me". I did it. The guy paid lobola, and all the relevant traditions were followed; it became a whole deal, and then it came to 'let's have sex.' I was like, "Yo" it was so hard, you know. I discussed this with my cousin's sister who was older than me. Same thing, she was like "You know if you just give it up you might feel something and it's gonna [going to] be different. I went through that and they told me that "Njengoba esekulobolile ungumfazi wakhe wena [Now that he has paid Lobola for you you're his wife now] and he has every right to you". I was 18 at the time and just finished matric. So, the deed [sex] happened, and I'm feeling nothing, you know, like when you watch Days of Our Lives and Bold and the Beautiful, that's what I grew up watching. You'd see Brook or Bo and Hope, and I'm like, okay, it's coming, it's coming, nothing. I'm like, no, I'm not feeling it. It had to take that for me to really fully say you know what? It's not for me and that's when the drifting in the church started happening because people started asking, "Why aren't I with him now? You look different". You know, people sometimes pay a lot of attention even though you keep telling yourself that I'm in the closet, but they can see. It has been hard to accept myself. I don't know. Sometimes we doubt ourselves mainly because there is no manual for this life thing, and it makes it very hard. But Ya I had to go through that and then sleep with a girl. And I was like "Uuuuh yeees". I just had to. I guess I boycotted my family at that time and said okay this is my life. Later, before my grandmother passed away, she opened up about her first-born son, my uncle, and she was like, "He was gay-ish as well, you know". I'm like, you'll understand, guys. Luckily, when you have a job and have your own things, it's a little bit easier. But yea I accepted myself after a whole lot of shit. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

5.3.2.5 Theme 5: A Condemned Body: A Testimony of Lost Hope

*"I don't know, guys. I don't understand what it is with people and dress code and not understanding me as a person inside and just being able to be enough to go to church. And it is two churches that have actually discriminated against me because of how I dress". (**Participant #6 - Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023**)*

The fifth snapshot theme that was discussed explores the challenges that black Izitabane women face within their faith communities and how they deal with these challenges. This theme exposes issues that are related to gender expressions and societal expectations whereby women are expected to dress and conduct themselves in a certain way. These expectations often lead to many Izitabane women feeling unwelcomed, which in turn, contributes to these women leaving the church. The following narrative reveals the oppressive nature of many faith spaces whereby body image matters more than the presence of the body. Likewise, it demonstrates

how black Izitabane women deal with homophobic and oppressive faith spaces by reframing what faith means to them.

> **Participant #6:** *I'm going to share my experience of the last time I was in church in 2014. I was invited just like you [referring to the researcher]. When they invited me to church, I was wearing pants and they saw that I was wearing pants. I go to church, and I'm very happy to go to church, and then the next thing when I got there, they turned me away. They told me pants are not allowed. Because I'm an outspoken person, I was just like, "Okay, if I was a prostitute or someone there in the road and I'm coming to get guidance from God, why would you not let me in for the way that I'm dressed?". For me the reason that I'm saying this point is I'm not tryna [trying to] say that you're masculine [referring to the researcher] and me I'm feminine they should have treated me differently but I always feel like sometimes church looks more at what a person dresses like rather than the thing that's inside because honestly, I don't like wearing skirts and I've never liked wearing skirts. My mom and I, always used to fight about that because I've never liked wearing skirts. When we had to visit home in the rural areas we used to fight because we didn't want to wear skirts. I do not know, guys. I don't understand what it is with people and dress code and not understanding me as a person inside and just being able to be enough to go to church. And it is two churches that have actually discriminated against me because of how I dress. I remember my other experience was, I was part of a play right academy so obviously, I couldn't do a lesson wearing a skirt. It was always comfortable to do the activities when you wore pants. So, I remember I was attending youth services at the church, and they were like, "Why don't you come for youth services??" So, I was like, "No, I'm always wearing pants or tracksuits." They said, "Okay, you're going to sit at the back". The day when I attended the pastor started preaching that a woman is not allowed to wear pants. For me, it's always like that, and of course, I actually kinda [kind of] not identify as Christian anymore. So that's why I was a bit skeptical of speaking. It's to the extent that I do not identify as a Christian but I do believe in God. So, I identify as a spiritual being. It's to that extent but I was born in a Christian home. I believe. "I'm so sorry, Jesus, if you exist. I am so sorry. Please forgive me". Even the Bible I don't like it anymore. It discriminates against women, and it discriminates against black people, it discriminates against Izitabane. To me. To me. I actually believe that the Bible was altered by a man. Yeah, this is what I believe. I really resonate with the researcher because I was kicked out. I feel like God is supposed to be opening doors. Okay, fine, I am a sinner. Don't you just let me in the church and then let me repent for my sins in church, you know? Like they don't even let you in. Forgive me, guys, if you like church, but I just don't anymore. I do pray. I'm a very spiritual person. I do pray, and I believe in fasting. I believe in God. I pray there's no one who prays like me. I pray, I fast but I just do not go to church.* **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

5.3.2.6 Theme 6: Sense of Self and Positioning

> *"You are uniquely you. There will never be another you. So, personify your experience. Personify your God and you wouldn't be here if it wasn't*

*meant to be" (**Participant #9 -** Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)*

The sixth and final snapshot theme presents personal stories of resilience, transformation, and empowerment. Under this theme, two women shared their personal experiences about how they found peace in their lives by reframing what faith means to them personally. The women shared that they have come to the realization that God loves and accepts all bodies the way they are, and they are able to carry that knowledge with them, allowing it to comfort and guide them, and bring them a sense of peace and well-being. In addition, the participants acknowledged the importance of having people of faith in their lives and significant relationships with others in the Christian community.

> **Participant #9:** *"Make your God personal" you know. I think a lot of people accept information without necessarily questioning what is being given to them which is what happens in many churches. If a person goes to church and the pastor is convincing and so charismatic, wearing a shiny suit and preaching with a nice base you end up accepting whatever they say without actually questioning what they mean when they say a woman must wear skirts. Ask yourself what is this person actually saying and what are the repercussions of what this person is actually saying. What does that mean for someone like me? What does that mean going on and forward? So, for you to survive in this world you personalize your experience always. Even old people give you advice and say "Indlela ibuzwa kwabaphambili" [this is a Zulu proverb meaning "Those who have gone before are the ones who can show the path"]. However, you can ask but the answer will never be copied and pasted. That answer will guide your decisions but it will never be copied and pasted. Because we live in a different time, you have a different experience and you are you. You are uniquely you. There will never be another you. So, personify your experience. Personify your God and you wouldn't be here if it wasn't meant to be. Siyabonga [Thank you].* **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

> **Participant #8:** *As the years went by. I met people from the religion of salvation. I love that religion. There is this woman – Mam Mkhize [pseudonym – Mrs Mkhize]. She was an ordinary member of the church and then she got married to the leader of the church. They [people from the church] used to discriminate against her because the church leader had a wife before she met her. I don't know what happened there, but he [the pastor] ended up with Mam Mkhize and Mam Mkhize was not accepted by church members. When I arrived in this church there was this thing like you mentioned [resonating with the researcher] that you find a church that you think you like. The moment they [church members] see you, they gonna [going to] talk about Adam and Eve, Sodom and Gomora, and you just like, "Why does it change, you know?". She [Mam Mkhize] started hearing stories about me like, "Yey that kid is [gay] Isitabane bhla bhla bhla". She brought me close and we are trying shame. It's very hard. I don't know, I wish… You said you're going to publish this at some point. I'm taking it back to them [the church]. Like honestly, it's a lot. I don't know because you grew up with this thing [Ubutabane]. It's not really easy to*

unlove God and then say I'm gonna [going to] live my life you know. But I'm hoping things like your research are gonna [going to] help our churches. I'm really hoping. I don't know but I'm at a trying stage. **(Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023)**

5.4 The Unfiltered Voices of Black Izitabane Women Part II (Individual Interviews)

This section focuses on the nine participants' responses to the individual interview questions and research questions through narratives and researcher analysis. For the purpose of this study, I additionally used an open-ended interview guide in order to acquire qualitative information from black Izitabane women and investigate the ways in which these women experience life. During the interviews, participants were asked to share experiences about their lives because stories allow researchers to access the influence of cultural and political shifts (Vincent & Camminga, 2009). In this sense, the personal narratives of historically 'defiled' groups (Riessman, 2001) may cast light on both individual biographies as well as the social context in which individuals' lives are played out. Each answer is presented through the participants' lens and their experience. Before presenting the responses from the participants, I provide an analysis of the responses. This analysis conveys stories of a black Isitabane woman's perceptions, lived experiences, and worldviews through a series of questions exploring Isitabane identity, the "coming out" process, homophobic hatred and violence, and Christian religious beliefs, all of which align with the study's research questions. Issues related to how black Izitabane women continue to process their experiences in relation to the studied phenomena were discussed, as well as how their lived experiences are shaped by violence, culture, and religion, and how they view their relationship with the church and with God.

The interview schedule guided participants to engage with the following seven questions: (1) What is your understanding of the word Isitabane, and what does it mean to you? When did you first hear this word? What was your reaction when you first heard the word? (2) How has your journey been in the discovery of your sexuality as a black Isitabane in post-apartheid South Africa? (3) Have you ever experienced violence because of your sexuality? (4) What has been your source of support in the navigation of your sexuality? (5) Is or was the faith space helpful or harmful in the process of navigating your sexuality as Isitabane? (6) How did your experiences as an Isitabane shape how you navigate faith spaces? (7) In what way, if any, did your experience of faith influence how you perceive yourself as a black Isitabane? The conduct of individual interviews depended on the availability of the participants. Initially, all the individual interviews were planned to be face-to-face; however, due to unforeseen

circumstances, three of the participants decided to do their interviews on WhatsApp. This limited my ability to investigate significant social cues both verbal and non-verbal, such as body language and facial expression, which can provide additional information to verbal responses and encourage coordinated correspondence.

5.4.1 Question 1: What is your understanding of the word Isitabane, and what does it mean to you? When did you first hear this word? What was your reaction when you first heard the word?

According to Dee, "The language we use must surely flow from the kind of struggles we are seeking to wage. LGBT as a label may fail to capture the unlimited rainbow of sexualities and gender identities that are possible in human society, but it is a political term that has emerged out of the struggle against oppression" (2010: p.134). Thus, the first question that was asked aimed to explore the participants' understanding of the term Isitabane[19] and its significance to the participants. This question was designed to provide a space for each of the participants to speak openly and honestly about a term that has been used for a very long time to stigmatize black non-conforming bodies. The women interviewed had a range of positive and negative experiences with regard to the term 'Isitabane'. The meanings of the term differed with each person, even though the common understanding was that they signal same-sex practicing lived experience. Participants shared stories of when they first heard the word Isitabane and what the term means to them now. Some participants reported they have reclaimed the term Isitabane and "embodied" it.

Many shared that they first heard the term when it was being said to others by family members and friends before it was said to them. Others shared that initially, the term Isitabane was an insult to them; however, through self-exploration and learning more about sexual attraction for other people, they discovered that the term Isitabane was an "accurate" identification. Some of the participants have engaged in thoughtful and critical examinations of how they choose to understand and define the term Isitabane, as well as how they choose to identify themselves. Almost all of the women interviewed who had been called 'Isitabane' felt that the term was insulting at first but then they learned to accept and embrace the term.

> **Participant #1:** *For the longest time ever since I heard the term Isitabane there are not a lot of things that hurt me. Like I don't care to a point when it is said to me. But when I heard the word Isitabane, it was an insult in a way because the first time the context was when they were insulting this boy, saying, "Hayi*

[19] Isitabane is a term used to refer to queer or LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender] people within the South African context.

wena uyisitabane. Yini ubehaviour kanje?" [You're Isitabane! Why are you behaving like this?] and I think he also felt like he was being insulted because he was hurt. So, from that day, the term Isitabane didn't sit well with me. Also, within my family, they often used the term Isitabane, and I would be like, "You know that term is not nice. Why don't you just say gay or something? Why are you saying Isitabane?" To a point where they actually started to use the word "after-nine". And also, again, I was like, "Woo do you understand what is after nine? Why?" So, there was that "Ay Andile asazike thina ukuthi sizonibiza ngani kanti" [Ay Andile we don't know how to refer to you anymore]. I said, "No, why is there a need for that term that is associated with us like we're people?". Again, like I was coming from that point that we're just people? There is no need to label each other. So, for me, the word Isitabane the first time I heard it, it wasn't a good term. So, when I actually came to understand that people sometimes can call you Isitabane not because they want to hurt you. Maybe because they know that a person who is in a relationship with the same gender is Isitabane you see. For some, it has become a Zulu word for a lesbian in English, and then in Zulu, it is Isitabane. There's a gay guy so in Zulu Isitabane. So, for me, I understood that not everybody who is calling you Isitabane is insulting you. That person is how they understand in their language that, oh so you are in a relationship with girls, so you're Isitabane, not that they're insulting you. **(Individual Interview, 14 November 2023)**

Participant #2: *The first time I heard that term, obviously we grew up with TVs and stuff, even though I can't say that the first time when I heard it, I had already known the person that I am. No, I didn't know. When I first heard of it, it was used to refer to a male who is in a relationship with umjita [slang that is used to refer to a male person], another male you see. I didn't think that a female in a relationship with another female falls under the term. I did not understand. How is this person different from other people because they're still human? Or maybe the difference is that this male person is dating another male person, that's why they are called Isitabane? It didn't sit well with me because we are all humans at the end of the day. When you say Isitabane, it's like you're insulting me, or there's something off with the term. After some time, you get used to it. People use it a lot maybe because they want to hurt us, I don't know if they can't see that slowly but surely, we no longer care about it.* **(Individual Interview, 18 November 2023)**

Participant #3: *To be introduced to it like I think about all the bad experiences because there was this time ka matric right I wasn't out yet, so we went to this camp and what I can share is that the term Isitabane for me awaken painful stuff I don't like it because like I said when I was doing Grade 12, I went to this camp where I first realized that I really like women. Yes. There was someone my age. So, we were close and stuff. We just did whatever we were doing. We were just nice to each other. So, this one learner noticed. In that camp, they pick students from different schools who are doing well in their schoolwork. So, this one student from the other school noticed that ow this person was like this and that. Then our school went to visit Ukzn [University of KwaZulu-Natal], the same school was also there. I was just like, ow I know that person. I greeted them. The people she was with were like "Uvumelani ubingelelwa Isitabane, Ungqingili? Usukuluma nongqingili manje?" [Why are greeting Isitabane, Ungqingili? Are you now friends with Ungqingili?]. They said all that while I*

was standing in front of her. I was just like 'ehh'. I was confused. Where does this person know me from? Where do they get what they're saying about me? Why are they so mean? I was crushed. I didn't understand but then it dawned on me that maybe this girl told her schoolmates about me that "ow that one is Isitabane". That moment really hurt me. And then there was another incident at church when someone said to me "Ayingeke ngathi Uyisitabane wena" [You look like Isitabane wena]. But all in all, as much as the term brings back horrible memories, I am Isitabane. I've reached that point where I am like no "Ngiyisona Isitabane" [I am Isitabane] and I'm comfortable with that. **(Individual Interview, 16 November 2023)**

Participant #4: *It's a unique term. What can I say? People sometimes use it in the wrong way. When I was growing up, being called this term made me upset/did something to me until I realized that there was no need for me to feel that way because it's who I am. It has a discriminating component. I don't know how to explain it. Another term that I used to hear is Inkonkoni. The first time I heard of it – there was a boy that I was friends with, and he was gay. At that time, I hadn't realized that I myself one of the Izitabane (gay). It was bothering me that boys were harassing this boy. At that time, it was used to refer to this boy, not me. I was upset and wondering why. He wasn't different from any of them, and he was still a human being.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #5: *When I was growing up, the term Isitabane was used to tease people if they were homosexual. When I first heard it, I was eleven years old. I have a brother who is gay, and I am a lesbian, so they used to use it to tease us. It was painful to hear someone calling you this thing. Sometimes we'd say it playfully when we fight, and I'd say "lestabane lesi" [you're Isitabane], and he'd say "le tomboy leli" [you're a tomboy], you see. It depends on who is calling me with this name. When I'm being called by a guy, it hurts me, but if it's a person that I know and am familiar with, then it's fine because this person is teasing me playfully.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #6: *The first time I heard it was used was when a boy behaved like a girl and people would say he was Isitabane – meaning he loves other boys. Yes, I remember very well who it was directed to. We used to call him anti [aunt] Mngoma... That's when I first heard it. Growing up they used to call him Isitabane. I was still young and didn't pay attention to it. Some used it in a degrading way. Yeah, I didn't pay attention to it until I took a good look at him, and I asked myself what is Isitabane and why are they referring to him as Isitabane… To me, it's an insult. Some use it in a nice way, maybe we're just talking, and then some use it as an insult…. I don't care anymore… it's no longer something that I can take to heart I don't care anymore.* **(Individual Interview, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #7: *The word 'Isitabane' to me means honestly, I think it's just the translation of people who are in same-sex relationships. It's used within Zulu people I think the Xhosa people as well. So, my understanding of the word Isitabane it just means the person who is dating the same sex. At first, I thought it was associated with male and male relationships, but then as I grew up and found out that, okay, there are female and female relationships, it also applies to that, so I think it just translates to same-sex couples. That's what I think the*

meaning is and my understanding of it. The first time when I heard it honestly, I think it was probably at home with uSomizi and stuff. They said uSomizi uyisitabane and stuff, you know, he dates men, and that's where I first heard the word. When I heard it, I wasn't that perplexed or confused. It's just I knew it was like they gave me a term that is associated with or used to group, in a sense, people who date the same gender. So, it wasn't really a bad thing. It just depends on the tone, honestly to me, but if it's like a normal tone, my understanding of the term is people who date the same gender or sex. That's just how I understand the word. **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #8: *For me, the word Isitabane right now, as I'm 35, is a name I have embodied and made a part of me mainly because when they say the word Isitabane usually, most of the time, it's an insult. The word Isitabane just like in the apartheid era the word Kaffir was given so that we are looked down upon. Similarly, the term Isitabane is used to make us feel small. So, the term Isitabane for me is part of my name type of thing. I just embrace it. I don't know it has become like that for me for a long time. So that's them trying to cut me down, and I don't let them; instead, it makes me very happy. That's what the word means to me. When did I first hear it? At a very young age. It was so sad that it was said it gave that feeling of HIV, like "OH MY GOD OH SHAME" type of thing, you know. I was probably ten or twelve years of age, and I remember my elder sister loved to care for other people's kids, you know. She had Gugu who was her play kid. Gugu was Isitabane at that time. I was 12, and I was like Isitabane Isitabane, you know. I didn't understand what Isitabane was when I first heard the word Isitabane until I met Gugu. Gugu always wore pants. Unfortunately, at that time, Gugu behaved like a boy, you know. She didn't like to bathe, and she wore anything she could find, sometimes she wore dirty clothes like a typical boy, you know. I didn't understand her [Gugu]. I thought, "Why is she trying to change herself"? What's wrong with her? God created you as a beautiful woman!* **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 28 November 2023)**

Participant #9: *So, when I first heard the word I was growing up. I can't really pinpoint a specific incident or scenario. I just know that it was a discourse that was there amongst families, amongst black families, amongst my family, you know, even society as a whole, you know. By the time I started waking up and seeing that, okay, there are such sexualities that are different from just being heterosexual. It was I think I was about nine or ten years old when, back then, I knew that people who were labeled as Isitabane dress in a particular kind of way. I remember… I don't know if you know the song Revolution "…talk about the revolution" [she started singing] … that song. I remember one of the ladies that was deejaying or whether she was a singer, she was dressed so funky, or alternative is the word that we would use now, but back then, it was super unusual, you know. She had piercings on the eyebrow, and she had a lip piercing as well and it was so unusual. I remember expressing interest and being like, how, I would love to have a lip piercing. You know, I really liked that. This lady went above and beyond she even had a tongue piercing. I remember a lot of people around me specifically my family being so against me being interested in having a lip piercing and any kind of facial piercing you know and I was like okay why I mean it's the freedom it's an expression it's cool you know its funky and I remember them letting me know that "Isitabane esenza njalo [Isitabane*

do those kinds of things] except if you're Isitabane you could do such, you can dress that particular way". From those kinds of discourse, you know, and I know growing up that was popular a gay man that was really flamboyant and you know lesbians that were really masculine, you see. And so, it was like, okay, you don't want to be one of them, you know. That's how it was made out to be rather than a negative thing that you do not want to be a part of or be associated with. So as I grew, you know, there is this thing that is like external voices that are there for creating pressure that you mustn't want to be a part of this world, and you shouldn't express interest in being a part of this world, you know. When that happened, when I started to feel or realize, rather let me not say feel because when I started to realize that all my crushes they're women, you know, and I'm probably in love with my best friend, what is happening, you know? It was very hard because now all of a sudden, these external voices have been adapted into my own voice because that was what I knew growing up. My opinion basically is formed of the opinion of others because I'm a child you know and because I want to be accepted and I want society to look at me and I want my parents and family to be proud of me and all of these different things are comminuting together to create this kind of impression and this kind of reaction from me. It was tough. It became internalized homophobia. It became praying to God to fix me. It became Why can't this go away? I think I am pretty much almost the perfect child except for these factors that are standing in my way, such as being Isitabane and now being an overweight black female, you know. There were these things that were standing in my way at the time that I felt were standing in my way and it was super tough. It was tough accepting the word as a part of my vocabulary because for the longest time, as I said, it was associated with really masculine lesbians or really flamboyant and feminine gay men, and so it was like, do I really qualify? Should I accept this in my category? And is this language I want to perpetuate and call others because a lot of people use it as an insult towards you know people who are part of the LGBTQI so it was just like eish what then is the word up until I started associating with other queers and other homosexuals which happened late in life when I was in university. When I was actually willing to say let's open this door. If it closes, then it closes. If it doesn't, it doesn't. let's just be whatever we want to be. We are smart enough, wise enough, capable enough to handle what it is that we experience when we are on the side of the door. When I say we I'm referring to myself? So, yea when I started associating with other people and other queers I realize that this is quite empowering to know even when people would try and be sassy like ahh buka nje lezizitabane [Ahh you see Izitabane] somebody would be like "and so ufuna ukuba Isitabane yini nawe?" [You want to be Isitabane?]. It's interesting and I got so close to so many people who are so empowered about their sexuality and they were taking back this word that I previously growing up thought "Uyangthuka ngalo or uthuka abantu ngalo" [this person is insulting me] and have made it a thing of it is what it is and to a point where I'm now part of PMB Izitabane Group on Facebook and I'm cool with it. You know you can call me whatever you want. It's because I realize that accepting other people's narratives to paint my own picture has never really gotten me anywhere, and it will not get me anywhere at all. It was a complex journey in order to get there. In order to evolve, in order to evolve my understanding as a person. **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 27 November 2023)**

5.4.2 Question 2: How has been your journey in the discovery of your sexuality as a black Isitabane woman in post-apartheid South Africa? Please share as much as you are comfortable.

