

A Feminist Analysis of Christian Ethics and its Effect on Sexuality of Women in The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southeran Africa, Central Diocese, Pretoria Circuit

Submitted by

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DECLARATION

I, Lesego Martha Moeketsi-Temane, PhD student, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Faculty of Humanities, Religion, and Social Sciences, School of Religion and Theology, hereby declare that unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, this thesis is my original work and shall only be submitted for the above-mentioned degree.

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As the supervisor, I hereby approve this thesis for submission

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December 2025

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a feminist analysis of Christian ethics and its impact on the sexuality of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), with a specific focus on the Pretoria Circuit. The research critically interrogates how Christian ethical teachings, shaped by patriarchal interpretations of scripture and Lutheran moral tradition, have influenced women's understanding, expression, and negotiation of their sexuality within this ecclesial context. While ELCSA formally upholds values of justice, equality, and human dignity, its inherited ethical frameworks often reinforce gender hierarchies that constrain women's sexual autonomy and agency. These dynamics produce tensions between theological ideals and women lived experiences, revealing persistent gaps between doctrine and the realities of embodiment, desire, and faith.

Guided by feminist theological theory, the study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis of ELCSA's ethical texts, pastoral teachings, and church policies. This approach enabled an exploration of how women in the Pretoria Circuit interpret, internalize and sometimes contest the church's moral expectations. Thematic analysis was applied to examine the intersections of body, sexuality, morality, and power within the local ecclesial and cultural setting.

Findings demonstrate that ELCSA's Christian ethical teachings frequently marginalize women through practices of sexual regulation, moral policing, and silencing of female voices. Women's sexuality is often constructed within discourses of purity, chastity, and obedience, values that privilege male authority and define virtue through control of the female body. However, the study also reveals acts of resistance and reinterpretation among women who seek to reclaim sexual agency and dignity through faith-informed feminist perspectives. These women advocate for positive sexuality, gender equality, and a reimagining of ethical frameworks that affirm the body as sacred and sexuality as a divine dimension of human experience.

The research concludes that a feminist re-reading of Christian ethics within ELCSA, particularly in the Pretoria Circuit, has transformative potential. By centering women's lived experiences as legitimate sources of theological reflection, the church can move toward ethical models grounded in liberation, justice, and inclusivity. The study recommends the integration of feminist-informed theology into pastoral care, liturgy, and education, as well as structural

reforms to ensure equitable participation and representation of women in decision-making. Ultimately, this study positions feminist analysis not as opposition to Christian ethics, but as a critical and redemptive framework that can renew Lutheran moral thought to embrace the full humanity and sexuality of women as integral to faith and community life.

Keywords: Feminist Theology; Christian Ethics; Women's Sexuality; ELCSA; Pretoria Circuit; Patriarchy; Sexual Ethics; Liberation Theology; Gender Equality; Body and Agency

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CE — Christian Ethics

ELCSA — Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa

FA — Feminist Analysis

FE — Feminist Ethics

FT — Feminist Theology

FSR — Feminist Scriptural Reinterpretation

GSR — Gender and Sexual Rights

LCE — Lutheran Christian Ethics

PC — Pretoria Circuit

PWL – Prayer Women's League

SED — South Eastern Diocese

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

World religions are largely regarded as being oppressive towards women. Within Christian ethics, women's bodies and sexuality have often been framed in terms of control, purity, and reproduction (Ackermann 1993:286). Miller (1998:125) adds that "women's sexuality has been viewed through a lens of moral judgment, where their worth is tied to their roles as wives and mothers rather than as autonomous individuals with their own sexual agency". This indicates that women's oppression is derived more from custom, culture and traditions. The challenge usually lies in the field of hermeneutics, and the interpretation of sacred writings of the Bible. As a prominent Protestant denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) plays a significant role in shaping moral and social norms among its congregants. According to Phaliso (2012:8), in ELCSA, sexual ethics has largely drawn from traditional Lutheran and Western Christian moral codes rooted in patriarchal readings of Scripture and Lutheran theology. Its teachings, doctrines, and ethical frameworks influence perceptions of gender roles, sexuality, and women's agency within the church. These teachings emphasize chastity, marriage and reproduction, often silencing women's voices and excluding them from full participation as moral agents (Phaliso, 2012:8). Chesterton (1986:243) argues that "many individuals find themselves caught in the crossfire of this perspective that promoted denial of sexual expression for women in order to maintain morality within religious spaces". Against this backdrop, feminist theology provides critical tools for interrogating and reinterpreting the ethical foundations of ELCSA's stance on women's sexuality. It advocates for gender equality, women's rights, and a re-examination of biblical texts and doctrines from women's perspectives. Within the ELCSA context, feminist analysis of Christian ethics raises essential questions about how religious teachings impact women's sexuality, autonomy, and participation in church life. This necessitates an ethical guide that can assist ELCSA women to navigate the complexities of sexual morality.