> *"I got into many hopeless and very toxic heterosexual relationships that framed and reframed and ultimately broke my idea of love. Eventually, when I decided after accepting myself and after finding the words in order to paint my own narrative, it was interesting opening that door, you know…"* ***(Participant #9 – Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 28 November 2023)***

This question examines how black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg process their experiences of being Christian and Isitabane, how their coming out process shaped their faith journey, and their understanding of the church and God. Respondents shared that they felt lonely and experienced doubts during their journey of coming out. A combination of religious beliefs, society, and fear of family rejection discouraged them from exploring their feelings. There was an explicit recognition of the unacceptability of Ubutabane within Christianity; the condemnatory attitude toward Ubutabane was a message that some participants had internalized. For some leaving their homes and consequently coming out added to greater self-acceptance. Some have reconciled their sexuality with their religion, and some feel that they will only have to answer to God, so they don't allow anyone to have that power over them.

> **Participant #1**: *I'm not sure where to start. I think I haven't reached the point where I can say I'm confident in my own skin in terms of my sexuality because sometimes I ask myself, "Is this who I'm meant to be? Like is this really me?". So, my experience and just trying to figure out things, sometimes I can see progress like okay Amahle [pseudonym-Amahle], you're getting somewhere, but then again something comes up, and then I take two or three steps back and say eish I don't think this is the way you know. But my experience, it has been lonely, for lack of a better term. Because one I don't have any reference to this life. I don't have anyone who is close to me who has lived this life who is living this life. To say oh, okay, now I'm faced with this challenge. What can I do and also when… I think it's something that I always say that I haven't been able to be part of a group like the LGBTQ [Izitabane] community. Mmmh, the only people that I know who are part of this community, I think in high school, I only had one friend who identified as lesbian, and she was in the closet. During high school, I was still confused I didn't understand what was really going on with me. I think I mentioned that during our group discussion - one thing about me I don't like making decisions without having enough information for me to take a decision. So, when I tried to understand my feelings, especially in high school. It was hard because there was no information around me. It was taboo to talk about sexuality, in fact, dating. Why are you even thinking about dating worst part you want to speak about dating girls. That made me internalize whatever that I was dealing with you see. So, it was difficult for me to understand because*

even like dating I started when I was 19. Even then it was because I was trying to stop my mom from asking me questions. Because my cousins were all dating but Amahle [pseudonym] why are you not dating? What is going on with you? You're busy playing with your brothers, wearing like a boy, walking like a boy what is it? So, from that, at 19, I said, okay, let me have a boyfriend and make sure that they see this boyfriend so that they can say, "ow she's dating," and maybe they will stop concentrating on what they were already thinking about me that maybe Amahle [pseudonym] is playing for the other team. So, just to move their focus, let me find someone who will catch me with this person. Then, at least, they will forget about me and the person that I am. So, like I said, it was a lonely journey, and, in a way, it still is. Because a lot of things I learned them on my own, I got them from the internet. Like I said I don't have enough friends a identify with the queer community. Most of my friends are straight and it's not that I do not want queer friends or gay or anything. Most of the things that have helped me I learned them on my own. Unfortunately, I will say not everything that you find on the internet is right. So yeah, that has been my experience, and I'm still learning. It is an individual journey- there is a certain way that society expects you to conduct yourself when you say you like women. For instance, they expect you to dress like a guy or change how you walk or something. And I think I mentioned during our group discussion on Saturday that I sometimes put on nail polish, I even have two pairs of earrings. When I bought them, my mother was like Andile, are you changing? I asked her, "Changing what, Mom? What do you mean when you say I'm changing?" "No, I just like nail polish, I love earrings, but it doesn't have to say anything about me," I replied. I wear dresses when I go to church and I'm cool with that. I have a pink one even. **(Individual Interview, 14 November 2023)**

Participant #2: *I'm not going to lie. When I was in high school, that is when I started to realize the kind of person I am; it wasn't easy. My background, the situation I was living under, and the way my family is. Before I even came out, I observed how they were, the people they are you see. Every time when we talked about such topics, I would observe their reaction you see, and I realized that my family is homophobic I am not going to lie to you. Ya, there was that thing that even if I wanted to tell them that I was living this life they were going to judge me and say things to me so at first, I decided to keep this a secret but, in the end, I realized that it was not going to help to hide so I tried to show them the life that I am living something like that. But there was always something telling me that even if I come out and tell them the kind of person that I am they will never accept me. They will call me names because I know that they are homophobic. Now when we look at the community where I come from and how they treat people like me, I'd say I'm the second person who was brave enough to come out and show people the life that I am living. Maybe there are other people who live this life, but they are hiding, or when a person is back home, they continue to behave like females, but when they leave the place, they go back to living this life because there is this freedom that you have when you're away from home. Back home, there's that thing because even Induna is close with my family, and I treated him as my dad, but when I realized that he is against this life and me wearing pants, I decided that I did not need such a person in my life. This is the reason why I said I'm not a person who attends gatherings. Even when there's a gathering at home, I do not care because I'm trying to protect*

myself because I know that if I do attend, I always come back heartbroken. So, when it comes to things like that, I choose to stay behind… because when I go somewhere they always expect me to wear skirts instead of trousers and be an "intombazane" [maidens]. Let's say maybe there's a gathering at a friend's house or maybe someone that I know, then I have to Ngiyobhinca [wearing Zulu traditional garments] and be like other izintombi [maidens], something that I am not comfortable with doing. Some of the things that they make me do, I think they make me do them for them, and to make them happy, they don't care about me and how I feel about all those things. Ya, I'd say I only get freedom when I'm not home and when I got to university because that is where I realized that people are living their own lives and no one cares about what other people think. Even at university, there were not a lot of people who came from my community and who knew the life that I was living. When they finally asked me about my sexuality. I didn't hide anything from them I told them that I was dating other women. They would ask me why I never said anything, and I would tell them that the situation in our community doesn't allow me even they see how things are. Abantu bayakuthanda ukukhuluma bayajajana. [People love to judge. When I'm not at home, I feel free; it's like I can live my life. I do not have to hide who I am. **(Individual Interview, 18 November 2023)**

Participant #3: *From the beginning accepting was hard. It was hard. I tried praying about it trying to change myself. It was in me, and I didn't realize it, and it started surfacing without me realizing. I tried to hide it. I failed. I failed until I reached the point where I realized that I should be me. I was afraid to be seen in my community, and I would ask friends how I should dress because how I thought I should dress would show that I was Isitabane. But I reached a point where life was very hard for me. I had many losses. Life was very hard for me and it is funny how being Isitabane brought comfort to me. It's like I'm going through a lot. I lost everyone important. I was alone but being myself, it was like someone was there for me by me being myself. You understand. I started exploring myself. I was like, dude, you're cool, you understand. I was happy you see. From there it didn't matter what other people think. People from church I didn't care what they thought of me. I did everything that I wanted to do. Like I said, I lost my brother I went to therapy because I had trauma because he died in front of me. So, to survive daily Ubutabane brought meaning to my life because I felt like my life had no meaning. My brother was the most important person to me. I was not close to my mother. Being Isitabane brought meaning to me… looking back and seeing where I'm coming from, it's nice, and being Isitabane, like I said, I know what I want to achieve, you see. Now I started to go to the gym you see. I started feeding the Isitabane in me. I stopped suppressing who I am. As it surfaces I let it thrive. So, it's very nice when you reach that point. Looking back, it makes me happy.* **(Individual Interview, 16 November 2023)**

Participant #4: *It wasn't an easy journey. It was not. Community, family* ***(pause)*** *especially with my mother because she can't hide her emotions. My mother, even though she is not going to address you directly, you will see her reactions toward you. Sometimes I ask myself whether she blames herself for what is happening and stuff because she says things. Sometimes she shouts at me after finding out that I am Isitabane [lesbian]. Now she's okay. I think she tried to process this because we had a meeting with my father. They sat me down*

and asked me what was going on with my emotions and I explained to them. My father, on the other side, understands. Even though he is hurting he doesn't show me. He tries to comfort me and to show me that regardless of everything, I am still his child, nothing has changed. For my mother, it's still difficult. But I think now it's better even though I can't share with her everything that I go through, how I feel about things. I prefer my stepmom rather than my mother. **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #5: *Well, I can say that it was symmetrical because when I started to discover myself, I realized that it's fine because even at home, they have accepted me, and they didn't say much about this. I realized after some time that this was not easy. I fell for a straight girl and I could not move on for six years. This is where I started to wonder why I'm like this because I'm suffering and I can't move on from this person. But after some time, I became okay. I'm okay. At home, they are okay… in my community, though there are people who hate me. Boys in my community don't like me, and some women don't like me. I do not know. They say I will make their kids Isitabane. I didn't pay attention to that because I told my mother, and she told me that "Kulungile ungenzeli abantu" [it's okay, please don't do this for people].* ***(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)***

Participant #6: *It is not difficult if you're going to accept yourself first and pay no attention to what other people say. Ya, it was not difficult… I told myself that.* **(Individual Interview, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #7: *My journey honestly, I'd say smooth sailing in a sense because I didn't feel pressure or like homophobia in a sense. I was just a kid, you know, with certain types of feelings. Luckily, you know, there's research, there's YouTube, there's Google, and there's the internet. There's all of that; there's even television and stuff. It helped me understand that, okay, I'm this; I'm a female who loves females. So, I'd say my discovery of my sexuality has been smooth sailing. There hasn't been any backlash or stuff I have like experienced, you know. It has just been a good journey.* **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #8: *It has been very hard because back in the day, you know, I was young, somebody in 1996 and 1998, you see. The whole gay and lesbian right only came in 2006 when I was doing matric. Our black brothers, especially in Lokshins [townships], had this anger, and they just came from violence. We were experiencing our uncles and brothers who were dying, and ey let me not get into the political part of it, but growing up in a society with all that anger and all that violence was very scary and hard. I do not want to lie. I think, amongst other reasons for me, that made me… you remember when we were talking when we had our group discussion, those times when you're like, I'm gonna [going to] pray this demon away, I'm not going to live like this. I'm not going to be Isitabane. Amongst some of the reasons why we were scared of coming out were those. I had a brother who was (breaths heavily) I don't even know where to start. My brother! I'd forget to do the dishes at night sometimes and …. He is my aunt's child and they live five houses from my grandmother's place. So, in my grandmother's place, everybody comes and goes whenever. He was nine or eight years older than me. But he was a giant, he was built you know. So sometimes I'd forget to wash the dishes at night, and when he comes*

to my grandmother's house in the morning, for no reason, you know, he'll be like, "Are you still sleeping at this time?" you know, and I'm like or God why is here in the morning you know. Then my grandmother would be like yea wake her up. She slept before washing the dishes. That nigga would bang you to the wall, and he'll push you to the sink, you know like it was nothing. So, coming out saying you are gay was like, woo, what are you saying? You know. Until I was able to really come out when I got a job. I was 19. I moved to Durban and found a place there. I think for a year I was living this life in Durban. My brother died in 2006, so he didn't really get to see anything, but that thing was still embedded in me when I went home, I had to take out all my piercings. Even though I'd wear my pants and my sneakers neighbors would be like, "Ey you now and then?" I'd be like "Leave me alone". **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 27 November 2023)**

Participant #9: *My journey was a very weird one and it definitely is weird. I think firstly like I said a lot of narratives wrote my story so especially being a black person, a black female you often find yourself in spaces and boxes where you don't want to trample too many toes you know at least growing up that's how it was you know you don't want to trample too many toes, you don't want to make enemies, because connections, you might need them and if this person is a homophobe. There was that mindset that if you piss people off nobody will want to be around you or be associated with you and all of that. That was the mainstream attitude you know. We didn't know that there were comfortable spaces and safe spaces for people like us. The discovery of Ubutabane [homosexuality], as I said, started at a very early age. I've never really associated love with gender. I really have not as a person you know. And growing up and discovering what exactly that means for me in terms of okay, there's a beautiful concept here, but then I see that I'm more homosexual leaning in terms of, you know, I love women, and I love everything feminine about them. For a long time, there were conversations in my head. The reason why I waited too long to even open the door rather of my own sexuality was because when you listen to social media a lot of the discourse that goes around is always about "Are you sure you really like a woman? Are you sure maybe you just haven't found the right man because I have dated men before. And it's like okay "are you sure you? You haven't found the right man. Are you sure you want to be with a masculine-presenting woman you know because you haven't really gotten the right one maybe that's the point. Maybe that's what's wrong. So, I got into many hopeless and very toxic heterosexual relationships that framed and reframed and ultimately broke my idea of love. Eventually, when I decided after accepting myself and after finding the words in order to paint my own narrative it was interesting opening that door you know because even when I opened that it was okay maybe you don't want to date a masculine female because maybe you're just looking for a man within her so date the feminine female and then being with a feminine female you realize that damn I really like women. You like everything that encompasses femininity, you know, even in your masculine partner, which currently my partner is the first masculine person I've ever dated. But like I adore besides who she is as a masculine presenting person I adore her femininity and I think that understanding over time and then realizing that I'm just in love with the person, I'm in love with your femininity. I'm in love with who you are as a woman. It was definitely*

great. It's definitely great [laughs]. It has made that journey to self-discovery so much easier because now it's about me it's about what I'm into. It's about what I like. It's not about everybody else and what they think. Am I scared, you know, to be seen like this? Am I scared to be seen with this particular person? I think that the evolution of myself from self-acceptance to opening the door of dating to dating and loving it and evolving and just true acceptance has definitely been great and I think being in a post-apartheid South Africa is so much greater now because there are so many different words. People accept the fact that sexuality is a fluid spectrum and they accept that you can label yourself as queer, you can label yourself as pan, you can label yourself as sapiosexual. There are so many different types that you can label yourself, and it's okay. Even if tomorrow you find that one particular label didn't fit for you, you can evolve that. And now there's the rise of things like TikTok you know. It's not just you're internally freaking out on your own, praying not to be this kind of person, but rather, it let me look online and see if there's anybody like me, and maybe we can help each other through these kinds of questions. Although this all happened when I was already old and above the age of 21, I feel like for a lot of young developing Izitabane it's a beautiful thing. **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 28 November 2023)**

5.4.3 Question 3: Have you ever experienced violence because of your sexuality? Kindly share as much as you are comfortable.

"Relax we used a condom. I had to show you what you were missing out. You could be a proper girl. Look at you, you're so beautiful." …. he knew, and he saw very well that I'm lesbian [Isitabane], and he did that.
(Participant 8 – Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 27 November 2023)

Nine black Izitabane women were asked to respond to questions that sought to explore what constitutes homophobic hatred and violence, the most common manifestation of homophobic hatred and violence, and perceptions of how widespread it is in the lives of the women involved in the study. Additionally, the causes and consequences of homophobic hatred and violence and its connection to socio-religious structures were also examined. Experiences of discrimination, family rejection, and emotional and verbal abuse were the most common homophobic hatred and violence manifestations reported or experienced by the women in this study. Six of the women shared that they had experienced violence, including verbal violence, and one participant shared that she knew people who had experienced sexual assault and that she herself had experienced sexual assault. This is in line with the literature, including the prevalence of these experiences among Izitabane women between the age of 16-35. The women in this study recognized that homophobic hatred and violence are often used as a means of control: to demand black Izitabane women to conform to heterosexual norms, instill fear, exert control over Ubutabane sexuality, and assert notions of masculinity.

Participant #1: *I have been fortunate. I'm not around a lot of people most of the time. I keep to myself a lot. But have you ever noticed someone's behavior before and after they found out about your sexuality? Before they knew about my sexuality, they were acting a certain way toward me, and now that they know, they are acting snucks [which can be translated as being weird] toward me. But it wasn't aggressive; also, it was just explicitly I don't care about you anymore. But you find those vibes. For example, my aunt, my mom's younger sister, when I was studying in Durban I shared a flat with them. We lived in one building, and at the time, I was still discovering myself a lot was happening. My aunt and her husband were okay with me but when they found out that aw Andile is like this. I don't know who told them because I do not remember telling them. Once they found out their behavior changed. I remember my uncle wouldn't want to be in the same room with me even now you see. Although my aunt is chilled, when we start talking about marriage you will hear her saying "Ay abo Andile asbazi nkosi yami ukuthi bazophelelaphi" [Ay we don't know where Andile will end up] you see things like that.… I do not care. There are certain people in my life who matter and their opinions matter. So, when someone else comes and tells me their opinion just because they don't like the life that I am living, I don't care.* **(Individual Interview, 14 November 2023)**

Participant #2: *Physically no. As a person, I believe that if you're a male I do not care about you. I like to fight. Yes, I do love to fight, but something that I will never do is lay a hand on a woman. But if it's a guy, no, please don't try me because you think I'm a woman. But when it comes to verbal violence, I think the issue with my dad's twin has really hurt me, and there's nothing that has hurt me like that. I don't want to lie. It really hurt me because even today, when I think about it, it hurts. My blood. Someone who expects me to respect him and call him father while he himself cannot respect me, accept the life that I want to live, a life that makes me happy. I am not going to lie because even the issue with my brother, even though I have never taken it seriously, got to me. This one day my mother told me to bathe and accompany my brother to town. My mother asked me what I was going to wear I told her I was going to wear pants. She then said you know how your brother is. I said it's fine if he wants to fight, we will fight. When we were about to leave, my brother asked me if I was going with him wearing pants and I said yes. He then told me that I would not be getting in his car wearing pants and I said OKAY this is the car you paid for it and I didn't pay for it so I'm going to a take taxi. He then got in his car and left. I waited for a taxi. Thinking about this, I asked myself, "If my own blood could do something like this to me, what about people who are not my blood?" If my own family and my blood, people who are supposed to protect me, can do this to me [participant getting emotional], how are other people supposed to take me seriously? Yeah, it is very difficult. At home, there are three of us, my big brother, me, and my mother's lastborn. The lastborn doesn't care about my sexuality. He is relaxed and doesn't stress. We're all right. As I'm saying maybe as much as my mother knew when I was in high school when I didn't really understand what was happening, I noticed that my mother was always scared for me because she knows my family is very strict. She was scared that maybe people were going to say I'm Isitabane because she spoiled me, you see, and that I'm the only girl. What are people going to say now that I'm dating other women and behaving like this? While I've never come out to my family or held*

any serious meeting with them regarding my sexuality I have noticed that even when we're just sitting at home or just talking I noticed some of the things my mom or when a group of girls walking past my house she will call me and say "Nazi Izintombi" [Here are girls] or when a girl comes to my house she'd say "Ngizele insizwa zodwa" [I gave birth to boys only] and then I'm like if my mother is okay there's no need for me to worry about what other people say or think. **(Individual Interview, 18 November 2023)**

Participant #3: No. **(Individual Interview, 16 November 2023)**

Participant #4: *Yes. My younger uncle didn't understand my behavior when I was growing up, and he used to ask me, "Mshana uyini? Izitabane asizifuni layikhaya! Izitabane asizifuni layikhaya" [my niece what are you? We don't want Izitabane in this household! We don't want Izitabane in this household!]. I'd just keep quiet and that was it. My other uncle, the one who raised me knows from when I was young about my situation. My grandmother understands as well. In my community – there was a time when I had an argument with one person about this girl. I was not even dating this girl but we were friends. This person wanted to date this girl but the girl didn't want him, so he assumed that it was because of me. They said to me "yey wena uzenza umfana and stuff nje asikfuni la sizokushaya wena nalabangani bakho ohamba nabo la. Asinifuni la emphakathini abantu abanje" [you think you're a boy and stuff? We don't want you here. We will beat you and your friends. We don't want people like you in our community]. I kept quiet. After a few days, there was an incident that occurred in the river with the guy who tried to rape me but didn't succeed.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #5: *Yes. Verbal, but it was coming from a community member. At the time, I was still in Grade 9, and this person was working at school. This person asked me to fetch something for them upstairs I don't remember what it was. When I left she told my classmates that "angimfuni kabi lo" [I don't like her]. She said a lot of horrible things about me and my classmates told me all about it. I was friends with one of her kids and sometimes I'd come to her house to study with her or sometimes fetch her kid to walk together to school. When she saw me, she'd shout at her kid and ask her why she was with me. "Wena ngasho ngathi hlukana nalomngani wakho angimfuni" (I told you to stop being friends with this person. I don't like her).* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #6: *No physical violence or anything but verbal violence you don't find those people in my community. Let's say you're walking on the street and people will ask you if you're a boy or a girl. And then they'd say things like "izulu ngeke ulingene futhike uhlukumeza umawakho ehh umawakho wakzala uyintombazane wena uyazitshintsha" [You will never see heaven and you're breaking your mom's heart, your mom gave birth to a girl and you're changing yourself], things like that. Physically, no one has ever touched me… I'm still safe, and from here to there, I feel safe. I can still fight for myself.* **(Individual Interview, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #7: *Regarding violence, I haven't like personally experienced some sort of violence. I think it has to do with me being like a home buddy, you know. So, like, I don't really go out much, so probably that's why. In my close circle*

of people, I know I have never experienced any violence, and I think it links with being born in the 21st century, so yeah, I have never experienced any violence of some sort, whether physical violence or verbal violence, nothing of that matter. **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #8: *Yes. The answer is yes. I've met so many black women. In my head, it is like 90% of black women have been raped. I am a rape survivor as well. I was thirteen when it happened. At the time I hadn't discovered my sexuality and whatnot, however, due to my sexuality. I do not want to lie. One incident I am remembering right now, which is why I became part of NGOs and Activism and so forth, was to try and spread awareness. So many times, I have been told not to blame myself, but at some point, you need to realize that ow had I not done that but maybe you know, even though they rape kids. In my incident, I went out drinking you see. Over did it, and this guy I knew, and this is the time I moved to Durban, and I'm new in this whole going out and clubbing thing. I didn't know what a club was until I was 20. My lesbian friends introduced me to this place called Angelos now it's called 58. I became this person who wanted to visit this place every weekend. So, my lesbian friends got tired of going every weekend, so I decided to go alone, you know. I got drunk, and then I had to go back home, so I went to Chicken Licken for some wings, and I was sloppy drunk. This guy becomes really friendly and we're all drunk and laughing at the fact that we are so drunk. At some point, we fell asleep while we were waiting for our order. We ended up requesting a cap. It was going to drop him first, then take me to my place. We ended up saying we going to use one cab. I was relaxed I didn't think much of it. I fell asleep again in the cab. I guess he told the cap driver that we were going to the same place. Next thing, I woke up at his place. It was a whole mess. I am mentioning this story because the morning after when I confronted him, he said the words, "Relax, we used a condom. I had to show you what you were missing out. You could be a proper girl. Look at you, you're so beautiful" so that's why I'm mentioning this because he knew and he saw very well that I'm lesbian [Isitabane] and he did that.* **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 27 November 2023)**

Participant #9: *I'm lucky enough to have never really experienced violence because of my sexuality. I have experienced a situation of assault in a sexual manner but it wasn't because of my sexuality. I think I'm very thankful for that and I think it's mainly because I'm a feminine presenting Isitabane and you don't really find that kind of experience in a lot of feminine presenting gay and queer women mainly because people look at you and they'll rather be passive aggressive with you and say things like "you haven't found the right man or you just need some of me or you're a waste of beauty" it's mainly so commented that will make you uncomfortable and try to belittle your experience, your sexuality, your relationships especially when I first started like opening myself up and dating woman I think ya that was my experience everywhere. Even male friends because I have a lot of male friends. Not so much now, but back then, I had a lot. Even when I'm talking about my experiences with them, initially, it was always "umuhle kangaka skhokho" [but you're so beautiful], you know, or "selukuhlulile uthando" [love has defeated you]. Even females would say "selukuhlulile uthando [love has defeated you] and you decided to switch things". I always laugh to myself about it and say "ukube uyazi umuntu wesifazane [only if you knew that a woman] would hurt you worse than any man*

ever could". I think that's mainly based on the fact that there's just such a strong and heavy connection and bond that you don't expect that to be the case. No, I'm lucky enough to have never experienced violence. It's mainly being uncomfortable and people belittling the experience and who you are as a person and belittling your relationship and things like that. **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 28 November 2023)**

5.4.4 Question 4: Is or was the faith space helpful or harmful in the process of navigating your sexuality as Isitabane? Please elaborate.

> *"Just recently I have come to understand that it is not the religion itself but people who are preaching it. I decided that let me take Christianity, let me take the bible, and let me live it according to my life"* ***(Participant #1 – Individual Interview, 14 November 2023)***

Respondents shared that faith spaces made it exceptionally difficult for them to embrace their sexuality. Some of the respondents felt that identifying with both identities at the same time was not possible as being Isitabane was presented as incompatible with being a Christian and with the teachings of Christianity. Some of the respondents chose to focus on claiming the positive aspects of their Christianity and re-framed what Christianity represented to them. By doing so they were able to feel that they also belonged to Christianity. Overall, faith provided the women in this study with a safe space to explore their sexuality and religious identity. It instilled a degree of positivity in their lives.

Participant #1: *For the past year or two, I have been trying to understand how to fit my life into Christianity, and I have researched different religions like Kemet, the ancient Egyptian religion, which, if you read about it, is similar to Christianity. But when I was searching more about it and trying to understand what it is based on and stuff, I realized that yes, this religion I can relate to, like it doesn't have that thing that you find in Christianity, that judgmental mentality that is there in Christianity. But then again, I was raised by Christians, so there's that thing that made me realize that no, maybe you're deviating. How about you come back because there's a lot? You see when people say what religion are you? I say no, I'm not religious; I'm more spiritual, but also, I do not understand what you mean when you say you're spiritual. So, my faith for the past two years has been rocky because I felt like "Christianity doesn't accommodate who I am". Just recently I have come to understand that it is not the religion itself but people who are preaching it. I decided that let me take Christianity, let me take the bible, and let me live it according to my life. For the past couple of months, that is what I have been doing. I read the Bible and base those verses on my life because if I follow what the pastor says, that is going to harm me, and then start looking for something better while this something better can end up harming me because, in my search for a better religion, I came across scary things. I read on Pegan religion, and from that, I decided that no, this is not for me. I'm glad that I went through all that to understand that there are many things in this world but maybe they are not for me. This is where I'm at right now. All in all, the Christian religion helped me*

to understand a lot of things. For example, there's this one… because I have been battling with understanding why, in churches, we are told that "Unkulunkulu uyazizonda Izitabane, Unkulunkulu uyazizonda izidakwa" [God hates Izitabane, God hates drunkards] you see. That thing that "Wena kahle kahle uyazondwa Unkulunkulu you're hated" You're hated, God hates you". That thing made me think if God hates me so much then why did God make me? I want to understand that. One of my favorite verses is John 3 chapter 16 "at the beginning God saved the world that he gave his only Son". When I read that verse alone and I break it down, it helps me understand what God meant when God said "Ekuqaleni Unkulunkulu walithanda kangaka izwe" [For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son] what does it mean. That line on its own that "He gave his only son". They say Christ came with salvation. So, if God loved us before giving us His Son before salvation basically before we had an opportunity to sin. So why does he hate me now? I'm a sinner; I'm not saved because I'm Isitabane and stuff. If God hates me so much, why does this verse say, "God first loved the world so much that He gave His only Son to provide salvation? So, without God's love for sinners, salvation wouldn't be there. So, when a pastor tells me that God hates me because I'm a sinner, God loves me more than a saint. So, as much as the past two years, I was looking for something better when I realized that I do have something better. Before that, it helped me to understand my position in God, and how I am relating to God. So that's why I am saying I'm glad that I went through that stage where I was not satisfied with faith. Let me look for other things because it made me understand that, you see, there is this saying that says, "You don't know what you have until you lose it". **(Individual Interview, 14 November 2023)**

Participant #2: *Regarding the church, the last time I attended church was in primary school. I decided to stop because I noticed that people like me were seen as sinners. Even when you go to church wearing a dress or skirt there is always that "Sizokhonza nomuntu oyisitabane" [We're worshiping with Isitabane]. There was always that fear that maybe they were going to think that I was tainting the dignity of the church, so I decided to stop going to church and live my life... I'm not going to lie, there's a lot of judgment in my church. I cannot say much about the Nazareth church because I have never been to that church after embracing my sexuality. I only respect the Sabbath rule. However, the Zion church, people from that church are not good people. They go to church and call themselves Abazalwane [believers] but they are not good people. I believe that "Uma kmele ngiye esontweni kmele ngiye endaweni la khona ngizozizwa ngikhululeke khona, la engeke ngize ngisabe" [When I attend church, it needs to be a welcoming and safe environment.]. Even when I face challenges and maybe look for guidance and prayers, there's always that thought at the back of my mind that these people are going to judge me and they are not going to help me with anything.* **(Individual Interview, 18 November 2023)**

Participant #3: *I'd say it was harmful because it made me hate the person I am before I became fully the person I am. When the person I am was trying to thrive or surface, I hated it, you understand. Now, when I think about how helpless I was during that time, it irritates me to think, why would I hate myself like that? I tried building a personality that was going to conform to society you understand. Now I hate that I built that personality. You see the mindset of*

people in my community and in my church, especially women, they're like, you have to get married in the church. I was the only one who hated that. I remember how they used to hype me. They would say things like, "Umfundisi bani bani uzoshada wena!" [Pastor who and who is going to marry you]. That was a mockery. They saw the type of a person I was so they mocked me. I hated every moment. They always hyped me up: "Uzokhethwa uzokhethwa" [You're going to be chosen, you're going to be chosen] you're beautiful, and whatnot. I just hate the ***Nqubeko*** *[pseudonym – Nqubeko] I was. I just hate it because sometimes you find that you're going through something you'll be like maybe things would be better if I kept the personality that I built to conform to society. Religion made me believe that God will punish me because I'm this person. Things are going bad because I'm this person. You end up struggling.* **(Individual Interview, 16 November 2023)**

Participant #4: *It was harmful. It was harmful because the last time I went to church, someone wanted Ukungikhetha, and this was the third time. I left because I realized that things were getting out of hand. To top that, my grandmother respects and believes in this culture. I didn't want her to end up arranging something for me without me knowing. Sometimes, she would say to me, "Wena wayeka umfana efuna ukuzosilethela inyama layikhaya" [You are just going to let this boy go while he wants to bring us meat]. I just laugh and say, "Ay gogo". But now she understands because she sometimes asks me about girls. Ya… Even listening to members of the congregation when they speak or when they see Isitabane, they would say things like "Umsangano lo Unkulunkulu ngeke ayivume lento enje" [This is madness. God will never allow something like this]. So, this discourages me from the church.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #5: *Yes, it was harmful a lot because I saw myself as someone who was committing a big sin. Yeah… because they used to over-emphasize that it is a sin.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #6: *It was not harmful because even when my pastor preaches he has never spoken about Ubutabane and whatnot. No. I have never heard him.* **(Individual Interview, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #7: *Honestly, this whole thing with faith, I don't relate much because I distanced myself from the church, not exactly like because I experienced anything. No, it's just a family thing. We just stopped going to church, but in a sense, there was this teacher, you know, this teacher, who read the Bible in front of the class. I believe it was Grade 8; I was 13 at the time. He read the Bible in front of us in class. I don't know why because he was an isiZulu teacher. He read the bible, and he said "People who date the same gender are committing a sin. Into engafuneki iBible lize liyasho (it is not allowed even the Bible says so)". So, as a person I kind of like distanced myself further away from the whole Christianity thing. It came to a point where I stopped going to church like I didn't have a religion; I'm just me – Kazi [pseudonym-] - and I don't go to church; I believe in ancestors only. In a sense, it was harmful because, I mean, growing up, I did have a relationship with God, and now this teacher comes and tells me that the person that I am is a sin and I'm going to hell. I took it personally. I was just like, you know, after all these years me going to church and having a relationship with God, now someone comes and tells me*

that I am a sin. It was just rough. So, I decided to leave this church thing completely this whole Christianity thing I am leaving it. I do not go to church – I am Sipho who doesn't believe in anything. **(Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #8: *Faith space for me hasn't played a helpful role you know. It's always "Sodom and Gomora; you're going to burn." You know when you grow up with people and as you all get old, they get offered positions in the church. The next thing the person starts talking about Adam and Eve and whatnot. So those who are my peers, I am able to confront them and say, okay, let's read the Scripture, you know. I will ask them where exactly it mentions Sodom and Gomora. We read the whole Scripture of Sodom and Gomora. Sodom and Gomora was a wild place you know. There were hookers, there were strippers, there were gays, there were lesbians, there were rapists, there were killers. Anything and everything was happening in the place called Sodom and Gomora. God wanted to save this place. The angels wanted to save this place and these angels asked God what can we do? Can we do something? Can you send us down there to do something for these people so that you don't burn them? Then God sends these angels down there. The angels were told that if you cannot save them in this certain amount of time I am going to send fire. The men go down when they get there. It is Sodom and Gomora for real, you know. As an angel, I'd like to believe that you become beautiful and holly, and these people wanted to sleep with this man angel. I do not know why. Whether it's me who hasn't allowed myself to open my mind or maybe it's the church that is brainwashing me. The Bible says "Abesilisisa bakhanukela ingelosi" wanted to have sex with the angels. And that was the angels failing. The angels were like we're failing. Can we at least save a certain amount of people who will listen to us? The King's servant was there, and then when the angels went to the King's home, the angels told them God was going to burn this place down, but if you follow us, you will be saved. As they were going they were told they couldn't save all of their daughters and were told not to look back. The wife, Lot's wife, and the mother heard one of the children crying. She looked back, and she was turned into salt. The Bible says. That is why Sodom and Gomora were destroyed. Not necessarily because there were gays and lesbians. It is not recorded that there were lesbians but it has been generalized by the church. When I had this discussion with the church leader, it was clear to them that a relationship between two women is also seen as a sin. Whereas as a Zulu in my culture, we have Sangomas "Owesifazane uyambathwa umkhulu" [Sangomas who are females but possess male spirits] and then there's going to be that change in your feelings in your hormones. I'd like to believe that sexuality has to do with hormones. It is acceptable, and if we go deeper into the Bible, we find that there were kings, King James, and others. The Bible has been refined. Some things were taken out. Some were added to support whoever was in power at that time you know. We can't say in this day and age that the Bible as it is, that's how it was, or that's how God left His messages. We found out that there's this place in Egypt where there is a Bible the size of a king-size bed, but yet today, we only rely on the black and pink Bible. So, yeah it hasn't really been supportive to me.* **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 27 November 2023)**

Participant #9: *Faith was very harmful. Like I had said I live in a very mixed household. My dad is a Muslim my mom is Isangoma but originally a Catholic.*

All sides were very harmful. Within the Islamic, it's called haram. You are a sinner this huge sinner who doesn't want to give your parents grandbabies and allow them to carry on your surname. You are not trying to leave an heir because now there's an expectation that you're a woman, you should be giving birth to children, and if you're gay, you're not going to do that. Also, in the church, they're like Oh my God, obviously there's a demon in you, and that's what's causing you to be this way. And then you have the cultural aspect you know, people are just like maybe udlisiwe [you're bewitched] or this or that. Everything other than just "you are" was the answer. Everything wrong would be the first thing elaborated when you bring up such conversations in these kinds of spaces. Unfortunately, institutionalized religion of any kind whether you're Christian or not, drills a cult-like mindset where people take what has been said and they perpetuate that in their homes. Picking and choosing what it is they elaborate on or perpetuate in their homes not the message of wholistic and true love but rather the message of don't do this because you're a sinner and there's something wrong with you if you do this. It was a harmful thing growing up. Very harmful and growing up I think having the conversations with your loved ones your parents or whoever definitely softened a lot of stuff, softened a lot of the conversations that were being had in the household because as much as I haven't come out but like I realize that my parents pay a lot of attention to me. For example, I remember growing up we'd always get into fights over how they would talk about homosexual people on television. Izitabane on television. "Don't say that or don't talk about them like that. Don't talk about Somizi like that. Don't talk about Ntsiki Mazwai like that. Don't talk about these people like that" I would say. I remember being asked several times, "Why are you offended? Do you belong in this group?" And I'm just like, no, but it's offensive, you know. Over the years I've continued to be that person because I am that person. There's definitely been more of an acceptance and a shift to say, okay. Obviously, this is something that our child is passionate about, and also them being exposed to homo people like gay people Izitabane has helped so much because now it is no longer something that is far away from them. It's tangible people you care about that are in front of you that are being themselves in front of you, and you still relate, you know. I think it definitely helped, those conversations helped a lot. Initially, they were very harmful, but over time, through incorporating conversations and my feelings and all of these things, you know, it was brought to more of a place of holistic love rather than selective love. **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 28 November 2023)**

5.4.5 Question 5: How did your experiences as an Isitabane shape how you navigate faith spaces?

"I used to be prayerful. Very prayerful. But now, when I have to pray, I'd be like, why am I praying because God doesn't listen to me anyway? .... I feel like I'm drifting away from the church because one day I want to marry and have a wife. The church will never accept that. It's just a matter of time before I quit because I'll be judged anyway" ***(Participant #2 – Individual Interview, 16 November 2023).***

The respondents shared unique stories about how their experiences as Izitabane shaped how they navigate their sexualities. The respondents shared that the belief that God hates Ubutabane created a tremendous sense of conflict and caused them to feel deeply uncomfortable about attending church. Some of the women shared that upon accepting their sexuality, they made a conscious decision to step away from the church, and some shared that they remained active in the church throughout their self-discovery process.

> **Participant #1:** *Honestly, I have that I don't care attitude. I do what people I care about care of. For example, my mom. If something is going to disappoint her I re-evaluate it. I honestly do not care. Yes, I do respect faith spaces and all of that because, just like you have mentioned, it's hard to say just because you're here when you go home, you now wear pants or when you attend events like traditional stuff, and you show up wearing pants just because they have accepted you and all of that. I also have that; I can't go to church wearing pants and say ow well, they know about me. There's still that. But I do not concern myself about what other people think or say about me dating girls. I honestly do not care. If something doesn't sit well with my mom, who is the only person I care about like in terms of her opinion, then I do not care. I do respect the goal process of the church and stuff but I'm not going to belittle myself just to accommodate your comfort. So ya it helped me to say let me focus on what matters to me. I had to learn that I don't care mentality because I realized that this whole thing is harmful to me and hinders me from growing and living my own life. So obviously, for years, I had to belittle myself so that people can be comfortable, you see. Although sometimes I find myself thinking, okay, Amahle [pseudonym- Amahle], maybe you need to tone it down a bit, but now I have the courage to say, you know what? I do not care.* **(Individual Interview, 14 November 2023)**

> **Participant #3:** *I used to be prayerful. Very prayerful. However, now, when I have to pray, I would be like, why am I praying because God does not listen to me anyway? You understand. There are bible quotes and stuff, and there was even this pastor who was like if a woman and a woman get together, there is some damage that happens spiritually. So, like I have done a lot. I have been myself. When I pray, why am I praying? Because maybe God is not hearing me, you understand. I feel like I am drifting away from the church because one day, I want to marry and have a wife. The church will never accept that. It is just a matter of time before I quit because I will be judged anyway. At some point, I will be fully myself. I am fully myself when I am here, but when I go to church, I have to wear skirts. It has affected my faith, and I do not want to lie. I feel like I should just love God personally. Dealing with challenges since I am gay that I have had, it is hard to believe that God loves me because why should I go through all this? Why should I go through all these problems on top of the problems that I have? Why am I experiencing all of these?* **(Individual Interview, 16 November 2023)**

> **Participant #2:** *Just because I'm living this life, it doesn't mean that I have to stop believing in God; no, I haven't stopped. One thing that has kept me going in hard times or when I am experiencing challenges is to believe that*

Unkulunkulu uyena osidalile ubesahlali azi ukuthi vele ngizophila lempilo [God created us this way. He always knew that I was going to live this life] so there was no need for me to worry about other people. As much as whatever is happening at that time is not a pleasant experience, I try not to dwell on it even when I see that things are terrible for me. I do not know how to pray, but I know how to talk to God. So, I just sit there and ask God why He created us this way because people hate us. Sometimes I think maybe my faith is being tested, and maybe this life that I'm living is being tested, whether I'm sure if this is the life that I want to live or maybe I'm just doing this because most of us are now doing it because of peer pressure. I always put my trust in God all the time. No matter what people say or how they test me, my faith is strong and not going anywhere. **(Individual Interview, 18 November 2023)**