It is notable that a significant body of literature does not speak much about balancing this gendered view on sex and sexuality within religious spaces. In the rare cases where literature (Lindau et.al.2007, Moon. 2021, McElroy. 2025) has attempted to address this issue, it puts more emphasis on the need to control female sexuality to maintain the church`s moral stance. Little or no attention has been paid to the impact of the moral stance posed by Christian ethics on women`s sexual rights. Restrictions posed by Christian ethics not only undermine individual

autonomy but also reinforce harmful gender stereotypes that perpetuate inequality and oppression. Recognizing sexuality as a vital aspect of human identity and well-being makes it imperative to challenge these restrictive paradigms. This study conducts a thorough ethical reflection on issues of sexuality, opening space for theological debates surrounding the sexuality of women within ELCSA.

1.1 A Brief Overview of the Location of the Study

This study was conducted within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) in the Central Diocese, Pretoria circuit. Pretoria Circuit is in Gauteng Province, which is known as South Africa's economic hub and a melting pot of diverse cultures and communities. This area is characterized by a diverse population, with a rich tapestry of cultures and traditions that influence the social dynamics within the church community. Most of its congregations are in Tshwane Municipality while others are in Ekurhuleni Municipality, reflecting the broad geographical and demographic spread of the church's membership. It comprises twelve parishes situated in four townships, which are, Mamelodi known as Mamelodi Zone, Atteridgeville also known as Atteridgeville Zone, Tembisa which is known as Tembisa Zone, and the last group of parishes around the Central Business District (CBD), Centurion, and Eersterus, collectively referred to as the Central Zone.

These townships are vibrant, densely populated areas with unique social and economic challenges that impact church activities and community engagement. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in these areas serves as a vital spiritual and social support system, addressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, and social cohesion. The diversity within these communities necessitates tailored approaches to ministry, making the Pretoria circuit a compelling setting for this study. Understanding the interactions and dynamics within these varied environments will provide valuable insights into the role of faith communities in shaping social development and cohesion in urban South Africa.

The study acknowledges that there has been an ongoing attempt from the church to uphold morality by denying women`s sexual expression. Germond (2004:16) points out how the church continues to instill feelings of guilt and anxiety in women regarding their bodies. ELCSA is no exception.

During my tenure of office as an ELCSA minister, I have engaged in teaching penitential class and worked closely with girls and women who grapple with feelings of violation and oppression stemming from church laws. These laws mandate the suspension of pregnant

unmarried women, effectively isolating women from their sexuality and denying them their sexual rights. This situation raises profound questions about the nature of sexual relationships and the church's role in shaping perspectives on these matters. Many of these women articulate their confusion and frustration regarding the church's stance. They wonder why they are supposed to feel guilty for engaging in sexual relations, especially when such acts are often necessary for procreation. After all, children are considered a divine blessing, a gift from God. One poignant query came from a woman who asked, “Are we not supposed to have sexual relationships because we are widows?” This question reflects a deep-seated conflict between personal needs and institutional expectations. Another woman voiced her concerns, stating, “I have been sexually active throughout my marriage; now that he has divorced me, what am I supposed to do with all of my sexual desires?” Her statement underscores a critical point: sexual desires do not simply dissipate with the end of a marital relationship.

1.2 Motivation of the Study

The motivation for undertaking this study arises from multiple, interrelated factors, both personal and contextual.

- My academic and theological journey first directed my attention to the intersection of gender, sexuality, and religion. Initial conversations with church members around issues of morality and sexuality revealed to me both the depth of these concerns and my own struggle to respond theologically to the arguments raised. This led me to pursue a focused exploration of Christianity and African sexuality in my MPhil mini-thesis, and subsequently, an investigation into rape by male clergy during my MTh. In that study, I was struck by the prevailing view among some church members that women were responsible for provoking rape by “throwing themselves at men”. This alarming perspective intensified my interest in how Christian ethics frames women’s sexuality, and particularly how it promotes the exclusion of women from their own sexual agency to uphold specific moral ideals.

- Further motivation stems from the recognition that Christian ethics has historically been used to demonize women’s sexuality in religious spaces. As Brown (1988:67) notes, for centuries the church has employed ethical teachings to guard and constrain female sexuality, denying women essential sexual rights. These theological interpretations have long been embedded in patriarchal frameworks that privilege male authority and control over women’s bodies, often portraying female sexuality as inherently sinful or

dangerous. Such deeply entrenched narratives perpetuate inequality, marginalize women, and limit their ability to express their sexuality openly and healthily. To challenge and transform these narratives is not only an academic pursuit but also a moral and theological imperative.

- In the context of ELCSA, the regulation of women's sexuality manifests in starkly visible double standards. Unmarried women who become pregnant are frequently disciplined through suspension from church activities, while men responsible for these pregnancies often escape similar censure. This discrepancy not only reflects broader patriarchal societal norms but also reinforces the perception that women's bodies are uniquely subject to regulation and control by the church. Such practices foster shame, stigmatization, and exclusion, negatively impacting women's mental health, dignity, and sense of belonging. The perpetuation of these double standards also discourages honest conversations around sexuality, reproductive rights, and shared responsibility. These injustices motivate me to interrogate how Christian ethics within ELCSA sustains harmful practices and to explore alternative theological frameworks that can affirm women's dignity and equality.

- Finally, I am motivated by a broader desire to understand the implications of women's sexuality within religious contexts, particularly in societies where Christian ethical teachings often clash with contemporary understandings of sexual identity and expression. By focusing on the lived experiences of women in ELCSA, this study seeks to illuminate how women negotiate their sexuality in relation to their faith, as well as the tensions they encounter between personal desires and communal expectations. In highlighting women's resilience and agency in these negotiations, the study challenges traditional narratives that marginalize or silence their voices. It also contributes to the creation of more inclusive religious discourses that recognize the complexity of women's experiences and affirm their place within both church and society.

- Taken together, these motivations underscore the urgency and significance of critically examining the intersections of Christian ethics, Lutheran theology, and women's sexuality. This study seeks not only to expose the patriarchal assumptions embedded in ELCSA's ethical traditions but also to contribute to the development of liberative, feminist-informed approaches to sexuality that uphold justice, equality, and human dignity. My motivation, therefore, is to interrogate these double standards and the

theological assumptions that sustain them. I am driven by the conviction that Christian ethics, particularly within ELCSA, must be critically examined to expose practices that harm women and to seek theological alternatives that affirm women's autonomy and dignity. This study is motivated by the urgent need to challenge these harmful norms and to contribute to the development of more just and compassionate approaches to sexuality.

1.3 Problem Statement

The central problem this study addresses is the tension between ELCSA's commitment to equality and human dignity, and its ethical practices that continue to regulate and marginalize women's sexuality.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), women's sexuality is regulated by strict moral teachings grounded in traditional Christian ethics. These teachings often marginalize women's sexual agency, voice, and lived experiences. The result is a tension between the church's inherited ethical framework and women's quest for dignity, autonomy, and holistic participation in faith communities. This exclusion raises questions about how Lutheran theology and ethics can be reinterpreted in dialogue with feminist perspectives to affirm women's sexuality as part of their full humanity.