Participant #4: *I am a person who believes in culture, so there is not a lot that has affected me in this regard. However, I cannot gather with them [churchgoers]. However, I do pray, and even at home, I am always there when they pray.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #5: *I am a believer. I pray even though I no longer go to church. I try not to pay attention to people when they say that being me is a sin. I choose to focus on praising and believing in God.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #6: *No… I have told myself that I am God's child because everything is still going well for me. When I call God, God answers. This means that I am still God's child, and God still loves me.* **(Individual Interview, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #7: *Honestly, after I came out, maybe I have been to church probably three times. So, I have not been to church, but the recent church I went to is accepting. I went there wearing pants, and nobody had a problem with it. Nobody questioned it. It was just that we were there to worship God. We were just going to pray and sing, and no one was paying attention to what others were doing or wearing. You are here just to worship God.* **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #8: *For me, it has made me stronger, and I do not want to lie. It has made me stronger to a point where… to a default, you know. I am originally from Hammarsdale, bred and raised in Hammarsdale. We moved to Pietermaritzburg in 2016. When we moved to Pietermaritzburg, we found a church, the same Apostolic church, but now different people you know. Now, their teachings were very different from the church I attended in Hammarsdale. It became so hard that when I got here, my mom asked that I not expose my sexuality. Men started approaching me, and some even chose me to be their wife. I am not about that, so I decided to be open about my sexuality. I decided to bring my girlfriend from Durban to attend church with me. She and I did not attend the same church. When people saw us together the news started spreading within the church that she and I were dating. The next thing the preaching changed. They started preaching against Izitabane, and for a long time, I used to get up while Umkhokheli [the leader of the church] was preaching about it, grab my girlfriend, we leave at that time, you know. Until I was like, "This is my God. I have been an apostle for as long as I have been*

alive. I am not going to let them, with their corrupt teachings, chase me out of this place". It forced me to be stronger. I ended up being the villain. Whenever Umkhokheli speaks about these things, I would raise my hand and ask him, "As I am Isitabane sitting in front of you, are you telling me to get out the door?" you know. It instigated many talks within the church, you know. So much that it went to the higher people. The church was divided. Okay, before we got here, I said it made me strong to a fault. My nine-year relationship ended. Mmmh, one of Abakhokheli's wives, I do not know how you know. It was the weirdest story of how we ended up having this affair. However, we ended up having an affair, and she was… "you know straight people, when they get to taste us bayahlanya [they become crazy]." She was slightly older than me, four or five years older than me. She became like a twelve-year-old love-sick puppy, and that gave the people from the church something to hit me with. I admit that was my flaw for taking it to the church, but in the back of my mind, that was me trying to prove that "Yes, I am Isitabane; what are you going to do!" although it was planned, it gave me that booster of which now when I think about it, it gave them sticks to hit me with and say "Ubutabane benu buka benzani manje" [your Ubutabane look at what it is doing now]. Even though there are young men who sleep with Abakhokheli now that it is Isitabane. It became a whole big thing. However, it sharpened me, and I do not want to lie. It has made me very strong. I stand for what I believe in, and I have gathered a little group of supporters, you know. We are now able to do young people's activities at church through all of that, you know. Because I always talk about something different. I am always saying let us do this, let us go there and whatnot. We meet up with other congregations and whatnot. I have become a leader. So, it has made me strong, and I do not want to lie. **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 27 November 2023)**

Participant #9: *It created much skepticism in me because, in the last question, I spoke about selective discourse and being selective in the messages that you want to provide. You know, like, in a particular argument, you can say God loves all His children, but in another argument, you can say, but He does not like Izitabane because it is a sin. You must be stoned. I am not only talking about Christianity, but I am also talking about Islamic culture. In Muslim culture, in churches, and all of these different things. It is weird for me. I think it is definitely made me distance myself from the institutionalized potion of religion and rather make it a personal thing. I pray by myself, and it is the fact that I am spiritually gifted, so I pray alone at home. I have been to so many different kinds of churches, and I have been to so many youth groups. As much as growing up, it was not a must to go to church, but I have had so much vast experience in so many different places, then I experienced this kind of conditional love factor that I seem to find everywhere. It is something that I do not feel I want to associate myself with. Yes, I want to associate myself with God but I do not want to associate myself with a higher mind of being selective in the love that I give to God's people. It is me being credible and cautious. If somebody invites me to their church, I'm more than likely not going to go. I'm not going to lie because someone is going to look in our direction and be like ow, "Khona Izitabane la" [There's Izitabane here]. It is all of these different things like if you cannot accept my people and the people I love, if you cannot love everybody then what is the point? You cannot selectively preach love and also use certain things against people when it benefits you. So now I pray at home. I praise at home; I*

praise in spiritual spaces. I know for some, it is the mountain; others, like me, it is in nature, being in the water; and being in so many different spiritual spaces that exist that do not need me to be confined to anything in order for me to be accepted. That is what faith has become for me. It has become so personal that no matter where I go, I will never lose anything because I can still carry that faith with me. When I feel like I need to be in the water, I can do that anywhere, but I cannot find a particular Apostolic church anywhere if I have adapted to that particular church. **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 28 November 2023)**

5.4.6 Question 6: In what way, if any, did your experience of faith influence how you perceive yourself as a black Isitabane? Please elaborate.

"I wanted to kill myself. Something that pulled me out was Ubutabane. It is what made me happy. It is what brought me back from being suicidal and made me realize that life can still be beautiful". (Participant #2 – Individual Interview, 16 November 2023)

This question explored the Christian religion's role in black Izitabane women's lives, as expressed in the discussion. It examined how these women understand the Christian position on Ubutabane and how, in turn, affected the way they navigate or perceive their sexuality. The women recognized that the Christian religion condemns Ubutabane as both un-African and un-Christian, and some expressed that they grew up internalizing the condemnatory messages and assumptions about Ubutabane. Furthermore, it was revealed that black Izitabane women feel rejected by the Christian religion because of the damaging and uncompromising environment that Christianity has created for this community. Some of the participants shared that they started to believe that identifying as Isitabane and Christian was not possible, and some shared that they had to unlearn what they had been taught about Ubutabane being un-Christian in order to be able to embrace their dual identities. With everything considered, the respondents acknowledged that the root of bigotry and prejudice against Ubutabane lay with religion as well as with oppressive cultural and social traditions.

Participant #1: *Yes, it is hard not to because growing up at home, they teach you how to behave like a girl. So now you come with these feelings. How do I fit into all the teachings that I was raised with? The Christian way, you see. Everything that I was taught when I was growing up. So, I think, for one, both these things- being Isitabane and being a Christian are fighting with each other. I think there is a conflict, and it is what is making me find myself in this position and say, okay, Amanda [pseudonym], you are gay, do you understand? You see my relationship with God and this whole conflict. I think it is what built my understanding of Christianity and my relationship with God as I speak to you right now. So, how I was raised as a Christian, obviously, it is hard to unlearn all those things. So, in a way, I had to accommodate these things into my coming to terms with my sexuality. So, it has been helpful that I was raised as a*

Christian, but also, I feel like it is the same reason why at some point I was depressed, at some point I doubted myself, and at some point, I wanted to change myself. You see. So, as much as it helped me to be where I am today, but also through depression and anxiety attacks that I have experienced, faith contributed a lot, you see. **(Individual Interview, 14 November 2023)**

Participant #2: *In that case, no!* **(Individual Interview, 18 November 2023)**

Participant #3: *Faith told me that I will never go to heaven, you see. I will never go to heaven. God burnt people who were homosexuals [Izitabane]. I have even searched different verses. There are a lot you see. We will never see "Umbuso wezulu" [the kingdom of heaven] because we love the same gender. Faith has told me that someone like me has certain spirits. I have that spirit in me that needs to be taken out. Faith has taught me that. I would ask someone to pray for me because I have homosexuality [Ubutabane]. Oh, there was also this time when I was going to church. There was a Passover conference in Cape Town. So, there is a lady called Vee [pseudonym – Vee] who lives in Cape Town. That day, I was wearing a dungaree and had artificial nails just to fit in. She was like "Wena ngathi Uyisitabane. Ngikubone ungena" [You look like Isitabane. I saw you coming in]. I was like, how? I have nails on you, understand? She continued to tell me about this girl Mary [pseudonym – Mary], you see. I feel like Mary's story changed everything for me. Vee told me about Mary. She said I remind her of Mary. Mary had given her life to Jesus, just like me. She was gay, and then she accepted Jesus. The church prayed for her, and she lived with the Bishop and his wife. Vee showed me Mary's pictures. Mary changed and became a "girl". However, Mary stopped going to church. I looked her up on Facebook, and I found out that she is now proposed to a girl. I really liked her story. Mary is now gay, and she stopped going to church. So, I was like, who am I, to try to change myself? This person lived with Mum Bishop, and I live in KwaZulu-Natal. This person was prayed for, you understand. So, they made me believe that I was possessed. I realized when I was in matric that, okay, they prayed for her, Mary, so what made her go back, you see? I realized that, no, this is it. Whether I run away from it or not. This means that I will always suffer in silence, you see. I will always suffer. I realized that it is not that I am possessed. I realized that. I am not possessed. This is me. In fact, I reached a point where I was like whether I was possessed or not. It is a part of me. It is a part of me. I have been fasting. I have been praying since the beginning, and this thing started to surface while I was praying and fasting. I was not even dating. I was just God's child, you see. So, what can I do? I was like, excuse me but fuck it. Whether I have demons or not, it is fine. As I said, I reached a point where I had to make myself happy. Do what makes me happy in the dark hole I was in. In the deep, deep, dark hole. I wanted to kill myself. Something that pulled me out was Ubutabane. It is what made me happy. It is what brought me back from being suicidal and made me realize that life can still be beautiful.* **(Individual Interview, 16 November 2023)**

Participant #4: *Somehow, because the Nazareth church is shaped by seating plans and entries. Girls who are still virgins are seated on one side, and they cover their faces with Inansuka [a white shawl worn by virgins in the Shembe tradition]. Those who have kids are seated on the other side, and those who are not married are seated on one side, and so forth. So, there was no place for*

people like me… I wish to see change - for them to know that ekugcineni sidalwe Unkulunkulu [In the end, we are all God's creation]. There is nothing that we do in this world that we can say we created ourselves because even the church preaches that "Okwenzekayo kufana nokudaliwe" [can be translated as "What is happening it is the same as what was created"]. However, at the end of the day, they are the ones who judge us before everyone else. **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #5: *No.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #6: *No, I do not remember very well.* **(Individual Interview, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #7: *Honestly, it did regarding this thing with my teacher who read the Bible in front of us. It made me question whether this is really the life I want to live. Do I want to live a sinful life? Do I want to live a life full of sin? Am I sure about this? Am I sure? Is it a phase because people always say so? So, you know, I kind of doubted myself, you know, so yeah, there was a bit of doubt there, but then as soon as I distanced myself from Christianity from the church and the whole praying and believing in God thing, I was okay. Even he [my teacher] stopped talking about the Bible or I'd just tune him out when it comes to those things. It was that period in my life when I doubted myself. I was in a bit of self-conflict.* **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #8: *It has made me more than ever believe that God is within all of us because when they are standing in the pulpit, they would curse me and say, "Aksiyo imimoya kankulunkulu, Unkulunkulu wayishisa lemimoya" [This is not God's spirit, God burnt those spirits] but here I am. I prosper, you know. I am not where I would like to be in life, but I prosper in this evil spirit that they believe I possess, you know, and I do not know whether I should say unfortunately or fortunately, but when other kids see that, they have been able to come out and say yea I am so what. And I look at that in a positive way because, like we said the other day, you know, we should personalize our God, and this is me; my God is accepting of me. There are kids within the congregation who look up to me. That is positivity for me.* **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 27 November 2023)**

Participant #9: *Initially, I would definitely say it caused a lot of internalized homophobia. It had me questioning and asking myself questions like maybe I did not find the right man, you know, maybe I'm just looking for the man in my person and this and that. Over time, when I allowed myself to ignore those voices, I realized that these are just thoughts. However, it delayed my journey of self-acceptance in that kind of way. It made me view myself as a demonic extension until I had to reintroduce myself to myself by realizing that you have never been evil, you have never been like this, and you have never been hateful. Instead, you are one of the most loving people you know. Why, then, would you call yourself a demonic entity or a demonic extension? In the perception of self, it forced me to do some research. You know, really understand that when you talk about yourself and when you label yourself with these things because others have said so. I researched. I went back in time. The people who lived in ancient times, how they were when it came to this topic. Was it as filthy and as dirty as people painted out to be when they talked about us? The answer is absolutely*

not. I also remember my friend who made a play about Mkabayi. The lady who is related to Shaka. She was such a strong woman, and I believe she was a lesbian. That's why she never married a man. That is just my little hypothesis. However, I say that to say it was not filthy or dirty to be strong and to be this woman who does not need a man by her side. As I researched, it was not dirty or filthy. It was never this kind of evil thing before institutionalized religion was a thing. Being a gay man was not weird. All of these different things that existed before people tried to cage us and put us in these boxes that make sense to them have unfortunately now become an extension of how we look at others in society. We teach these different things in religion, and all of these different opinions, you know, you push them onto children. This brings me to this thing of people saying that they do not want children to be exposed to homosexuality, but also, in the same breath, why expose a child to self-hate? Allow your child to discover themselves and evolve. It definitely did for a long time, up until I decided to self-accept. I am not saying I am completely past the point of being oppressed by faith because, as I said, parents are very heavy in their own religions, and they have their own perceptions, which I cannot completely erode. Of course, their perceptions, how they do things, and how they speak have improved. However, ultimately, I can never completely erode things that were there before me. So, it does cause that fear that when I do come out, what is going to be the conversation about that? what's going to be the reaction? Are you going to perceive that there is something wrong with me? Or are you going to be like okay, these are your choices? Are you going to be like I do not want to hear about it? Is that what you are doing? Do you choose to be this filthy person? You do not quite know. **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 28 November 2023)**

5.4.7 Question 7: What has been your source of support in the navigation of your sexuality?

"…. I believe that my family should support me more than anyone else. They have an impact on how the community treats me and my situation. Yes, so if they do not embrace me and show that they accept me, the community is going to do the same…." ***(Participant #4 – Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)***

The women in this study have attempted to live their lives authentically and without compromise while enduring extremely difficult, painful, and challenging situations. The final question explored how black Izitabane women in this study find support, particularly in terms of navigating their sexuality and faith. Some of the respondents shared that they mostly rely on themselves, and some shared that they rely on their friends and partners for support. Unfortunately, most respondents have not been able to find robust support systems and communities where they can be free to be themselves and grow in their Christian faith. Nevertheless, the women in this study have come to the realization that they are made in the image of God, and God loves and acknowledges them the way they are. They can carry that knowledge with them, allowing it to comfort and guide them and bring them peace and well-being.

Participant #1: *This year, I met someone who also identifies as queer [Isitabane] and as a Christian. Although she is younger than me, I think just talking about the Bible and talking about our experiences gives that kind of support because now I have someone who understands this life that I am living and who also has values that are similar to mine.* **(Individual Interview, 14 November 2023)**

Participant #2: *No source of support.* **(Individual Interview, 18 November 2023)**

Participant #3: *No. I rely on myself, but sometimes I just see people who are doing well and draw inspiration from them. Sometimes, you will be like what if I am being myself? Maybe I will never make it in life. I am facing different challenges, but I will be like, "I will be good someday." I have to be myself. There are people older than me who are like me, and they are doing this, and that you see. Just work on yourself and try to be better at your health. Because I also have mental health issues... It is hard being gay, and I do not want to be depressed thinking about what my family and my mom would say if they found out or thinking about comments from other people. I try to accept those things and not take them to heart. Instead, I try to work on me to be a better person. I try not to allow negative things to get to me. I go to the gym, I play soccer, I look after myself, I eat healthily. The last time I was overwhelmed, I went to see a psychologist. Other than that, I have no one.* **(Individual Interview, 16 November 2023)**

Participant #4: *I have never thought about it, but I believe that my family should support me more than anyone else. They have an impact on how the community treats me and my situation. Yes, so if they do not embrace me and show that they accept me, the community is going to do the same… but I can say that my father supports me even though I can see that he is still hoping that maybe someday I'll change. Emotional and physical, he is always there.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #5: *Apart from you guys and apart from my family, no, there is not.* **(Individual Interview, 20 November 2023)**

Participant #6: *At home and church. At church, I think they support me as a church member; at home, they support me as who I am.* **(Individual Interview, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #7: *When I came out, my source of support was my cousin. She and I are about the same age. Yeah, other than her, I think my source of support has been me, honestly, because I tend to keep to myself regarding my feelings and stuff. Oh, another source of support is my ex-best friend. She remembers. I shared everything with her, you know. She has been with me since I was 13, so yes, I was fresh out of the closet then, so we just kind of like navigated this whole Isitabane thing together.* **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 21 November 2023)**

Participant #8: *It has been mainly my partners, and I do not want to lie. But also, friends and a lot of friends. I don't want to lie some people out there have accepted and had no problem with people like us and being around people like us. We know sometimes they want to make you their experiments but, in most*

cases, it has been friends and mostly straight friends. I have friends from church who have stood with me as well. There was a point at church where people were told not to associate with me because being Isitabane is going to rub off of them and whatnot. These people stood with me, you know, they would tell of some of the men in the church, and some would tell me that "Hey, these people have started with this 'bs' [bullshit] again, but you know what, we love you. We love you for being you", you know. But for the most part, I am the type of person when I'm in a relationship. You know, my relationships last longer, three years to nine years. We become one when I'm in a relationship. So, my source of support has been mainly my partners. Just recently, in the past few years, my younger brother is 16, and I'm 35, so he's become more mature. He's become an adult. He is my number one fan, you know. I talk to him about almost everything. Lately, he's been there. He's been that for me. Yeah, I can't say my mom. Whilst my grandmother was still alive. Yoo# that woman stood up for me. There was a point… you will remember at church I was chosen by this brother. Lobola [bride wealth] was paid, as I mentioned. My grandmother played a vital role in all of that and when they received lobola. There was this one time before they received lobola, they called this guy; I was 17 at that time, right after matric, and he was 28. It was already ridiculous. They didn't tell me that he had kids they told me he had one kid. When we accepted Lobola, we found out that he had three extra kids, so he had four kids. I told my mom I was like Mom, I can't do this. I'm a kid myself. My mom called this guy over. We had a meeting, and they told him that, well, you chose her, but she's still young, so you're going to let her grow first. They even went as far as "You are not going to force sex on her. You're going to wait. We had planned to do a 21st celebration for her". The guys said yes, yes, yes, I will wait for her. She's just going to be my flower. On the day of uMembeso, the guy got drunk. He came back around 20:00, and he was like, "Well, you're my wife. I need sex from you. I've been horny for so long." I'm like "What the fuck?" you know. He is like he is taking me home with him you know. I screamed. Because I was friends with a lot of guys around the area they came out to help. It was so confusing. "Why are you making her cry? You paid lobola". It became a whole thing. My guy friends were able to get me away from him that night, but when I told them at home, I was told I needed to give him sex. Unfortunately, I think I did elaborate on that. It was a whole thing with my older sister organizing alcohol and weed, and that is how I lost my virginity. Still, I wasn't feeling it. I wasn't feeling this whole being a woman thing and whatnot you know. I got another job at College. I met this girl who was also 26 [years old], but yoo# she did things to me I never knew existed, so I was so hung up on the girl that the guy who paid Lobola for me got the news, and it became a whole thing. He went and told my family. My family and my aunt per se kicked me out and told me that nothing like that had ever happened before. They beat up the girl. I left with her. I was not at home for three weeks until my grandmother was like stop all of this. Just forget about it. I'm not about to lose my granddaughter because of this person who just came into our lives. Luckily. I don't know whether it was my ancestors or God at that time, but I believe they worked hand in hand. I found a job at FNB [First National Bank], and I was getting paid a lot for a 19-year-old. I gave them back, I think, about twenty thousand. I didn't give him back all of it because he had sex with me.
(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 27 November 2023)

Participant #9: *I think the primary source of support that got me to where I was comfortable enough even to open the door, so to speak, and allow myself to be free was that I made a friend, Amanda Ndlovu [pseudonym]. This was late 2018. Amanda [pseudonym]always knew about it, and she was so proud of it. You know when someone is so sure it is contagious that damn you do not care, and she was always like, I am a lesbian. You know I'm Isitabane but do not fuck with me. She is very out there. Moreover, I am just like, okay, I do not know. I am scared. At that time, I was in a long-term, very psychologically and emotionally abusive relationship with this man that I dated. He was my first relationship ever. It was such a horrible relationship on and off all the time, and throughout that duration of the relationship, whenever we broke up, I found myself slowly but surely drifting into the two other relationships I spoke of, male relationships. There were very feminine men, very feminine men. I found myself drifting into those kinds of spaces, and I remember saying, "Mmmh, they look so feminine." That is when I realized that I like the femininity of a woman and all of these other things. I met this friend of mine, Amanda [pseudonym]. She is so sure of herself. She is so proud. She is so this, she is so that. I eventually opened up to her, and I let her know that this was what I was going through. I am stuck in this horrible relationship, and I am not happy. I do not see this as my last stop. I have always questioned, I questioned from the time before I even convinced myself to be in heterosexual relationships, and I do not want to be this bad child. I do not want to disappoint my parents, my spirit guides, all of these things. Many people made it seem like, especially if you are spiritually gifted and queer, there is something wrong with you, and it was like there must be some sort of Isilwane [evil spirits] on your shoulders. Something is wrong with you. Moreover, I was like, damn, I do not want to give in in case something is wrong with me. She was just like you know what? I am also spiritually gifted. Be who you are, or at least try. Through talking to myself and listening, I realized that she was right. You need to figure out what your narrative is. What is your story? What is going on with you, and are you willing to allow yourself to express yourself? Even if it does not work out. It is not what you think it is. I do not know what that was, but you know, self-convincing. Eventually, I was like, okay, slowly dipping my toes in the water. I started to join groups on Facebook, but I was always very secretive about it. I joined the ones that were not too loud. I did that and started chatting and over-chatting with people. eventually, I got to experience a life where I started to be proud of myself and not care. I started to evolve and experience all of this. I was like, damn okay, what is this. Eventually, I joined the Uthingo network, and that is how I met Thembi [pseudonym – Thembi] and all of these different people. Ever since I opened that door, it has been a really rewarding door to open.* **(Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 28 November 2023)**

5.5 Assembled Keepsakes

Because this is a sensitive subject, after each individual interview, I asked the participants to share items that gave them comfort or brought them new perspectives and provided understanding that allowed them to accept situations as they are. Some shared Bible Scriptures, some shared prayers, pictures, quotes, and some shared hymns:

"For God so loved the world, that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 NIV [Figure 9]

[Figure 10]

Bawo iba nathi (Be with us Father)

Ngelixesha elinjena, usixolele izono zethu (In times like these, forgive our sins)

Siyakudinga ohh Jehova (We need you ohh Jehova)

Xa ukhona konke kulungile (With You by our side everything is well) [Figure 11]

[*Figure 12***]**

Dear God,

I thank You for the

blessings You have bestowed upon me.