This presents a dual problem. First, ELCSA's inherited ethical frameworks reflect patriarchal assumptions that marginalize women, resulting in the silencing of female voices and the regulation of their bodies through moral and theological prescriptions. Second, the absence of a liberative and inclusive theological discourse on sexuality perpetuates gender inequality, contributing to broader social issues such as gender-based violence, stigma surrounding reproductive health, and the invisibility of women's sexual rights within faith communities.

Despite ongoing discussions at the intersection of feminist re-interpretations and Christian sexual ethics within a Lutheran framework, there remains a lack of nuanced analysis examining how the dynamic interplay of key concepts such as gender, sexuality, theology, and ethics produces tensions and opportunities for transformative engagement. This gap limits our understanding of how these relationships can foster more inclusive and reflective ethical frameworks, highlighting the need for in-depth exploration of their complex interactions.

The above statement highlights the need for a feminist analysis of ELCSA's theological and ethical discourses, one that not only critiques but reinterprets Christian ethics as a constructive tool for fostering inclusive, affirming, and liberating approaches to sexuality.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine how Christian ethical teachings, as interpreted and practiced within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), shape and regulate the sexuality of women, and to analyses the ways in which these teachings reflect moral assumptions that marginalize women's sexual agency. By examining the interplay between faith, ethics, and sexuality, this research seeks to explore the lived experiences of women within ELCSA to understand how they negotiate the tensions between church teachings and their embodied realities.

The feminist critique of Christian ethics does not merely hope to highlight the shortcomings of traditional teachings but also seeks to uncover the rich resources within the Christian tradition that can support a more affirming and inclusive approach to sexuality. Oduyoye (2001:76) is of the view that "many contemporary theologians and ethicists are reinterpreting biblical texts and theological concepts in ways that honor the dignity and agency of women, thereby fostering an environment where women's voices are heard and valued". This reinterpretation can lead to a more holistic understanding of sexuality that embraces diversity and promotes healthy relationships. The study ultimately aims to develop a feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics that is inclusive, affirming, and consistent with Lutheran commitments to justice, equality, and human dignity.

1.5 Key Research Question

How does ELCSA's traditional Christian moral stance on women's sexuality influence women's sexual agency and contribute to tensions between church teachings and women's lived experiences?

1.5.1 Research Sub-questions

The key research question gives rise to the following sub-questions:

- What historical elements of Christian ethics have been used to shape the ethical regulation of women's bodies and sexual practices?

- Which theological constructs of Christian ethics continue to shape the sexuality of women?
- What insights can be drawn from the embodied experiences of women in ELCSA regarding their understanding of sexuality and Christian ethics?
- How can a feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics be developed to promote inclusivity, justice, and women's full participation in church and society?

1.6 Research Aim and Objectives

The study aims to explore the potential of feminist theological perspectives to critically challenge Christian ethical teachings as interpreted and practiced within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), and to propose a theoretical framework that reinterprets these ethics in ways that align with Lutheran values of justice, equality, and human dignity, thereby fostering a more inclusive, affirming, and liberating approach to sexuality.

This will be done with the following objectives in mind:

- To identify and analyses the historical elements of Christian ethics that have been used to shape the ethical regulation of women's bodies and sexual practices.
- To examine the theological constructs of Christian ethics, particularly within Lutheran doctrinal categories such as law and gospel and vocation, that continue to shape women's sexuality.
- To explore the embodied experiences of women in ELCSA regarding their understanding of sexuality and Christian ethics, highlighting the tensions between church teachings and lived realities.
- To propose a feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics that promotes inclusivity, justice, and the full participation of women in church and society.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

Despite careful planning and methodological rigor, this study encountered several limitations that impacted data collection and analysis.

First, the researcher's positionality as clergy in the Pretoria Circuit posed challenges. Some participants expressed hesitation in discussing their sexual matters with someone affiliated with church leadership, fearing judgment, misunderstanding, or stigma. To mitigate this, the study employed data collection tools that did not necessitate physical contact. Participants completed unstructured questionnaires independently and in private, which allowed for greater

confidentiality and encouraged more candid responses. The anonymity afforded by this approach helped alleviate apprehensions and enabled participants to share sensitive information more freely.

Second, external health crises affected traditional data collection methods. The outbreak of Swine Flu in April 2024 rendered in-person interviews and community gatherings unsafe, necessitating alternative approaches. Digital tools, including online questionnaires and surveys, were utilized to maintain social distancing while reaching participants efficiently. While this adaptation ensured continuity of data collection, it also influenced the way interactions occurred, potentially limiting the richness of observational and conversational data. Nonetheless, the use of digital tools provided a broader reach and allowed participants to reflect on their responses at their own pace.

Third, societal and religious perceptions posed significant challenges to participant engagement. The sensitivity surrounding discussions of sexuality within faith contexts led some individuals to perceive the study as inappropriate or lacking relevance. This hesitation reflects a broader culture of silence and marginalization that discourages open dialogue, making participants wary of disclosure. Although the research prioritized confidentiality, empathy, and the creation of safe spaces for conversation, prevailing social and religious taboos ultimately limited the depth and diversity of the data collected.

Fourth, lack of collaboration from church leadership presented challenges. Initial attempts to engage leaders were met with skepticism regarding the relevance and utility of the research. Some leaders cited doctrinal concerns and fear of controversy as reasons for reluctance to participate or endorse the study. Their hesitation limited access to institutional insights and inhibited broader church engagement. Overcoming this barrier required persistent communication and efforts to align the study's aims with the church's mission and values, highlighting the importance of building trust and demonstrating potential benefits of inclusivity.

Fifth, administrative delays affected the research timeline. Securing the gatekeepers' letter from ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit leadership was a challenge. This is a critical document granting formal authorization and credibility. It took approximately two years to obtain. The church (ELCSA) needed to be convinced of how the church would benefit from this study and it took a while to convince the leadership of the church and obtain the letter. This delay impeded the timely initiation of data collection, compressed subsequent analytical activities, and extended

the overall duration of the study. Navigating institutional protocols and proving the positive contribution of the research underscored the complexities of conducting research within ecclesiastical contexts.

In summary, while these limitations affected certain aspects of data collection and analysis, the study employed adaptive strategies such as using pseudonyms in questionnaires and careful ethical safeguards to mitigate their impact. These approaches ensured that meaningful, credible, and contextually grounded insights were still obtained, while highlighting the challenges inherent in researching sensitive topics within religious communities.

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study is significant on several levels academically, theologically, ecclesial, and socially.

Academically, it contributes to scholarship on feminist theology, Christian ethics, and sexuality by situating these discourses within the specific context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA). While feminist theological scholarship has grown globally, there remains a gap in localized studies that interrogate how African Lutheran traditions regulate women's sexuality through Christian ethics. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of women in ELCSA, the study not only enriches feminist theological discourse but also contextualizes it within Southern Africa, offering fresh insights into how global debates intersect with local realities.

Theologically, the study is significant because it critically engages with Lutheran ethical frameworks such as vocation, the law and gospel dialectics, and teachings on human dignity, to expose patriarchal distortions and propose liberative alternatives. This engagement seeks to reclaim Lutheran theological resources for the promotion of justice, equality, and inclusivity. In doing so, the study opens the possibility of developing a feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics that remains faithful to Lutheran values while also addressing contemporary challenges.

For the church, the significance lies in its practical implications. By interrogating ELCSA's disciplinary practices and ethical stances on women's sexuality, the study provides space for critical self-reflection within the church community. It highlights the ways in which current practices perpetuate double standards, stigmatization, and exclusion, thereby undermining the church's mission of justice, reconciliation, and dignity for all. The findings of this study can

inform pastoral care, church policies, and theological education, equipping church leaders and members to respond more justly and compassionately to issues of sexuality.

Socially, the study contributes to broader conversations around gender justice, sexual rights, and human dignity in African contexts. By challenging the patriarchal regulation of women's bodies, it aligns with wider struggles for gender equality and human rights. Importantly, it also amplifies the voices of women who are often marginalized within church and society, recognizing their resilience and agency in negotiating their sexuality and faith.

The study is significant because it seeks to bridge the gap between doctrine and lived experience. It challenges the church to confront its complicity in perpetuating harmful norms, while at the same time offering constructive pathways toward a more inclusive and liberating theology of sexuality. In doing so, it contributes not only to the academic field but also to the transformation of religious communities, fostering a more equitable and affirming environment for women within ELCSA and beyond.