Even if I am not perfect, You never forsake me.

You stay by my side, guiding me as

I go through many challenges. You are indeed

my God of wisdom and strength. I am grateful for

Your presence and guidance. [Figure 13]

"People are souls having a human experience" [Figure 14]

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I used qualitative autoethnography to explore the role of faith in the lives of black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg. This chapter presented the findings of nine interviews with black Izitabane women between the ages of 18- 35, sharing the experiences of their many identities. The women provided valuable information about how they navigate their identities in the context of faith, family, and community. Six resonant themes emerged, each of which speaks to a complex and ongoing process of constructing, negotiating, and reconciling one's Christian identity and Ubutabane sexuality, as well as dealing with homophobic social attitudes. Formally, the data analysis process was divided into three distinct phases. During the first phase, I listened to each interview, transcribed it, and reviewed it, employing the research questions as a guiding framework. After compiling all of the stories that had been shared, phrases were all moved to a new folder for reflection. In the second phase, I read through each transcript once more and coded the data for emerging themes. The final phase involved listening again to the audio of each interview while simultaneously reading the printed transcripts to get a sense of the affective qualities of the black Izitabane women who were part of this study.

The key themes that emerged from the analysis were: *Religion is still a big part of my life": Recognizing Christian Faith as an Important Part of Black Izitabane Women's Lives; "Uma ufuna ukuba Isitabane uzoya esihogweni[20]": Self-Discovery and Self-Disclosure – Stories of Becoming; "Udinga umfana nje ostrong ozolala nawe uzoba right[21]": Being Isitabane in a Heteronormative Socioreligious Society; "Njengoba esekulobolile he has every right to you[22]": Wrestling with Social Responses to Izitabane Sexuality; "Unkulunkulu uyazizonda Izitabane, Unkulunkulu uyazizonda izidakwa"[23]: Dealing with Internalized messages and Challenging Harmful Christian Perspective Concerning Ubutabane; and "… Personify your experience. Personify your God": Fighting back from the Margins*. The following chapter is organized thematically according to the themes that emerged from each interview, which presented the women's experiences regarding their sexuality and faith. The chapter will discuss the meaning of these findings and the implications they may have for future research.

[20] If you want to be Isitabane then you're going to hell
[21] You need a strong man to sleep [have sex] with you; you're going to change
[22] Now that he has paid Lobola for you you're his wife now and he has every right to you
[23] God hates Izitabane, God hates drunkards

CHAPTER SIX

CREATING COUNTER COMMUNITIES OF CARE: EXPERIENCES OF FAITH AS IMPORTANT SOURCES OF DOING THEOLOGY.

The central focus of this study was to explore the lived experiences of black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg. In particular, I wanted to determine a role that can be played by faith in establishing counter communities of care for Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, by establishing the causes and consequences of homophobic hatred and violence and establishing how black Izitabane women draw on faith as they navigate life. In Chapter Five, I presented stories that were gathered as part of this inquiry. These stories serve as a useful resource to understand and support Izitabane women as we navigate issues of sexuality, violence, faith, religion, and culture in post-apartheid South Africa. According to Sherkat, "The key to understanding the religion-sexuality connection lies in the sexual experiences of women – lesbian [Izitabane] women and bisexual women discovering new paths to enlightenment by mixing religion and sexuality in the cauldron of their lived experiences" (p.313). Sherkat contends that since sexuality is seen from a heterosexist paradigm, the lived experiences of Izitabane women have been diminished or ignored as having no value. This is a result of the education of many conservative churches that engaging in sexual activity with the same gender is wrong (Sherkat, 2002: p.313). In this study, I give at-length exposure to these experiences that have been forgotten and deemed unimportant.

Six resonant themes that emerged from the findings were as follows: "*Religion is Still a Big Part of My Life":* Recognizing Christian Faith as an Important Part of Black Izitabane Women's Lives; *"Uma Ufuna Ukuba Isitabane Uzoya Esihogweni[24]":* The Journey of Self-Discovery and Self-Disclosure – Stories of Becoming; *"Udinga Umfana nje o-Strong Ozolala Nawe Uzoba Right[25]":* Being Isitabane in a Heteronormative Socioreligious Society; *"Njengoba Esekulobolile He Has Every Right to You[26]":* Wrestling with Social Responses to Izitabane Sexuality; *"Unkulunkulu Uyazizonda Izitabane, Unkulunkulu Uyazizonda Izidakwa"[27]:* Dealing with Internalized Homophobia and Challenging Harmful Christian Perspective Concerning Ubutabane; and; *"… Personify Your Experience. Personify Your God":* Fighting back from the Margins. These themes suggest that one's spiritual development

[24] If you want to be Isitabane then you're going to hell
[25] You need a strong man to sleep [have sex] with you; you're going to change
[26] Now that he has paid Lobola for you you're his wife now and he has every right to you
[27] God hates Izitabane, God hates drunkards

could be a source of resilience, empowerment, and meaning. In this chapter, I provide insightful evaluations and further discuss findings through the theoretical framework as discussed in chapter three.

As indicated in chapter three, the voices of black Izitabane women in this study are explicitly situated within the theoretical frameworks that focus on reclaiming, celebrating, and humanizing the experiences of the oppressed human bodies, namely queer theory and queer theology. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood maintain that "… Queer Theology is an 'I' theology. The theologian does not hide in grammatical essentialism, for instance, to use of a 'we,' which presumes the authority of an academic body. In this way, queer Theology is a form of autobiography because it implies an engagement and a disclosure of experiences which have been traditionally silenced in theology" (2007). According to Michaelson, to queer is to complicate, to problematize, to undermine, to unsettle. That is what queering implies or has come to mean. We decenter, complicate, challenge. It is not a process of embellishment but instead of uncovering (2015). My primary goal in using this framework is (1) to offer a more profound and more extensive awareness of the lived experience of black Izitabane women with an overall aim to open up new conversations and questions about how faith communities can create safe spaces for black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg; (2) challenge the widely held belief in many African communities that Ubutabane is 'against Christianity' and against African values; and (3) advocate for a limitless Christian theology that is inclusive of all those who live outside the normative structures of sexuality.

6.1 "Religion is still a big part of my life": Recognizing Christian Faith as an Important Part of Black Izitabane women's lives

The first theme that was extracted demonstrates that black Izitabane women have strong connections to the religion of Christianity and were raised as part of the church, despite the fact that these connections frequently come with challenges related to Ubutabane sexuality. In this theme, I will engage and explore the Christian faith as an essential part of black Izitabane women's lives. The objective of the study was to explore the lived experiences of black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, including how they construct and negotiate their identities. This theme analyses the black Izitabane women's journey with faith, focusing on their narratives of how they became acquainted with Christianity and how faith has offered them the anonymity they needed to conceptualize and understand their conflicting identities.

According to Smith & Snell, religious participation allows young people to consider their own beliefs and values as they develop perspectives about other faith traditions and cultures (2009). King argues that religious communities may foster intergenerational connections and provide young people with opportunities for building social capital (e.g., expanding support networks) (2003). In addition, numerous studies show that being part of a church community and practicing religion provides comfort and support to many people in times of grief, loss, or crisis. Religious faith serves as a coping mechanism, offering a sense of direction and meaning by shifting focus to a higher power (Brittian et al., 2013: p.7). According to Van Klinken, the pervasiveness of religion of Africans as "notoriously religious," meaning that many Africans are religious and that religion has a significant impact on sociopolitical life. In such a context, being explicitly and openly non- or antireligious is not only uncommon but socially and culturally also more or less unacceptable. Van Klinken further maintains that in Africa, religious adherence is not simply a matter of individual choice but (also of family history, community, and culture) (2015). This was evident in this study. The women in this study describe their journey with faith in a similar language. All the women were raised within the Christian church, and they acknowledged that religious faith was important in their lives. The following quotes demonstrate the place of the church and religion in the lives of black Izitabane women in South Africa:

> *"The church and religion are something that I was raised with. When they spoke about our family history, my great-grandfather was Umkhokheli* [the leader of the church] … *So, yes, going to church is important at home, and we do go to church…. So, yes, we do go to church, but if you don't want to, you don't want to"* (**Participant #1: Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023**).
>
> *"At home, we are Roman Catholics. I grew up attending church until I realized I belonged to this community. I was no longer comfortable with wearing dresses and dressing femininely, you see. So, in 2018, when I came out, I realized that I could no longer go to church because you know how Catholic people are. But I do believe yes, I believe"* (**Participant #5 – Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023**).
>
> "*I am an Apostle… I grew up in the church, almost like everyone else here. My grandpa was one of the church founders. He was a leader, so growing up as a little kid with no clue about my sexuality at that time, it was exciting until I grew up and discovered myself. It wasn't my choice [going to church], but I loved the idea of believing... I still believe in God. I guess because of my grandpa, I still have that thing that even though I am an Apostle, there are a lot of other religions that I want to explore. I've tried some and felt comfortable, but there is that thing that maybe I was raised in the Apostolic. There is that thing that*

says Apostolic Apostolic. But yes, it was not my choice, and I love believing, unfortunately" (**Participant #8 – Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023**).

"My experience with religion and faith is very different from everyone else. At home, I live in a blended family such that my dad is from Malawi, and he is a Muslim, and my mom is a Roman Catholic. She grew up as such, and then later, she became a Sangoma [Traditional healer]. So, as you can see, faith and religion were such complex topics when I was growing up because you never really go to one side. You cannot be a Muslim completely because some of the Zulu traditions are against the Muslim culture or what happens in my mother's church is against my father's church, you know". But otherwise, faith has found a place in my life in my own kind of way" **(Participant #9 – Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023**).

These experiences shared by black Izitabane women are consistent with Marc Epprecht's findings in his book *Sexuality and Social Justice in Africa*, where he notes that "many African Izitabane [lesbian and gay people] … are proudly happily and deeply religious" (2013: p.66-67). According to Van Klinken, as much as this observation comes as a surprise to many Africans and is considered a contradiction in contemporary Africa, the religiosity of Izitabane people is "significant to critically grasp the width and depth of African religious realities" (p.949). Van Klinken argues that the presumptions that Izitabane people are not religious or that they do not belong in faith spaces need to be interrogated and complicated vis-à-vis the complex realities of contemporary African contexts. Acknowledging this will help to go beyond the initial surprise that many African Izitabane are religious and move toward a better understanding of the variety and complexity of religion(s) in relation to issues of sexuality. Rather than contemplating the "apparent contradiction" that African Izitabane's religiosity would present, Van Klinken proposes that we explore and understand this religiosity in more depth. He adopts the notion that both religion and sexuality are crucial aspects of personal identity and subjectivity (Van Klinken, 2015: p.949-950).

Furthermore, Robertson argues that an exciting and unique contribution from the literature on the Southern African region "is the ways in which some Izitabane [queer] subjects' experiences are situated on a spectrum including both Christianity and African Traditional Religions and/or cultural beliefs" (2020: p.5). The following narrative demonstrates this:

"I can say that I am in between the Nazareth church and the Zion church because on my mother's side of the family, they are Zions, and on my father's side of the family, even though there are a few who are Zions, most of them are Nazareth. (**Participant #2 – Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023**)

According to Robertson, analyzing LGBT people's experiences of faith "provides an insight into the fluid situatedness of Izitabane [queer] Christian subjectivities in Southern Africa" (2020: p.5-6). Robertson's work underscores the importance of situating Izitabane Christian's subjectivities within specific geographical and cultural contexts, recognizing the diverse socio-political landscapes that shape the lived experiences of black Izitabane women in Southern Africa. Furthermore, it underscores the fluidity and complexity of Izitabane Christian subjectivities, highlighting the ways in which these identities are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, gender, sexuality, and culture (Robertson, 2020: p.5-6). Centering the narratives and lived realities of black Izitabane women in this study allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the diverse ways in which other black Izitabane individuals negotiate their identities, beliefs, and social contexts within the framework of Christianity to unpack the intricate interplay between religious teachings, cultural norms, and personal beliefs, illuminating the multiplicity of ways in which the participants navigate their spiritual journeys. Furthermore, it allowed me to identify the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Izitabane Christians in the region, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and culturally responsive approaches to theology and religious practices.

6.2 "Uma ufuna ukuba Isitabane uzoya esihogweni[28]" Self-Discovery and Self-Disclosure – Stories of Becoming

For many Izitabane women, "coming out" to oneself or speaking one's truth has been outlined by many of these women as empowering and liberating. It leads to acceptance—an act of bravery, self-advocacy, and meaning (Oschse, 2010). The second theme focuses on experiences of "coming out" as a black Isitabane woman in a heteronormative Pietermaritzburg and negotiating Ubutabane identities with families, friends, and faith communities. This theme analyses the black Izitabane women's journey of self-discovery, focusing on early messages against Ubutabane sexual orientation and the impact of these messages on the formation of Izitabane identities; the women's narratives of becoming and how these stories empowered these women to conceptualize and understand their identity while simultaneously negotiating both processes of coming out as Isitabane and as a Christian, on the individual and broader societal space. Furthermore, it focuses on how this journey is not a single event but a process of continuous negotiations and assertions. I explore the conflict that arises when sexual

[28] If you want to be Isitabane then you're going to hell

relations are policed and controlled, what it means for non-normative sexualities, and how we can create a safe space where religion, gender, and sexuality can coexist without judgment.

"Coming out," the act of letting people know that you are not a heterosexual through means of dating people of the same sex freely and openly" (Nkosi & Masson, 2017: p.87), can be challenging for black Izitabane women since they belong to a community and embody an identity that has been oppressed and discriminated against based on race and gender; coming out as an Isitabane can feel even more isolating. This isolation can be even more challenging for individuals if there is no one in their community who shares these identities. Most women in this study have disclosed their sexual identity to at least one member of their family or assumed that family members knew, even though they did not explicitly disclose their sexual identity. In their responses, the families of those who disclosed their sexual identities were either supportive, confused, in denial, or unsupportive. Furthermore, some of these women shared that they experienced an inherent dilemma that caused internal conflict, surrounding the question of how one can live life being sexually attracted to women and also be a member of the church they belong to. One woman shared:

> *"… it's hard … because growing up at home they teach you how to behave like a girl. So now you come with these feelings. How do I fit into all the teachings that I was raised with? The Christian way you see. Everything that I was taught when I was growing up. So, I think, for one, both these things- being Isitabane and being a Christian are fighting with each other. I think there is a conflict …"* (**Participant #1 – Individual Interview, 14 November 2023**)

Some chose to abandon their faith communities in order to be true to their identity as Izitabane:

> *"… the last time I attended church was in primary school. I decided to stop because I noticed that people like me were seen as sinners… There was always that fear that maybe they were going to think that I was tainting the dignity of the church, so I decided to stop going to church and live my life... I'm not going to lie, there is a lot of judgment in my church… the Zion church, people from that church are not good people. They go to church and call themselves Abazalwane [believers], but they are not good people"* (**Participant #2 – Individual Interview, 18 November 2023**).

Others tried to hide their sexual orientation in order to follow their conservative Christian faith:

> *"It was hard. I tried praying about it trying to change myself… I tried to hide it. I failed. I failed until I reached the point where I realized that I should be me"* (**Participant #3 – Individual Interview, 16 November 2023**).

The experiences documented in the literature align with the findings of this study, demonstrating that for black Izitabane women who identify as Christians, the process of coming out is an ongoing journey. These women grapple with the complexities of disclosing

their sexual orientation within the context of their religious beliefs, navigating a multitude of decisions regarding whom to come out to, when, and in what setting. Coming out is not a singular event for these women; instead, it is a continuous process marked by deliberation and discernment. They must carefully weigh the potential risks and consequences of disclosure, considering factors such as familial acceptance, community attitudes, and religious teachings. Each decision to come out carries with it a unique set of challenges and uncertainties, as these women negotiate the intersections of their sexual and religious identities. Moreover, the ongoing nature of the coming-out process underscores the persistent barriers and stigmas faced by black Izitabane women within both religious and societal contexts. Despite the progressive constitution in South Africa, many continue to grapple with the fear of rejection, discrimination, and isolation, which impact profoundly our sense of self and belonging.

White & White upholds that there is an inner searching and questioning that many [Izitabane] Christians attempt to resolve within themselves; that is, "how to know oneself sexually, to know oneself spiritually and to combine these two in a healing unity, for persons of faith, who are also [Izitabane women], reconciling both in a healthy and life-affirming manner can be challenging, terrifying, and invigorating" (2004: p.209). Wilcox, on the other hand, expressed that other Izitabane Christians resolve this dilemma by accepting that one's spirituality and faith are not necessarily tied to a strict code of rules and doctrines, as they are underscored by many conservative churches, but are more connected with resources and strength from which an individual lives her life and gains meaning and support. This perspective is more inclusive and accepting of Izitabane women than many conservative interpretations of Christianity and in line with liberal Christian thinking (Wilcox, 2002).

Furthermore, most women in this study shared that after years of struggling with their "unnatural" feelings, they were able to accept themselves. One woman shared:

> *"I think that my evolution from self-acceptance to opening the door of dating to dating and loving it and evolving and just true acceptance has definitely been great. I think being in a post-apartheid South Africa is so much greater now because there are so many different words. People accept the fact that sexuality is a fluid spectrum, and they accept that you can label yourself as queer, you can label yourself as pan, you can label yourself as sapiosexual. There are so many different types that you can label yourself, and it is okay. Even if you find that one particular label does not fit you tomorrow, you can evolve that… Although this all happened when I was already old and above the age of 21, I feel like for a lot of young developing Izitabane; it is a beautiful thing"* (**Participant #9 – Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 28 November 2023**).

This stage of acceptance was evident in many of the stories that black Izitabane women shared in this study:

> *"I started feeding the Isitabane in me. I stopped suppressing who I am. As it surfaces, I let it thrive. So, it is very nice when you reach that point. Looking back, it makes me happy"* (**Participant 3 – Individual Interview, 16 November 2023**).

> *"It is not difficult if you are going to accept yourself first and pay no attention to what other people say. Ya, it was not difficult… I told myself that"* (**Participant #6 – Individual Interview, 21 November 2023**)

> *"… there is YouTube, there is Google, and there is the internet. There is all of that; there is even television and stuff. It helped me understand that, okay, I am this; I am a female who loves females"* (**Participant #7 – Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 21 November 2023**).

> *"… I do not care. There are certain people in my life who matter, and their opinions matter. So, when someone else comes and tells me their opinion just because they do not like the life that I am living, I do not care"* (**Participant #1 – Individual Interview, 14 November 2023**).

Indeed, while each coming-out story is inherently unique, there are common threads that bind us together, resonating with the experiences of many Izitabane women. Despite the diverse details and circumstances surrounding our journeys, a recurring theme emerges: the profound quest for self-acceptance. Through these women's narratives, we witness the transformative power of self-acceptance – a journey fraught with challenges yet ultimately liberating. In embracing their authentic selves, these women defy the constraints of heteronormative norms and patriarchal structures, reclaiming agency over their identities and stories.

These experiences of coming out provide valuable insights into the intersections of faith and sexuality. For many black Izitabane women, reconciling their sexual identity with their faith represents a deeply personal and spiritual journey. This journey challenges traditional religious doctrines that often marginalize Izitabane individuals, prompting a re-evaluation of spiritual beliefs through a more inclusive perspective. As these women navigate the process of coming out, they also embark on a path of spiritual transformation, seeking out faith communities that affirm their identities and support their spiritual growth. The narratives of coming out highlight the resilience and courage needed to confront and challenge deeply ingrained societal and religious prejudices. By openly living their truths, Izitabane women advocate for their own right to exist authentically and lay the groundwork for greater acceptance within their faith communities. This act of defiance against heteronormative and patriarchal constraints serves

as a beacon of hope and inspiration for other black Izitabane who struggle with similar conflicts between faith and sexuality.

Furthermore, these narratives play a vital role in the ongoing conversation about establishing religious environments that respect and celebrate diversity. The stories of Izitabane women coming out to highlight the significance of faith communities evolving into spaces of complete acceptance and hospitality. In such spaces, Izitabane women can explore their spirituality without fear of being judged or marginalized, thus promoting a sense of inclusion and spiritual well-being. Ultimately, the journey of coming out, intertwined with faith and sexuality, showcases the possibility for these facets of identity to coexist harmoniously. It urges for a transformative re-evaluation of religious teachings and customs to encompass the entire spectrum of human diversity. Through the participant's courageous stories, Izitabane women affirm their own identities and contribute to the ongoing progression of faith communities toward greater inclusiveness and acceptance.