1.9 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by body theology and indecent theology as its primary theoretical frameworks. A theoretical framework provides the conceptual lens through which a study interprets social and theological phenomena and guides the analysis of data (Van der Waldt, 2024:43). In this research, the framework assists in examining how Christian ethical teachings shape and regulate women's sexuality within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit.

Body theology, as articulated by Nelson (1979), understands the human body as a central site of moral, spiritual, and social meaning. It challenges ethical approaches that treat morality as abstract or detached from lived human experience. In the context of this study, body theology provides a lens for examining how women's bodies become sites where Christian moral teachings are interpreted, regulated, and contested. It highlights the relationship between theology, social norms, and embodied experience, allowing the study to explore how women's sexuality is shaped by religious and cultural expectations within the church.

Complementing this perspective, indecent theology, developed by Althaus-Reid (2001:51), critically interrogates dominant moral norms that regulate sexuality under the guise of religious decency and propriety. This framework exposes how theological discourses can silence or marginalize women's sexual experiences while privileging patriarchal moral authority.

Indecent theology therefore provides a critical tool for questioning restrictive interpretations of Christian sexual ethics and for opening space to consider more inclusive and liberating theological perspectives (West, 2018:77).

Together, body theology and indecent theology offer a critical framework for analyzing both the institutional teachings of Christian ethics and the embodied experiences of women. While body theology emphasizes the importance of lived, bodily experience in ethical reflection, indecent theology challenges the moral structures that regulate and silence women's sexuality. Combined, these frameworks enable the study to examine the tensions between church teachings and women's sexual agency, while also contributing toward feminist-informed theological reflections on sexuality within ELCSA

1.9.1 Literature Review

Scholarship on Christian ethics and sexuality demonstrates that the regulation of women's bodies and sexual agency has long been shaped by patriarchal theological assumptions. Although Christian ethics is theoretically grounded in ideals of love, justice, and moral integrity (Buda, 2013), its historical development occurred within social contexts that privileged male authority and constructed restrictive moral frameworks around sexuality. Early Christian thought, as Johnson (2015:88) explains, tended to regard sexuality not as a positive or autonomous dimension of human life but as a potential threat to spiritual purity. Consequently, sexual discipline, particularly abstinence and chastity, became central moral ideals. Participation in the Christian community was often linked to the demonstration of "proper" sexual conduct (Roberts & Donaldson, 1880), establishing a tradition in which women's sexuality was closely monitored and regulated within both religious and social spheres.

A key theological influence in shaping these attitudes was the ascetic tradition that emerged in early Christianity. Scholars such as Gudorf (2010) and Wiesner-Hanks (2010) note that asceticism promoted abstinence, self-denial, and the renunciation of bodily desires as pathways to spiritual perfection. Within this framework, virginity and celibacy were elevated as the highest expressions of faith. While these practices were presented as spiritual disciplines, they also contributed to a moral discourse that associated bodily desire, particularly female desire, with sin and moral weakness. Castelli (1986) and Williams (1989) show that ascetic self-control gradually became a marker of moral authority within the early church, reinforcing the perception that women's bodies represented potential sources of temptation. As a result, female sexuality was increasingly subjected to moral scrutiny and control.

The writings of Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) further entrenched these views within Christian ethical thought. Augustine's theology of sin and grace, shaped partly by his personal struggles with desire, articulated a strong dualism between the body and the spirit (Chadwick, 1986:121). In his Confessions, Augustine linked sexual desire to the doctrine of original sin, portraying bodily impulses as manifestations of humanity's fallen nature. This theological framework reinforced suspicion toward sexuality and contributed to the elevation of virginity and celibacy as spiritually superior states. Within this moral system, women's roles were largely confined to two acceptable identities: virgins devoted to spiritual purity or mothers within marriage. Smith (2020:33) argues that Augustine's ascetic ideals gradually became communal moral expectations, shaping Christian ethical norms and reinforcing gender hierarchies in ecclesial life.