6.3 "Udinga umfana nje ostrong ozolala nawe uzoba right[29]": Being Isitabane in a heteronormative Socioreligious Society;

Heteronormativity, as defined in queer theory, is the presumption and privileging of gender conformity, heterosexuality, and nuclear families over all other "deviant" forms of gender expression, sexuality, and families (Oswald et al., 2009, cited in Pollitt et al., 2022). By self-identifying as Isitabane, black Izitabane women undermine heteronormativity and must interact with societal heteronormative messages while reconciling these messages with their sexual identities (Pollitt et al., 2022: p.1). Many women involved in this study spoke of heteronormative expectations early in their lives and shared that they felt pressured to conform to heteronormative expectations from a young age. This theme explores how faith spaces in Pietermaritzburg reinforce these expectations and exclude non-normative sexualities. Specifically, I focus on the experiences of black Izitabane women who are forced to conform to heterosexual norms or cut ties with their churches due to the condemnation of Ubutabane and the prevalence of heteronormative beliefs in many faith communities in South Africa. Further investigation is conducted into the intricate issues of heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, homophobia, stigma, discrimination, extreme forms of violence, and how geographic location shapes the way that many Izitabane women navigate life in Pietermaritzburg.

[29] You need a strong man to sleep [have sex] with you; you're going to change

Heteronormativity legitimates homophobia – the irrational fear of Izitabane people- and heterosexism – the discrimination of sexual minorities with social relations and structures. Heteronormative standards and discourses that legitimate the discrimination of sexual minorities can be found in most social institutions, including religion, the family, education, the media, the law, and the state. Under dominant heteronormative standards, heterosexuality and Ubutabane are binary opposites. The gender roles of masculine men and feminine women are naturalized, and sexual relations between complementary gender roles should be consummated in the private sphere. Monogamous, marital, and procreative heterosexuality is considered superior to all other sexual expressions (Robinson, 2016: p.1). Violence against Izitabane women is normalized and accepted. One woman shared her experience of when she was attacked by an unknown man who did not like that she was Isitabane.

> *"I tried to calm myself so that if he tried something, I would be ready for him. Then I heard him saying, "Why u-so? Why wenza lento oyenzayo?" [Why are you like this? Why are you doing what you are doing]. I kept quiet and continued with what I was doing while observing his next move. He grabbed me and pointed a knife at me. You see this scar [showing me the scar on her finger]. He nearly chopped off my finger. We fought. He tried to pull me to the nearest bush. We fought. I was able to get away from him. I found a rock, and I hit him with it. He fell, and that is when I was able to escape. We do not know who he is, and he has never been found. Even his voice, I do not think I can recognize it"* (**Participant #4 – Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023**).

Another woman shared her story of how she was betrayed by someone she had met on a night out:

> *"Next thing, I woke up at his place. It was a whole mess. I am mentioning this story because the morning after, when I confronted him, he said the words, "Relax, we used a condom. I had to show you what you were missing out. You could be a proper girl. Look at you; you're so beautiful". So, that is why I am mentioning this because he knew and he saw very well that I am lesbian [Isitabane woman], and he did that"* (**Individual Interview – WhatsApp, 27 November 2023**).

According to Van der Walt, conservative religious and cultural discourses are often employed to support Izitabane condemnation, exclusion, and violence (2002b). Van der Walt further adds that it is often held that the Bible is clear on Izitabane realities. This positionality holds that there is no possibility for the inclusion of Izitabane people, that Izitabane are an abomination, and that their 'lifestyle' should be avoided, repented from, and corrected. Van der Walt further

elaborates that this positionality further holds that Izitabane people are immoral and only found on the fringes of society and could, therefore, in no way form part of any vibrant community, especially not faith communities. Faith and sexuality, according to this position, are not matters that can be discussed in the same context, and matters of sexuality and intimacy should best be engaged in a private setting, if at all. Izitabane people and their lives can, as a result, only be discussed and engaged in the context of violence (Van der Walt, 2022b).

Similarly, Yarhouse and Tan argue that traditional religious beliefs are often considered directly in conflict with Ubutabane behavior and, in some cases, even with mere attraction to the Ubutabane, the roots of the conflict are plain. Izitabane women have become targets in light of their devotion to faith, even within the individuals' own families. Yarhouse and Tan found that some parents refuse to recognize the truth of their child's Ubutabane feelings; some even threatened to kick them out of their homes (2005). One woman shared her experience of when she was kicked out of her home for bringing her girlfriend:

> *"My family and my aunt per se kicked me out and told me that nothing like that had ever happened before"* (**Participant 8 – Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 27 November 2023**).

The roots of this conflict can be traced to interpretations of religious texts, cultural norms, and historical teachings that have contributed to the stigmatization of Izitabane individuals within religious communities. Izitabane women, in particular, have found themselves targeted and marginalized within religious contexts due to their sexual orientation and their devotion to their faith. Many Izitabane women face rejection and condemnation from their families, who may struggle to reconcile their religious beliefs with their love and acceptance for their Izitabane loved ones. Furthermore, the intersection of sexuality and faith can create a profound sense of internal conflict for Izitabane women who grapple with their religious identity in light of their sexual orientation.

The experiences of marginalization and internal conflict play a significant role in shaping our understanding of the intersection of religion and sexuality and its implications for theology. These experiences underscore the pressing need to re-examine religious texts and doctrines. Traditional interpretations often overlook the lived realities of Izitabane individuals, particularly black Izitabane women, and tend to perpetuate exclusionary practices. By documenting and analyzing these experiences, I

challenge African faith leaders to expand these interpretations, fostering more inclusive and compassionate religious communities. Secondly, the struggles of Izitabane women highlight the complexity of religious identity in the context of sexual diversity. Their experiences reveal the dynamic and often conflicting relationship between personal faith and institutional religion. This tension calls for a deeper theological exploration of how faith communities can embrace and affirm diverse sexual identities without compromising core religious values. It also necessitates calls for a more nuanced understanding of spirituality that transcends firm doctrinal boundaries, allowing for faith that is both inclusive and reflective of the diverse human experience.

Moreover, these stories provide valuable insights into the potential transformation through inclusive theology. By amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, such as Izitabane women, inclusive theology advocates for reforming religious practices and teachings to embrace diversity as an essential aspect of humanity. This approach not only aims to bridge the gap between faith and sexuality but also strives to establish a fair and inclusive religious environment where all individuals of all sexual orientations can find spiritual fulfillment and community. The rejection and condemnation faced by Izitabane women from their families and faith communities also shed light on the broader social implications of religious teachings. These experiences illustrate how theological doctrines can perpetuate social stigma and discrimination, reinforcing harmful cultural norms. However, they also showcase the resilience and hope that can provide for those navigating these challenging intersections. For many Izitabane women, their faith remains a crucial part of their identity, offering a sense of purpose and belonging even in the face of adversity.

Finally, the internal conflict faced by Izitabane women as they reconcile their sexuality with their religious beliefs underscores the significance of personal narratives in theological discourse. These stories provide profound insights into how individuals navigate and reconcile their identities, often discovering innovative and deeply personal ways to unite their faith with their sexuality. This process of negotiation and reconciliation demonstrates the adaptability of faith and its ability to adapt to the diverse experiences of its followers. In summary, the experiences of black Izitabane women are pivotal for furthering our understanding of religion, sexuality, and theology. They challenge conventional interpretations, promote inclusive theological approaches, and emphasize the impact of personal stories in shaping a more inclusive and compassionate

religious environment. By recognizing and acknowledging these experiences, faith communities can progress towards greater acceptance and support for all individuals, thereby fostering a more equitable and caring world.

6.4 "Njengoba esekulobolile he has every right to you[30]": Wrestling with Social Responses to Izitabane Sexuality;

While some Christians accept that Christianity and Ubutabane can co-exist, many maintain that the notion is contradictory to the essential principles of the Christian faith (Masson & Nkosi, 2017; Yip, 2002; Keena, 2015). These contrasting viewpoints are often based on different interpretations of Bible Scriptures and cultural beliefs about sexuality. The third theme that was extracted from the data addresses intimate and vital questions that speak to the complexities faced by black Izitabane women in the Southern African context, "who, amidst constitutional protection, navigate violence and the threat of violence" (Robertson, 2020). This theme explores the conflict between the Christian doctrine, religious, and sexual identities of black Izitabane women in South Africa. The theme speaks to challenges and the tension of embodying two "contradicting" identities in a black heteronormative society. It reflects on emotions and challenges that black Izitabane women experience during this process of coming to terms with being Isitabane as well as the expectations and the teachings of the Christian faith, as well as violence make it difficult for black Izitabane women to explore and enjoy their sexuality.

Traditional religious beliefs are often considered directly in conflict with Ubutabane behavior and, in some cases, even with mere attraction to the Ubutabane. Izitabane women have become targets in light of their devotion to faith, even within the individuals' own families. Yarhouse and Tan found that some parents refuse to recognize the truth of their child's Ubutabane feelings; some even threatened to kick them out of their homes (2005). Participant #8 shared her experience of when she was kicked out of her home for bringing her girlfriend:

> *"My family and my aunt per se kicked me out and told me that nothing like that had ever happened before"* (**Participant 8 – Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 27 November 2023**).

The topic of heterosexual marriage is another source of contention that frequently arose, particularly among black Izitabane women who attended the 12th Apostle Church and Nazareth

[30] Now that he has paid Lobola for you you're his wife now and he has every right to you

Baptist Church. The women who belonged to these denominations shared that they had been asked for marriage by men countless times. One participant even shared that she decided to stop going to church due to this:

> *"… the last time I went to church, someone wanted Ukungikhetha, and this was the third time. I left because I realized that things were getting out of hand"* (**Participant #4: Individual Interview, 20 November 2023**).

The church expects these women to dress and conduct themselves in a certain way that is in contradiction to who they are. For those individuals who choose to defy these social expectations, the imagined punishment is severe, such as eternal damnation or burning in hell. Another aspect of the internal conflict expressed by the women in this study is best categorized as pressure, particularly from other people of faith, whether of their faith or another faith. Many Christians who stand firm in opposition are not hesitant to proclaim their conviction that the people who identify as Izitabane are sinners. These are the beliefs and practices that allow homophobic hatred and violence to flourish and deny rights to Izitabane. Loughlin made a valid point when he stated, "It has often been pointed out that the Church champions human rights in the world but denied them in the church. … In the secular world, it would be wrong to dismiss someone for being Isitabane, but it would be right to do so in the world of the Church. To many, this seems like a hypocritical double standard, affirming what is at the same time denied. However, the Church has always advocated multiple standards, which are presented as a ladder of perfection, which we climb by embracing even more rigorous forms of life" (2004: p.75).

The church of Jesus Christ endeavors to provide for those in need, just as Christ did during His ministry. The women in the study felt that the church's rejection of the Izitabane people did not reflect the will of an always-accepting God. To many South Africans, the idea that one can be both Isitabane and a Christian is ridiculous. A global Pew Research Center study reports that 61% of South Africans surveyed in urban settings indicated that Ubutabane should not be accepted in society (2013). Similarly, Adamczyk and Pitt found that numerous Christians consider the developing affirmation of Ubutabane a threat to their faith and felt the need to defend it (2009). The current study found that the benefits of spirituality and religion are limited, and this was evident throughout the literature (van Klinken, Bombani, & Parsitau, 2023). "Many people, both within and outside church communities, have struggled to accept [Izitabane women] as moral and equal human beings" (Griffin, 2000: p.8). Religious texts, such as the Bible, are directly used to forbid Ubutabane activity, creating the basis for tension

between traditional religion and Ubutabane. Most religious teachings focus on how people, and women in particular, should conduct themselves, including what they should or should not wear. For the women in this study, bodily expression of their Ubutabane seems to be the number one factor that contributed to their exclusion.

Furthermore, within the Christian tradition, it is understood that all persons are created in the image and likeness of their Creator and, therefore, have innate sacred worth (Rives, 2005). The church community is seen as a reflection of God's love and ideal for humanity, aspiring to be a space characterized by acceptance, compassion, and solace. However, this has not been the experience for most black Izitabane women in conservative churches, who have had to look outside the church to find fellowship and support in their journeys of faith. With strength and tenacity, these women, who have been raised in a conservative church, remain true to themselves while continuing to pursue their faith and live authentic and open lives (Mahaffy, 1996). Many Izitabane women who have not had positive experiences with the conservative church may believe that the only answer is to leave religion altogether. They may then feel free to form their versions of Christianity by either worshipping privately or by creating small networks of support groups to incorporate a supportive and like-minded para-church community into their spiritual practice (Kirkman, 2001). Participant #9 shared:

> *"… I just pray at home. I praise at home; I praise in spiritual spaces. I know for some, it is the mountain; for others like me, it's in nature, being in water; it's in so many different spiritual spaces that exist that do not need me to be confined to anything for me to be accepted. That is what faith has become for me. It has become so personal that I will never lose anything, no matter where I go, because I still can carry that faith with me. When I feel like I need to be in the water, I can do that anywhere…"* (**Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 28 November 2023**).

Barton's study with 47 Izitabane women and Izitabane women in the United States of America found that many Izitabane have to endure sitting in church services listening to faith leaders advocating for the end of Ubutabane by any means, being told that they must "pray away the gay [Isitabane]" to enter heaven. Numerous Izitabane persons in Burton's study reported having been alienated and scrutinized (2010). This was true for the women in the present study. One woman shared:

> "*When I realized that I was living this life, I saw how people looked at me, even though they had never said anything to me directly. I decided right there, and there that being crucified by these people [the church] was not working out for me. So, I decided to stay at home and worship God by praying all the time, and yes, I still believe in God"* (**Participant #2 – Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023**).

As they struggle to accept their sexuality, one participant shared that they experienced a "deep, deep dark hole," but she noted: "Ubutabane is what kept me going." Some spoke very movingly about how God loved and accepted them as they were and how realizing this had helped them to accept themselves. In contrast to the belief that God accepts everyone, the women in this study had either experienced rejection from people within the church or were concerned about the painful possibility of disclosing their sexuality to the wrong person. For example, Participant #2 emphasized that "there's a lot of judgment in [the] church." Participants shared that they preferred to focus on Christ rather than the teachings of the church. For example, participant #1 highlighted that church teaching had been detrimental to her depression:

> "*… It has been helpful that I was raised as a Christian, but also, I feel like it is the same reason why, at some point, I was depressed, I doubted myself, and at some point, I wanted to change myself. You see. So as much as it helped me to be where I am today but also through depression and anxiety attacks that I have experienced, faith contributed a lot, you see"* (**Individual Interview - 14 November 2023**)

The stories shared by participants highlight a complex and deeply personal connection with a God who serves as a source of comfort and acceptance, especially in contrast to religious institutions' often judgmental and exclusionary attitudes. This God is perceived as loving and accepting, providing a profound sense of validation and inner strength to black Izitabane women as they navigate their identities within their faith. Many participants find it transformative to understand that God loves them unconditionally, including embracing their sexuality. This understanding counters the negative messages they may have encountered from religious communities or societal norms. Rather than perceiving God as a punitive figure, they view God as a compassionate and inclusive presence.

Additionally, numerous participants draw strength from their belief in a loving God, which assists them in persevering through discrimination and exclusion. The statement "Ubutabane is what kept me going" suggests that their faith and their sexual orientation are interconnected sources of resilience. The women's spirituality frequently revolves around a genuine and

intimate connection with a high power, bypassing the dogmas of the institutional church and emphasizing their interpretation of Christ's teachings.

This personal relationship gives the participants a strong sense of security and validation. Recognizing that they are accepted by God just as they are profoundly impacts their self-acceptance. This belief gives them the strength to embrace their identities despite external criticism. For instance, one participant who felt in a "deep, deep dark hole" found comfort in believing God's love surpasses human biases. The rejection and judgment from faith communities contrast the participants' personal faith and organized religion. Participant #2's comment about "a lot of judgment in [the] church" underscores this struggle. This often leads them to prioritize Christ's inclusive and loving message over the exclusive practices of the church.

Furthermore, participants often choose to embrace aspects of their faith that align with and validate their identities while consciously disregarding teachings that criticize their sexual orientation. This selective approach enables them to uphold their spirituality while rejecting certain aspects of religious doctrine. These individuals navigate their spiritual journeys with a sense of empowerment, placing their personal connection with God above the need for institutional acceptance.

The act of navigation serves as a form of spiritual resistance, allowing individuals to assert their right to belong in their faith communities on their own terms. Participants navigate their lives with a strong sense of empowerment, choosing to prioritize their personal relationship with God over seeking institutional acceptance. For black Izitabane women, the God they envision represents a radical departure from the traditional judgmental portrayal often perpetuated by religious institutions. This God embodies unconditional love, acceptance, and personal connection, empowering them to embrace their identities. This perception of God significantly shapes their spirituality, providing them with the resilience and strength to confront and transcend the prejudice they encounter within their religious communities.

6.5 “Unkulunkulu uyazizonda Izitabane, Unkulunkulu uyazizonda izidakwa”: Dealing with Internalized Homophobia and Challenging Harmful Christian Perspective Concerning Ubutabane;

Another important finding in this study is the development of internalized homophobia, which alludes to the negative self-discernment embraced by Izitabane women and men who have internalized the culture’s negative messages about themselves, resulting in a shame-based self-

image of being “flawed,” “damaged,” or otherwise “less-than” their heterosexual counterparts. Internalized homophobia has been named one of the most significant barriers to the Izitabane faith and well-being of Izitabane women and men because of its association with guilt, depression, and feelings of worthlessness. The fifth theme focuses on how black Izitabane women deal with this phenomenon and other harmful Christian assumptions concerning Ubutabane. This theme explores how black Izitabane women are often forced to leave their churches because Ubutabane is socio-culturally contested and unaccepted. Black Izitabane women are made to question their existence and the existence of God.

Wilcox found that for many Christian Izitabane women, “religious individualism” allows them to resolve the tension presented by being both Christian and Isitabane (2002: p.499). Expressly, the ability to embrace as Isitabane, as well as Christian, has provided a deep and meaningful resolution to the internal conflict some may struggle with and offers these women the unique opportunity and experience of living entirely within the framework of God’s love for them (Wilcox, 2002). Rives (2005) confirmed this in her research, stating: …[Izitabane women] are succeeding at integrating their religious and sexual identities. In the process, they are becoming more psychologically healthy than their heterosexual counterparts. Due to the hardships they face reconciling conflicting parts of their lives, they become dynamic, spiritual, authentic persons (2005: p.1).

Furthermore, the women in the study conveyed a sense that being an Isitabane woman and being a Christian were both important concepts in their self-identity. For some, feeling that two critical aspects of their identity were incompatible had caused them considerable distress and led them to search for ways to reconcile their faith and sexuality. For example, participant #1 shared:

> “*For the past year or two, I have been trying to understand how to fit my life into Christianity, and I have researched different religions… Just recently, I have come to understand that it is not the religion itself but the people who are preaching it. I decided that let me take Christianity, let me take the bible, and let me live it according to my life. For the past couple of months, that is what I have been doing. I read the Bible and base those verses on my life”* (**Individual Interview - 14 November 2023**)

According to Kirkman, a reexamination of sexuality and sexual relationships, incorporating faithful reading of scripture, particularly from a liberal, progressive perspective, and soul-searching, may result in the successful integration of these two seemingly paradoxical parts of

oneself as both Christian and Isitabane (2001). Yip argues that if one believes in a radically inclusive God who created all sexualities to be celebrated and accepted, then one must conclude that Izitabane women are totally and completely accepted by God and valued as part of God's family (2002). It was also found that not all women experienced inner conflict regarding their religious and sexual identities, but all participants had, over time, come to integrate these two identities. In addition, all the women were clear that experiencing Ubutabane attraction was not a choice or something they could control and, therefore, could not be a sin. Participant #8, for example, expressed that while she found other religions more accepting, she couldn't bring herself to leave her old church:

> "*There are a lot of other religions that I want to explore. I have tried some and felt comfortable but there is that thing that maybe I was raised in the Apostolic there is that thing that says Apostolic Apostolic"* (**Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2022**).

As they struggle to accept their sexuality, one participant shared that they experienced a "deep, deep dark hole," but she noted: "Ubutabane is what kept me going." Some spoke very movingly about how God loved and accepted them as they were and how realizing this had helped them to accept themselves. In contrast to the belief that God accepts everyone, the women in this study had either experienced rejection from people within the church or were concerned about the painful possibility of disclosing their sexuality to the wrong person. For example, Participant #2 emphasized that "there's a lot of judgment in [the] church." Participants shared that they preferred to focus on Christ rather than the teachings of the church. For example, participant #1 highlighted that church teaching had been detrimental to her depression:

> "… *It has been helpful that I was raised as a Christian, but also, I feel like it is the same reason why, at some point, I was depressed, I doubted myself, and at some point, I wanted to change myself. You see. So as much as it helped me to be where I am today but also through depression and anxiety attacks that I have experienced, faith contributed a lot, you see"* (**Individual Interview - 14 November 2023**)

Most conservative churches emphasize virginity and celibacy until marriage and heterosexual marriage as the ultimate picture of God's will for humanity. Izitabane Christian women have a difficult time seeing themselves as part of this plan and how their relationships fit into it (Kirkman, 2001). Therefore, a fundamental paradigm shift may take place within many women who devote themselves to their faith and seek meaningful, fulfilling, and committed relationships with other women. Society still does not recognize any relationship that deviates

from the norm of one man and one woman. As a result, it may be challenging to maintain and foster positive Isitabane relationships, even in an affirming church environment (Kirkman, 2001). When one's relationship is not considered equal and valid, a stigma is placed on it, which renders it less than the ideal family relationship. Kirkman found in her research that the Izitabane women she interviewed even believed that heterosexual marriage has a "special sacramental quality" (Kirkman, 2001: p.220) not afforded to Izitabane women because they understand it to be God's original design for humanity (Kirkman).