These historical developments illustrate how patriarchal assumptions became embedded within Christian ethical discourse. Chastity and sexual purity were constructed as central virtues, while male leaders exercised interpretive authority over moral teachings. As Davis (2004:65) observes, Christian ethics developed as a prescriptive system aimed at defining God's will through specific behavioral norms. When mediated through patriarchal social structures, these norms often limited women's moral agency and legitimized the regulation of their sexuality as a religious responsibility.

Feminist theologians have critically engaged this legacy by highlighting the gendered dynamics embedded in Christian moral traditions. Gudorf (1983:171) describes this pattern as a "gendered moral economy," in which women's self-denial and sexual restraint are celebrated as spiritual virtues while their bodily autonomy and sexual subjectivity remain marginalized. Such critiques reveal enduring tensions within Christian ethics: between spiritual ideals and embodied human experience, between institutional authority and personal moral agency, and between moral regulation and the pursuit of justice and dignity.

Despite these critical interventions, significant gaps remain in the literature. Much historical scholarship examines the development of Christian sexual ethics in general terms, but fewer studies explore how these ethical traditions continue to shape women's lived experiences within specific ecclesial contexts, particularly in African churches. Moreover, while feminist theology has offered powerful critiques of patriarchal ethical frameworks, there remains a need for contextually grounded analyses that integrate women's voices and experiences into theological reflection. This study addresses these gaps by examining how Christian ethical

teachings within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) influence women's understandings of sexuality and by exploring how feminist theological perspectives can contribute to more liberating and contextually relevant ethical frameworks.

1.9.2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach informed by feminist methodological principles to explore how Christian ethics shapes women's understandings and experiences of sexuality within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit. A qualitative design is appropriate because it prioritizes participants' lived experiences, voices, and interpretations, allowing the study to engage critically with the social and theological dynamics that influence women's sexuality within church contexts. Rather than focusing on numerical measurement, qualitative research seeks to understand meaning, perception, and interpretation as constructed within particular social and religious settings. In this study, the qualitative approach provides a framework for exploring how women interpret Christian ethical teachings and how these teachings intersect with cultural norms, personal beliefs, and everyday experiences of faith.

The research is further grounded in feminist methodological principles, which emphasize the importance of centering women's voices and experiences in the production of knowledge. Feminist research challenges traditional patriarchal assumptions that have historically marginalized women within theological discourse and ethical reflection. By foregrounding women's perspectives, this approach recognizes women not merely as subjects of religious teachings but as active interpreters of faith and moral tradition. Within the context of this study, feminist methodology provides a critical lens through which the regulation of women's bodies and sexuality within Christian ethical frameworks can be examined. It also allows for a more inclusive understanding of theology that acknowledges women's embodied experiences, agency, and moral reasoning.

Data was gathered from women within the ELCSA community in the Pretoria Circuit. The study focuses on participants' narratives and reflections on how Christian ethical teachings influence their understanding of sexuality, moral identity, and personal autonomy. By engaging directly with women's experiences, the research seeks to capture the complexity of how sexuality is negotiated within the intersection of religious doctrine, cultural expectations, and individual belief. This emphasis on lived experience is particularly important in feminist

research, as it challenges dominant theological narratives that have often overlooked or silenced women's perspectives.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method that involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring patterns or themes within the data. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to move beyond individual accounts to identify broader patterns that reveal how women collectively experience and interpret Christian ethical teachings. Through careful reading and coding of participants' responses, key themes were developed that illuminate both the constraints and possibilities present within church teachings on sexuality. These themes help to reveal how women internalize, negotiate, resist, or reinterpret moral expectations related to their bodies and sexual identities.

The use of thematic analysis also provides flexibility in interpreting the data while maintaining a systematic process of analysis. By organizing participants' narratives into themes, the study is able to highlight the ways in which theological teachings, church practices, and cultural norms interact in shaping women's moral and sexual experiences. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how ethical teachings function in everyday life, particularly in contexts where religion plays a significant role in shaping social values and personal identity.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. Because the study deals with sensitive issues related to sexuality, faith, and personal experience, particular care was taken to ensure that participants felt respected and protected throughout the research. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the research before agreeing to take part. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. Protecting participants' dignity and well-being was a priority throughout the study, especially given the potentially personal and sensitive nature of the discussions.