Rodriquez and Ouellette identified four strategies that Izitabane women may use to deal with being both gay and religious. They listed them as (1) Rejecting the religious identity, (2) Rejecting the homosexual identity, (3) Compartmentalization, and (4) Identity integration. The first strategy includes rejecting one's faith and religion altogether to embrace one's Ubutabane fully. The second is the opposite: one embraces one's spiritual faith while rejecting one's identity as Isitabane. The third strategy includes keeping the two parts of oneself completely separate and living two separate and distinct lives. The final strategy emphasizes the incorporation of both parts of one's self as fully lesbian and as a person of faith. This includes the idea that "… [Izitabane women] integrate their religious beliefs and their [Ubutabane] into a single, new, workable understanding of the self. Such individuals hold a positive [Isitabane] identity and a positive religious identity and do not feel a conflict between the two (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000: pp.334-335). It was found in this study that Izitabane women who have achieved identity integration often seek out like-minded individuals to create a spiritual support network that encourages them to live out their faith while also being true to their identity as Izitabane women.

This search for community underscores the significance of discovering a safe and inclusive space where one's sexual and religious identities can coexist harmoniously. As highlighted by Rodriquez and Ouellette, "integration [is] a long-term, ongoing, and complex process" (2000, p.338). They emphasize that "reading relevant literature, developing self-acceptance, simply talking to other individuals, and even direct intervention by God… as possible catalysts for the integration of [Ubutabane] and religious identities" (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000: p.344). One participant shared a powerful example of the profound impact of finding such a supportive community sharing:

> *"This year, I met someone who also identifies as queer [Isitabane] and as a Christian. Although she is younger than me, I think just talking about the Bible*

> *and talking about our experiences gives that kind of support because now I have someone who understands this life that I am living and who also has values that are similar to mine"* **(Participant #1- Individual Interview - 14 November 2023**).

This illustrates how shared experiences and values can cultivate a sense of belonging and mutual understanding, essential for preserving faith and identity. Van Klinken acknowledges that "This is not an easy process, and it often involves a spiritual struggle, not only with church but also with the God preached about in church – and both struggles are not always things of the past" (2015: p.955). another participant poignantly expressed this struggle when sharing:

> *"… I just sit there and ask God why He created us this way because people hate us. Sometimes I think maybe my faith is being tested…"* **(Participant #2 – Individual Interview, 18 November 2023).**

This reveals the internal conflict experienced by many black Izitabane women as they struggle to reconcile their faith with societal rejection and condemnation. The stories presented here exemplify the resilience and determination of black Izitabane women as they navigate their spiritual and sexual identities. This process of identity integration involves a constant negotiation between personal faith and external acceptance. It requires finding solidarity with others who share similar experiences and embarking on a profound personal and spiritual journey. These experiences yield several valuable insights. Firstly, the importance of community and support networks cannot be overstated. These networks offer validation, understanding, and shared experiences, which are essential for personal growth and acceptance. Secondly, the significance of religious and spiritual practices in identity integration is paramount. Rather than solely relying on institutional teachings, engaging with faith on an individual level allows for a more inclusive and affirming spiritual experience. Finally, the ongoing struggle with religious institutions and interpretations highlights the need for continued dialogue and advocacy for more inclusive religious spaces. These efforts are vital for creating environments where black Izitabane women can wholeheartedly embrace their faith and identity without fear of rejection or condemnation.

6.6 "… Personify your experience. Personify your God": Fighting back from the Margins.

> *"… resistance, at root, must mean more than resistance against war. It is a resistance against all kinds of things that are like war… So perhaps, resistance means opposition to be invaded, occupied, assaulted, and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself to be able to see clearly… I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can*

return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness" – Thich Nhat Hahn

The last theme that was extracted and present in almost every interview was the act of embracing one's truth and focusing on stories of resilience. It engages how black Izitabane women fight back from the margins by challenging, questioning, and re-reading the Bible Scriptures that are used to condemn Ubutabane and claim them as a source for liberation (West, Van der Walt, 2016), as well as by speaking up against discriminating theologies that seek to oppress and exclude Izitabane bodies in faith spaces. The study found that most of these women who were involved have come to the realization that God loves and accepts everyone as they are, and they carry this knowledge with them to find comfort, guidance, and a sense of peace and well-being.

Claiming the word "Isitabane," West reminded her readers that there is a long tradition of those who have been oppressed to "choose their own words to name themselves rather than allowing the dominant culture to assign negative meaning to certain words that are used to demonize a group of people" (2008, p.1). By reclaiming the word "Isitabane" for ourselves, we internalize the idea that our identity is defined by us and not by the majority culture. When connecting the words "Isitabane" and "Christianity," Izitabane people of faith can define the tenets of Christianity by their terms and experiences, free from blindly swallowing what they have been taught by the dominant culture (West, 2008, p.1). Just as members of different ethnic groups and nationalities have their worship and preaching styles, music, and even different interpretations of scripture, Izitabane Christians also reflect a unique and valid experience of their relationship to the divine (West, 2008, p.1). Just as each human being has his or her own deeply personal connection to God, so do Izitabane persons, as they cannot and should not separate their sexuality from their spiritual practice (Horn et al., 2005).

Izitabane women navigate the complex intersection of their Christian faith and sexual orientation, often facing significant challenges in reconciling these aspects of their identity. While complex, this journey of integration offers a profound testament to their resilience and commitment to their faith and identity. As these women seek out like-minded individuals and form spiritual support networks, their experiences highlight a unique form of communal support that merges faith and identity. These networks provide a space for shared worship and a context for mutual understanding and acceptance. These experiences of Izitabane women reflect a personalized approach to spirituality that is informed by their struggles and triumphs.

Just as different ethnic and national groups have their distinctive worship styles, music, and interpretations of scripture, black Izitabane women contribute a unique perspective on how faith can be lived out authentically despite societal and institutional challenges. Their approach to scripture and faith practices may differ from mainstream interpretations due to their lived experiences. This diversity enriches the broader Christian tradition by offering new insights into how faith can be interpreted and practiced in light of marginalized identities.

Reimagined divine relationships: Izitabane women often engage in reimagining their relationship with the sacred, which can lead to innovative theological insights and practices. Their experiences challenge traditional notions and open up new ways of understanding and relating to the sacred, reflecting the adaptability and diversity within religious practices. Furthermore, the process of navigating their faith while facing rejection and judgment can lead to a deepened sense of spiritual resilience. Their stories underscore the capacity of faith to evolve and adapt in response to personal and communal struggles. By sharing their experiences and perspectives, Izitabane women contribute to the broader discourse on faith and sexuality. Their narratives provide valuable insights into how faith communities can become more inclusive and responsive to the needs of marginalized groups. Their experiences highlight the importance of inclusivity within religious communities, advocating for a more compassionate and understanding approach to diverse identities. Izitabane women's experiences reflect a valid and enriching dimension of Christian spirituality. Just as various ethnic and national groups have their distinct ways of worship and interpretation, their unique journey of integrating faith and sexuality adds depth and diversity to the understanding of the divine. This diversity underscores the broad notion that spirituality and faith can be deeply personal and contextually varied, enriching the collective tapestry of religious experience.

Reclaiming, deconstructing, and reconstructing our faith: One of the most beautiful aspects of reclaiming, deconstructing, and reconstructing our faith is the ability to see it from the perspective of our unique experiences. Our personal stories, struggles, and successes shape the way we understand and practice spirituality. It is within our power to redefine our faith and find new meanings that resonate with our identities. Embracing our authentic selves empowers us to explore and live our spirituality with genuine conviction. The women in this study speak about questioning and rejecting the conservative church's teachings and finding out for ourselves what is true and what is not. For example, participant #9 shared:

> *"I think many people accept information without questioning what is being given to them, which happens in many churches. If a person goes to church and the pastor is convincing and so charismatic, wearing a shiny suit and preaching with a nice base, you end up accepting whatever they say without actually questioning what they mean…"* (**Focus Group Discussion, 11 November 2023**).

Similarly, the women recognized the popular interpretations of Bible scriptures, particularly scriptures that are frequently used to condemn Ubutabane. Participant #8 shared:

> *"The Bible has been refined. Some things were taken out. Some were added to support whoever was in power at that time, you know. We cannot say in this day and age that the Bible as it is, that is how it was, or that is how God left His messages. Participant #8 explained* (**Individual Interview - WhatsApp, 27 November 2023**).

She then pointed out that the Bible scriptures that are often quoted to condemn Ubutabane are not about Ubutabane relationships as we know and understand them today and that we should focus on the message of the Bible as a whole rather than on a few selected verses. This illustrates that black Izitabane women have direct access to the Bible, and they can challenge the interpretations presented by religious leaders as well as the teaching of their pastors in the church. It was clear from the interviews that experiences of faith are crucial – the belief in God as creator and in God as love. The women expressed that their sexual identity as Izitabane women does not stop them from believing in God. One woman shared:

> *"Just because I am living this life, it does not mean that I have to stop believing in God; no, I have not stopped. One thing that has kept me going in hard times or when I am experiencing challenges is to believe that Unkulunkulu uyena osidalile. Ubesahlali azi ukuthi vele ngizophila lempilo [God created us this way. He always knew that I would live this life]. So, there is no need for me to worry about other people… I always put my trust in God all the time. No matter what people say or how they test me, my faith is strong and not going anywhere.* (**Participant #2 – Individual Interview, 18 November 2023**).

The women acknowledge that God is love and that He knew what He was doing when He created us. Our sexuality is not something that we choose, but just like our religious identity, it is an identity that develops as we grow. This identity shapes how we understand ourselves and provides a basis for navigating our religious identity and growing our faith. Referring to the words of *John 3, chapter 16,* one woman shared:

> "*When I read that verse alone and I break it down, it helps me understand what God meant when God said, "Ekuqaleni Unkulunkulu walithanda kangaka izwe" [For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son]. That line on its own, "He gave his only son" … God loves me more than a saint"* (**Individual Interview, 14 November 2023**).

Another woman shared:

> **"***I have told myself that I am God's child because everything is still going well for me. When I call God, God answers. Meaning I am still God's child and God still loves me"* (**Participant #6 – Individual Interview, 21 November 2023**).

In the image of God: The women viewed God as love and as the Creator who loves all human beings, especially those at the margins of society. This understanding of God helps to deal with the Bible scriptures that are used to condemn Ubutabane in many African faith communities. This understanding can also help African faith communities respond to violence that is targeting black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg and learn how to shape faith spaces in ways that might be more welcoming to Izitabane individuals. Faith leaders must be informed and advocate for black Izitabane women who are at the margins of society and promote social justice and social change as instructed by the Holy Bible. In addition, the teaching of the mainstream church is that Christ came to earth to save everyone, without exception, and that must also include those in the church who are Izitabane women. Loughlin argues that mainstream churches must acknowledge Izitabane as fully humans and fight and advocate for full inclusion and equality of all Izitabane in all aspects of life. Churches must fight, advocate, and educate themselves about the struggles of all members of the church, especially marginalized individuals (Loughlin, 2004).

The popular discourse surrounding Ubutabane in South Africa is that Ubutabane is not only incompatible with African culture but also un-Christian. As a result, "Izitabane women do not belong" in this African and Christian nation. Goss speaks about queering Christianity to make the religion more inclusive of people who have been disenfranchised from it. Michaelson argues that queering involves shifting the focus, adding complexity, and presenting challenges to existing norms (2015). According to Goss, Queering Christianity aims to make the religion more inclusive of people who have been disenfranchised from it. This involves reconstructing the theological system, which is already flawed. By doing so, one's spirituality can reflect a life that integrates holiness, sexuality, and the practice of justice. According to the author, Christian queer theology primarily deals with four major issues. These issues are: (1) reforming existing churches or establishing a new, post-denominational church, (2) addressing the challenges

posed by post-Christianity, feminism, and other spiritual paths, (3) exploring queer sexual theology, and (4) seeking justice for various cultural contexts and social groups. The author asserts that these topics are central to Christian queer theology (Goss, 2002: p.xiv).

Reinterpreting Scripture: "Queer Christianity" reinterprets the Bible in light of the experiences of Izitabane people. Six clobber passages that are often used to condemn Ubutabane are reclaimed and reinterpreted to include Izitabane, with the objective being that, as Izitabane, we see ourselves as active members of theology. Koch, in his research, criticized the three primary arguments that scholars have used to support Ubutabane in scripture. Koch challenges his readers by offering an alternative; "cruising" scripture to find Izitabane references (2001). His theory is that Izitabane women of faith should not reject Scripture; rather, they should look for stories and characters that honor the faithful Biblical heroes who might have had a different sexual orientation. Koch encourages Izitabane individuals to "cruise the scripture" by "being open to possibility, paying attention to what catches your eye, pursuing your curiosity, following up on any promising signals, and simply "taking it from there." It is with this understanding and frame of reference that those in the Christian community who identify as Izitabane may approach scripture and claim it as their own. When one can open oneself to the infinite possibilities of God's love, then one can stake a rightful claim that the Holy Bible was written for everybody as a love letter from God to God's people, with the two central tenets being love God and love one's neighbor. This offers Izitabane Christians the opportunity to develop a strong sense of who they are, that they are loved and supported, and provides them with a sense of meaning and purpose, which can be highly beneficial to one's overall well-being.

Privileging lived experiences: The experiences recounted by black Izitabane women in this study offer faith communities a profound opportunity to challenge the prevailing assumptions that often shape discussions about the realities faced by those who live outside the norm in South Africa and across Africa. Queer theology presents valuable tools for African faith communities to center the lives of Izitabane women within religious settings, facilitating nuanced and embodied conversations that honor diversity. By incorporating queer theological frameworks, African faith communities can actively engage with the complexities of Izitabane women's lives, acknowledging the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and faith. This framework encourages a critical examination of traditional religious narratives and practices,

inviting communities to confront and dismantle systems of oppression that marginalize and silence Izitabane women.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this research was to determine how African faith communities can become a community of radical hospitality for black Izitabane women facing homophobic hate and violence in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. The research questions that have been answered are:

1. What are the causes and consequences of homophobic hatred and violence as experienced by black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal?
2. How do black Izitabane women draw on faith as they navigate homophobic hatred and violence in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal?
3. How can Queer Theology be used as a faith resource to enable the formation and development of counter communities of care for black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal?

This chapter evaluates the study, offering recommendations for future research, personal reflection, and the conclusion of the study.

7.1 Summary of Chapters

In Chapter One, I introduced the motivations and aim of the study by providing some background reflections on the realities of homophobic hatred and violence despite the legal protections provided by the South African Constitution. I examined the ways in which this violence is socially and culturally constructed within the African heterosexual territory. I argued that there is a gap between the South African Constitution and the lived reality of black Izitabane women in the country, a gap that this study would aim to fill. I employed the lens of intersectionality to explore how black Izitabane women's experiences differ along the lines of race, class, and gender. In addition, I introduced the research strategy, also known as research design, to answer questions in this study and explained the structure of the research.

In Chapter Two, I reviewed the existing literature focusing on the complexities and challenges of navigating multiple identities by focusing on the intersection of faith, religion, culture, and homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women. In particular, I discussed the nature and the extent of homophobic hatred and violence in South Africa. I explored the influence of Christian religion in the country as well as the positive role that was played by African faith communities in addressing social injustice and exclusion of black people during the apartheid era. I maintained that the church in South Africa can apply a similar critique to

other forms of social injustice, including violence against black Izitabane women. In this chapter, I place violence faced by black female Izitabane in context, looking at the social pressures to conform to heterosexuality that are often promoted by political and religious leaders across the African continent, as well as South Africa's high rates of violence, including sexual violence. Thereafter, I introduced the practice of Christian hospitality as one hermeneutic approach that African faith communities can employ to reach out and confront all forms of oppression against black Izitabane women to carry out the work of Jesus. I maintained that African faith communities have a role to play in ending violence against black Izitabane women, but to do so, they must be open to new ways of doing theology and interpreting biblical scriptures.

In Chapter Three, I introduced and engaged queer theory and queer theology as a hermeneutical lens. In my attempt to understand the role that can be played by faith experiences in ending violence against black Izitabane women's lives in Pietermaritzburg, I drew on queer theology. Using this theory allowed me to explore how these women make meaning of their lived experiences as well as how they navigate social exclusion, heterosexual norms, homophobic hatred and violence, internalized homophobia, and social and cultural norms. Using queer theology also allowed me to understand how religion and religious experiences impact the lives of black Izitabane women and how these experiences can be used to develop inclusive faith spaces where black Izitabane women can feel free to worship God without fear of being discriminated against.

In Chapter Four, I unpacked and demonstrated how and why research methodologies and techniques were applied. In this chapter, I presented the research's ethical issues, such as the sampling frame, recruitment of participants, confidentiality, and informed consent. The chapter begins with an introduction and explanation of the adopted methodology, and afterward, I walked the reader through the data collection process and data analysis. In addition, I discussed how thematic analysis would be used to interpret the data to discuss the findings and find a suitable conclusion to the study.

In Chapter Five, I presented data that was collected through one focus group discussion and nine individual interviews with black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. From my engagement with these women, I was able to generate rich data that I analysed thematically, sorting it into the following six themes: *Religion is still a big part of my life": Recognizing Christian Faith as an Important Part of Black Izitabane Women's Lives; "Uma*

ufuna ukuba Isitabane uzoya esihogweni[31]*": Self-Discovery and Self-Disclosure – Stories of Becoming; "Udinga umfana nje ostrong ozolala nawe uzoba right*[32]*": Being Isitabane in a Heteronormative Socioreligious Society; "Njengoba esekulobolile he has every right to you*[33]*": Wrestling with Social Responses to Izitabane Sexuality; "Unkulunkulu uyazizonda Izitabane, Unkulunkulu uyazizonda izidakwa"*[34]*: Dealing with Internalized messages and Challenging Harmful Christian Perspective Concerning Ubutabane; and "… Personify your experience. Personify your God": Fighting back from the Margins*. It was a beautiful experience as participants openly and comfortably shared aspects of our experiences of being black Isitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

In Chapter Six, I provided an interpretation of the research findings in conjunction with pertinent literature and the theory that guided this research methodology. Here, I highlight that the exclusion and marginalization of black Izitabane women lie in the conservative religion and cultural discourses. I acknowledge the role that many faith communities have played in excluding and discriminating against black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Be that as it may, African faith communities can also contribute to ending violence against this community. The experiences that were shared in this study allow faith communities to challenge and address the underlying assumptions that inform so many matter-of-fact conversations about the realities of black Izitabane women in South Africa.

Overall, the women in this study have met with complex challenges and painful situations while attempting to live their lives authentically and without compromise. Some of these challenges include being discriminated against by their religion and being frequently told about their alleged sins and the inevitable destination of hell. These negative experiences that the women in this study encountered have forced many to walk away from the church. Unfortunately, most of these women in this study, who do not meet the expectations of heterosexuality, have not been able to find a supportive church environment where they can be free to express themselves fully, grow in their Christian faith, and be of service to others. The majority of the women shared that instead of going to church or seeking a welcoming and affirming church, they preferred to worship in the comfort of their own homes. Some shared that they left the churches where they grew up in and were still looking for a new church where they could feel welcomed and comfortable with all their identities without having to choose one over the other. A number

[31] If you want to be Isitabane then you're going to hell
[32] You need a strong man to sleep [have sex] with you; you're going to change
[33] Now that he has paid Lobola for you you're his wife now and he has every right to you
[34] God hates Izitabane, God hates drunkards

of the experiences and perceptions that these women shared reflect that they were out to their church communities and that they felt unwelcome in churches. Thus, the women pointed to how individuals at church treated them as the most critical factor in whether or not they experienced acceptance at church. In addition, the women shared that their experiences of faith and faith spaces have forced them not only to redefine and reframe their relationship with God but also to construct and reconstruct their sexual identities.

Some of the women acknowledged that they have come to understand that their faith is all about what God wants for them. These women have, for the most part, come to the realization that God loves and accepts them the way they are, and they are able to carry that knowledge with them and allow it to comfort and guide them and bring them a sense of peace and well-being. In addition, findings reveal that the women's personal experiences with faith, faith spaces, and other members of the Christian community have had a more significant impact on how they view the relationship between their faith and sexual identity. Even though all of the women who responded have had difficulty reconciling the teachings of the church about Ubutabane with their sexual orientation, they see this as just one part of living an authentic Christian life. The findings further demonstrate that many of the women in the study have struggled and have been negatively impacted while coming to terms with and reconciling their religious and sexual identity. However, they have been able to integrate these aspects of themselves. Some of the women shared their experiences of being in happy relationships with other women. These findings show the importance of creating communities of care for black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, where harmful Christian norms can be addressed and where these women can feel welcomed and safe.

In this particular context, communities of care for black Izitabane women encompass supportive networks and spaces where individuals can navigate the intersection of their Christian faith and sexual orientation in a nurturing and affirming environment. These communities actively challenge and reframe harmful Christian norms that have long marginalized and stigmatized sexual minorities. By fostering understanding and empathy, these communities enable Izitabane women to express their identities authentically while maintaining their faith, providing emotional, spiritual, and practical support to address their unique challenges. These spaces help break down barriers between faith and identity through communal engagement and dialogue, promoting a more inclusive and compassionate interpretation of Christian teachings. This environment empowers black Izitabane women to

harmoniously live out their faith and sexuality, contributing to a broader reformation within religious communities that value diversity and respect individual dignity.

7.2 Reflecting on the research process

While I was reflecting on the complex intersections of political, cultural, and racialized processes that shape and inform my experiences and how these experiences would provide a framework in which to think about my field methods, I was not prepared at first to discover multiple ways in which the religion landscape in South Africa informed and shaped homophobic and hatred violence against black Izitabane women. I was, however, conscious that as a black Isitabane woman and someone who is navigating faith and whose identities are shaped by homophobic experiences (much like the women in the study), I had to be aware of my positional subjectivity and own journey of navigating homophobic and hatred violence. I had to be aware that it was not only my story that I was telling, it was the Izitabanes, while also knowing that I could not wholly move and detach myself from the research. This process required me to be constantly reflective about the sociopolitical location from which my work emerges (Collins, 1991) (which encompasses my multi-identities as a student, researcher, activist, black Isitabane woman, and my journey) that inform my engagement within the present study. I became mindful that since my own life is the primary source of data, like the participants in my study, I was actively and dialectically co-producing data with the study participants.

Unexpected and unforeseen ethical dilemmas can impact data collection and, consequently, the nature and quality of the data. While designing, selecting the study sample, and analyzing the data was the researcher's priority, it was crucial to reflect on these issues, which include positionality, personal identities, methodology, language, and the social contexts in which the research was conducted. My position as an insider/outsider- that is, an Isitabane researcher interviewing individuals who also self-identified as Izitabane- probably contributed to this study's process and helped generate good research relationships. Despite the differences brought by many things, my respondents and I shared a range of equal perspectives and experiences from living in South African society. Dowling suggests that insiders might have an advantage because "people are more likely to talk to you freely, and you are more likely to understand what they are saying because you share their outlook on the world" (2005: p.26). This was often the case when I was conducting interviews for this project. Thanks to overarching heteronormativity in South African society, my participants and I shared a common experience of marginalization because we failed to adhere to South African sexual

norms. We have a shared experience of the potential danger of religion and culture and a shared desire to find places where we can 'be ourselves.'

During the process of this study, I discovered that my status as an 'insider' and a longstanding membership in Pietermaritzburg's Izitabane community might have been a liability. Some participants found it easier to discuss topics such as homophobic and hateful violence with someone who also identifies as Isitabane. Be that as it may, because the respondents knew of my status as an 'insider,' they were hesitant to trust me with their experiences as I am one of them. Some still feared being exposed or that I would reveal the information to some community members. The possibility of this complication was addressed by thoroughly explaining to each participant the intention of the study, what it entailed, and how the study could impact their lives and those with similar experiences. This was done before each interview and sometimes during the sessions.

To protect the identified participants from harm, the participants were given a choice to decide if they wanted to remain anonymous and to what extent they wanted to remain anonymous. Each individual who was willing to participate in the study then read and signed an informed consent form as part of data collection. They were all given time to think about it first before it was made available to sign and return to me. Verbal consent was also obtained. The Informed Consent Agreement states the benefits and risks of participating in the study. It states that reports resulting from the study will not contain any information that could be used to identify the participant. All identifying characteristics, such as occupation, city, and ethnic background, were changed. The identities of study participants were protected throughout and after the study, and all data that was gathered was treated with confidentiality. To protect the participants' privacy, I used pseudonyms. Stories were compiled in the form of short monographs, with the hope that my storytelling would humanize black Izitabane women and bring the readers closer to our world. Once all the interviews had been transcribed, each interview was saved in a safe folder using the participants' assigned identification number in a folder on my password-protected computer. In addition, research participants were assured that this research was conducted as part of the requirements for a graduate degree at The University of KwaZulu-Natal and was not being conducted in association with any specific religious faith.

The research process was also influenced by my personal experiences as a black Isitabane woman, someone who navigates faith, and as a survivor of homophobic and hatred violence in innumerable ways. Because of my personal identity and experiences as a researcher, I believe

it was easier for me to connect with most of the participants. However, it is essential to note that since my identity was known to the participants, it is possible that my ability to access important information was limited. In addition, through sharing my experiences, I might have been judged as too much of an insider or too much of an outsider to trust with essential data. The key was to be as authentic as possible, which I believe is the right thing to do despite the fact that revealing my personal identity puts me at risk of victimization. Much effort was also put into being approachable and non-threatening and in making sure that all interviews were conducted in a respectful, friendly, and non-judgmental manner, thus making the participants feel that they could be open and honest with me about their lived experiences. Using my personal experiences, which was a big part of the study method, also helped create a setting where the focus group and interviews could be conducted without the apparent power imbalances that arise when a researcher interacts with the participants in research. While being a black Isitabane woman worked in my favor, my lived experiences also did.

With homophobic and hatred violence being such a susceptible subject all over the world, the participants found it easier to share with another Isitabane survivor. I believe that using the method of autoethnography was a success because, unlike researchers' traditional position in which their emotional self remains hidden, autoethnography typically embraces vulnerability as a way of understanding emotions and promoting social life. I had entered the field from a vulnerable position and, by focusing on my embodied experiences, maintained a sensitive and compassionate point of view throughout the data collection and writing process, allowing for moments of vulnerability. Sharing my experiences with the study participants immediately improved the engagement between myself and the participants. Once the participants learned about my lived experiences, they became increasingly comfortable and open to sharing their painful life experiences and reflecting on the meaning of the studied phenomena.

Their openness yielded detailed and in-depth information about how they experience homophobic and hatred violence and what these experiences mean to them. In addition, a lot of research was conducted regarding using personal life experiences as a data collection tool and how this can affect participants. For instance, because I am aware that there is a widespread stigma associated with homophobic and hatred violence, I decided not to hold many focus groups with survivors because I was concerned that they would be reluctant to disclose and discuss their lived experiences within a group setting. Furthermore, I decided that the only requirement for selecting survivors to participate was their willingness to do so.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, the study questions were influenced by my personal lived experiences. The questions that were asked were designed and discussed with experts at Uthingo Network prior to the fieldwork. Hence, while my personal experiences were used as the initial research tool and served as a guide for the structured interview questions and to facilitate the analysis, very little revision was required following this stage. The chosen method and designed tools thus worked surprisingly well from the start, arguably because they were designed with my positionality in mind and with input from Uthingo Network. In addition, the critical interviews with the participants were approached in such a way that participants were allowed to dictate the nature of the conversation essentially, and the questions were deliberately designed in such a way that the questions were general and broad. This allowed the participants to understand the nature of the questions and the data collected. The research methodology, tools, and, thus, the research process were influenced by both my lived experiences and those of the study participants. Furthermore, throughout the research process, I was very aware of the cultural context in which I was functioning.

Due to the marginalized and devalued societal position accorded to black Izitabane women, safety was a continuous concern. It was therefore vitally important to do the interviews in a natural location where the participants could feel safe to participate and to also conduct all the sessions during the day between 15:00 and 16:00 at Uthingo Network offices. The location is fenced and has comfortable offices that were provided to conduct the sessions. In discussing their experiences, interviewees drew on memories associated with the very setting of the interview, thus encouraging closer consideration of their taken-for-granted daily experiences. Respondents could look around and feel safe. Where safety was a concern, I had complete trust in Uthingo Network to guide me as they had the local knowledge. I also made sure that participants were aware that participation was entirely voluntary and that they were allowed to withdraw at any time without incurring any penalties or losing benefits. While all sessions were conducted at Uthingo Network, participants were given a choice of where they wanted to do the interviews. It also meant that safety concerns rarely influenced the research sessions. Another major influence on the research process and the collected data was the language. I understand the role of language in this study. As such, the study's key questions were written in English before the research commenced and then translated into Isizulu. The responses to the questions were later transcribed and used as the base for data. This allowed participants to feel free to engage and share their experiences in a language that they understood. It also made

it easier for me to use context-appropriate terminology and connect with the participants because I also speak the Isizulu language.

While this autoethnographic study was an exciting journey of exploration and disclosure, the process uncovered many different emotions within me. There were times when I was required to pause to manage and process all these emotions that emerged throughout the research and writing. Not only did I have to carry my pain, but often, I was exposed to the pain of the individuals that I was interviewing who had experienced similar circumstances. As such, it was vital for me to practice self-care throughout the autoethnographic process, including the design, development, and sharing of the research.

7.3 Reflecting on the study questions

In discussing their experiences, respondents drew on memories associated with the studied phenomena, thus encouraging closer consideration of their taken-for-granted daily lived experiences. While the space allowed participants to feel free to share their experiences, various study questions around their experiences acted as triggers. For example, while the term "Izitabane" was claimed in this study to represent South African queer individuals in a positive manner, the term triggered much pain for many participants. The respondent's narratives revolved around this term, outlining the reasons why the term is significant and evoking the meaningful connections that Izitabane have with themselves and others. They discussed what their experiences mean, why they chose to share these experiences, and how they relate to other Izitabane living in South Africa. This was especially important, in my opinion, for getting people to think about their biases and how they can affect black Izitabane bodies.

7.4 Risk and Benefits

Participation in this study had several benefits and potential risks for the participants, all of whom were informed of the benefits and risks in the Informed Consent Agreement signed by each participant. The participants benefited from involvement in the study because they had an opportunity to share their lived experience as black Izitabane women, which can be a meaningful, liberating, and positive experience, given that there may be few opportunities to do so in their daily lives. The interview allowed the participants to examine and reflect on their intersecting identities critically. In addition, their stories contribute to research related to the lives of black Izitabane women and will undoubtedly support faith leaders and others in helping professions to gain insight into their lived experiences. The potential risks could come from questions related to violence, gender, faith, and sexual orientation, which could cause

emotional distress, as these questions may be connected to painful or traumatizing memories. When participants reported feeling unsafe or experiencing emotional distress, they were immediately referred to a psychologist for help.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings of a research study aimed at exploring the lived experiences of black Izitabane women in South Africa while exploring the role that can be played by faith in creating communities of care for black Izitabane women who are surviving homophobic violence. In this study, I have emphasized the pervasive influence of religion in our society. I argue that religion has the potential to envision a life that fully embraces all bodies as they are. This study underscores how religious beliefs underpin our moral perspectives, shaping our daily interactions regardless of our religious affiliations. Often, religious doctrines are imposed upon us, casting us as sinners and painting our narratives for us. This study aimed to provide a safe space for black Izitabane women to tell their stories on their own terms. In sharing our own stories, we explored the role of Christianity, mainly its association with the politicization of Ubutabane in South Africa and broader African contexts. I argue that black Izitabane women, while deeply religious, struggle to gain recognition as human beings who do not deserve to be part of a faith community or any community. The lack of recognition often leads to exclusion and marginalization and hinders black Izitabane women from expressing and exploring their identities openly. I maintain that despite Christianity's complex relationship with Izitabane persons, the religion may also serve as a source of support for black Izitabane women who are facing homophobic and hatred violence in South Africa.

7.6 Recommendations

The study findings offer numerous opportunities for future studies to build upon:

1. Improve awareness and understanding of the lived experiences, reasons, and consequences of homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

    - **Community education initiatives**: Implement inclusive educational programs to increase awareness in all sectors of society about the experiences and challenges faced by black Izitabane women. This can involve organizing workshops, seminars, and campaigns that emphasize the prevalence and consequences of homophobic hatred and violence. Considering the limited number of studies that have investigated initiatives by faith communities in

South Africa, future research should explore the efforts made by other faith communities in ending violence against black Izitabane women. In particular, these studies should delve into the personal, familial, and communal perspectives towards black individuals who identify as Isitabane. Further examination of local faith communities' actions can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for black Izitabane women.

- **Collaborative research initiatives**: Encourage collaborations between congregations, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to continuously conduct research that investigates the underlying reasons behind homophobic violence and its impact. This collaborative approach will help ensure that the research remains pertinent and rooted in the actual experiences of black Izitabane women. Additionally, engaging in extensive research in biblical history is the most crucial step for churches to develop a more comprehensive and improved method for welcoming Izitabane bodies. It is essential for future research to delve into the perspectives of faith leaders on their role in addressing violence against Izitabane people and their responsibility to create inclusive and welcoming spaces. Furthermore, there is a need to explore further the experiences of black Izitabane women in faith communities, focusing on the lack of acceptance and support. This exploration should also include an investigation into the types of support, if any, provided to Izitabane church members or those seeking to join these communities. Such an analysis would enable African faith leaders to assess how well their religious organizations are fulfilling their missions and meeting the needs of their members, mainly black Izitabane women.

- **Policy advocacy**: The findings from this study can be used to advocate for more inclusive policies at local, provincial, and national levels. In presenting my narrative through an autoethnographic approach, I have shed light on the distinct vulnerabilities experienced by black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg. This storytelling, interwoven with the experiences of nine other black Izitabane women encountered during the study, emphasizes the crucial importance for policymakers to recognize and address these specific challenges. Our collective experiences demonstrate the significance of lived experiences in shaping policy development. They highlight the importance of using authentic insights to

inform and implement measures that cater to our needs. This study adds to the growing body of knowledge about black Izitabane women and provides valuable resources to influence policies that uphold safety, inclusion, and well-being. These efforts are aligned with the objectives of the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, particularly in the realm of response, care, and healing.

2. Leverage the power of faith in ending homophobic hatred and violence against black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

    - **Faith-based intervention**: Invite all congregations to conduct research on the increasing rate of violence against Izitabane women. Subsequently, they should develop and promote faith-based programs that explicitly address homophobia and advocate for the inclusion and acceptance of black Izitabane women within religious communities. Faith leaders can play a crucial role in shaping attitudes and behaviors towards marginalized groups. It is also important to establish partnerships between congregations that have already reached a consensus and declared themselves as hospitably welcoming and inclusive, as well as churches that are considering engaging in this specific process of reform to welcome Izitabane.

    - **Interfaith dialogues**: Congregations can organize interfaith dialogues that bring together leaders from diverse religious traditions and Izitabane women to address and combat homophobic hatred and violence. These dialogues can help build a shared dedication to eliminating discrimination and advancing equality. Religious leaders can examine how their congregations welcome individuals with diverse sexual orientations and how they can make their places of worship more inclusive. These discussions should focus on the importance of the church developing and promoting an inclusive theology that embraces and supports diverse sexual identities.

    - **Resource development:** It is essential to develop and disseminate resources such as sermons, study guides, and educational materials that incorporate the principles of Queer Theology. These resources can assist faith communities in understanding and embracing the diversity of human sexuality and gender identity. Additionally, it is imperative for the church to actively engage with

black Izitabane women as integral members of their community, seeking to understand and appreciate them as unique individuals rather than perceiving them as "aliens" or "outsiders." Achieving such objectives will necessitate transparency and openness from both the Izitabane people and the church and will require a mutual exchange of lived experiences. This will enable church members to develop a personal understanding of Izitabane individuals and establish connections based on their life experiences. The stories of black Izitabane women are valuable and should be both listened to and respected.

3. Leverage Queer Theology as a spiritual tool to facilitate the establishment and growth of supportive communities for black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal.

    - **Queer Theology workshops**: Plan and conduct workshops and training programs on Queer Theology for religious leaders, community activists, and members of the Izitabane community. These sessions aim to equip faith leaders, as well as the Izitabane community, with the theological knowledge necessary to address and counter homophobic beliefs and to advocate for inclusive practices. Many scholars widely advocate a comprehensive and careful examination of the Bible as a fundamental component of any meaningful and successful discernment process. Utilizing queer theology to engage with the Bible is crucial for nurturing congregational identity and promoting change within churches that aim to address the evolving societal norms and that aim to welcome Izitabane women. This shift in empathy and sympathy is evident in Western Christianity, as younger church leaders and ministry demonstrate a more open and less hostile approach towards human sexuality.

    - **Support Networks in Faith Spaces**: Consider creating support networks or counter communities of care that offer a safe and affirming environment for black Izitabane women. These networks could provide emotional, spiritual, and practical support, contributing to a sense of inclusion and empowerment. Creating a safe and inclusive space for black Izitabane women can facilitate an environment of radical hospitality within the congregation. Fostering a culture of welcoming and inclusion aligns with the principles of Jesus Christ advocating for social justice, particularly for individuals marginalized by society.

- **Integration into religious education**: Future studies should consider advocating for the inclusion of Queer Theology in religious education curricula at seminaries and theological colleges. Educating future religious leaders about Queer Theology can help cultivate more inclusive and supportive faith communities.

4. Contribution to the Response, Care, and Healing pillar of the National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide (GBVF).

    - **Implementation of faith-based healing programs**: We must develop and incorporate faith-based healing programs that are in line with Pillar 6 of the National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide. These programs should offer comprehensive care addressing survivors' physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

    - **Collaborate with government initiatives**: Work in close collaboration with government authorities to ensure that the specific needs of black Izitabane women are taken into account in the execution of the National Strategic Plan. This partnership has the potential to facilitate the development of more efficient and focused initiatives to address gender-based violence.

    - **Monitoring and evaluation**: Consider establishing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the impact of faith-based interventions on the well-being of black Izitabane women. This could entail collecting data on program outcomes and utilizing this information to enhance and refine strategies for care and healing.

By implementing these recommendations, the study has the potential to make a significant contribution to the body of knowledge on the experiences of black Izitabane women and to advance safety and well-being. Moreover, incorporating faith as a central element in addressing homophobic violence can provide innovative and culturally resonant solutions that align with the broader objectives of the National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide. It will require dedication and passion to achieve and sustain the level of conviction necessary to effectively guide the church in embracing new and healthier perspectives on the world.

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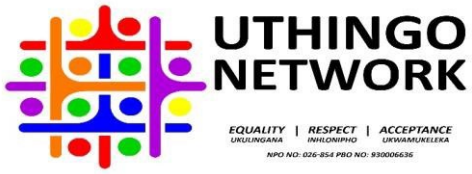
ONLINE SOURCES

1. ALIGN website, www.alignplatfrom.org: p.12
2. Uthingo Network, https://www.uthingonetwork.org.za/

Addendum 1



13 April 2023
University of KwaZulu-Natal
School of Theology – Gender, Religion, and Health Department

To whom it may concern

Uthingo Network has received an application from a PhD student, Nandi Makhaye, Student number 212559498, at the UKZN Pietermaritzburg Campus, requesting support for participants during the process of her research.

I understand that the topic of her research is, *'Homophobic hatred and violence in Pietermaritzburg: Drawing on faith to establish counter communities of care for black Izitabane women'*. Which aims to engage black queer lesbians of faith on their experiences of homophobic hate crimes with the hopes of developing tools that work towards establishing counter communities of care that provide a radical embodied hospital environment for black queer lesbians within the Christian church in South Africa.

Considering the sensitivity of the content to be discussed, Uthingo Network would like to offer full support to the participants of this study and the researcher, offering psychosocial support through the process of research and follow-up sessions after research has been conducted, should it be required. Considering the location of some of the participants, we will be able to offer telephonic counselling.

The main counsellor assigned to this project is Sphelele Nxumalo, the coordinator in charge of homophobic hate crime monitoring and support. Should there be any queries, you may contact her at 033 342 6165.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Tracey Sibisi
Programmes Manager

Email: advocacy@uthingonetwork.org.za

PO Box 100969, Scottsville 3209, Pietermaritzburg
19 Connaught Road, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 3201
Tel: +27 33 342 6165
www.gaylesbian.org.za – E-mail: info@uthingonetwork.org.za

Addendum 2

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL
For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date:

Greetings

My name is Nandi Makhaye, student number 212559498, a Ph.D. candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Theology under the Gender and Religion Program. My supervisor is Professor Charlene van der Walt, who is located at the School of Religion, Philosophy & Classics (College of Humanities) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She can be contacted at VanDerWaltC@ukzn.ac.za.

You are invited to participate in a research study titled: ***HOMOPHOBIC HATRED AND VIOLENCE IN PIETERMARITZBURG: DRAWING ON EXPERIENCES OF FAITH TO ESTABLISH COUNTER COMMUNITIES OF CARE FOR BLACK IZITABANE WOMEN.*** The study aims to explore the lived reality faced by Black Izitabane women in Pietermaritzburg; to explore the philosophy of Christian hospitality in ending hate violence against Izitabane believers and to introduce relevant inclusive and affirming theology as a process of empowerment to better lives of black Izitabane women living in South Africa. I am interested in interviewing you to share your experiences and observations on the subject matter.

I would like to invite you to be part of a focused group discussion where we will be sharing our experiences as black African Izitabane women. The study also involves sharing our experiences of faith. Thereafter, I would like to interview you about your own experiences in a one-on-one discussion that will be determined by you and within your boundaries. The study is expected to enroll 9 participants who are residing in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. The duration of your participation if you choose to enrol and remain in the study is expected to be one hour for a focus group session and individual interviews.

Please note that all of this research will be taking place against the background of professional counseling organized by **Uthingo Network** with facilities for referral if necessary. Please also note that if you decide to participate, your identity will be protected throughout the study and after the study. All data that will be gathered will be treated with **confidentiality**.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact me at 060 636 5299 or email me at makhayen1@ukzn.ac.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Please note that:

- Your Information will be used for scholarly research only and your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate, or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.

- Your views in this focused group discussion, as well as observations captured, will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form within this study.

- The Focused Group Discussion will take an hour and the one-on-one interview will be determined by you and within your boundaries.

- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed of by shredding and burning.

- If you agree to participate please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

Declaration/ Consent

I _____ have been informed about the study entitled: ***HOMOPHOBIC HATRED AND VIOLENCE IN PIETERMARITZBURG: DRAWING ON EXPERIENCES OF FAITH TO ESTABLISH COUNTER COMMUNITIES OF CARE FOR BLACK IZITABANE WOMEN.***

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher, Nandi Michelle Makhaye, at [redacted] or alternatively email her at Makhayen1@ukzn.ac.za.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview/focus group discussion YES / NO
Audio-record my interview / Individual Interviews YES / NO

_____ _____
Signature of Participant **Date**

_____ _____
Signature of Witness **Date**
(Where applicable)