The research process was guided by principles of respect, openness, and reflexivity. Feminist research emphasizes the importance of recognizing the researcher's role in interpreting participants' narratives and remaining attentive to power dynamics that may arise in the research process. By adopting this reflexive approach, the study seeks to ensure that women's voices are represented faithfully and responsibly.

By combining qualitative inquiry, feminist methodological commitments, and thematic analysis, this study provides a framework for critically examining how Christian ethical teachings shape women's sexuality within the ELCSA context. At the same time, it opens space

for exploring more liberative theological interpretations that affirm women's dignity, agency, and embodied experiences of faith. Through this approach, the research contributes to ongoing conversations within feminist theology and Christian ethics about how religious traditions can engage sexuality in ways that promote justice, equality, and human flourishing

1.10 Chapter Outline

This study comprises six chapters.

Chapter One - Introduction

This introductory chapter sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of how feminist analysis interacts with Christian ethics in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and its effects on women's sexuality. It includes the following sections: background information, location of the study and problem statement. It highlights the study's aims and objectives and outlines the purpose of conducting this study while identifying the key questions that the study addresses, particularly in relation to the intersections of Christian sexual ethics and female sexuality. It outlines theories and methodology that guide this study and highlights anticipated limitations in conducting this study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter consists of a review of existing literature on Christin ethics and sexuality. It includes an overview of key themes and debates such as Christian ethics and regulation of women's sexuality, patriarchal assumptions in Lutheran theology, feminist theological critiques of Christian ethics and women's lived experiences and agency in negotiating sexuality. By synthesising existing scholarship, the chapter then reveals elements of Christian ethics and demonstrates how they affect the sexuality of women in ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit. Lastly, the chapter highlights gaps in existing literature.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

Chapter three explores the theoretical frameworks that elucidate the discourses surrounding Christian sexual ethics and their effects on women's sexuality. The role of theoretical frameworks in guiding the study is presented, followed by the introduction of two key theoretical perspectives, which are body theology, and indecent theology. Body theology demonstrates the understanding of the body as a locus of morality and agency. Indecent theology includes critiquing norms of decency and moral regulation. Feminist theological

perspectives are centred on women's experiences and agency. Lastly, an integrative framework that links theory to the research questions and methodology is presented.

The research methodology section presents how the data was collected and findings synthesised from the data with the aim of enhancing the understanding of the participants' experiences and the discourses that shape their sexual identities and experiences. The introduction outlines the rationale for the qualitative exploratory design in this study. The research design includes a qualitative exploratory approach and feminist research principles. The population and sampling sections highlight criteria, purposive selection, and participant demographics. Data collection methods are discussed, including interviews, unstructured questionnaires, document analysis, and observational notes. Data analysis consists of thematic analysis and theoretical interpretation. The chapter then outlines key themes that emerge from the data, providing a comprehensive exploration of how Christian ethics are internalised, resisted, or reinterpreted. Ethical considerations are outlined, which include informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and well-being of participants. Then lastly, limitations of the study are outlined.

Chapter Four: Data Presentation

This chapter involves analysis of themes drawn from the data collected in order to address the research question. The introductory section outlines an overview of the data collected. Then themes from interviews and questionnaires are presented. The findings are linked to the research questions, analysing the impact of Christian ethics on women's sexuality, patriarchal patterns, gendered moral regulation, women's agency and negotiation of sexuality. This is followed by insights from feminist theological critique and implications for ELCSA practice and policy.

Chapter Five: Analysis of Major Themes that Emerged from the Study

Chapter five theoretically interprets findings derived from chapter four through the chosen frameworks of body theology and indecent theology. By bringing the lived experiences of women into dialogue with these theological lenses, the discussion examines how Christian ethics within ELCSA has constructed, constrained, and excluded women's sexuality.

Chapter Six: Summary of the Study's Findings, Recommendations and Concluding Remarks

This chapter summarises the study and key findings, and the study's contribution to theory, practice, and policy. It then provides recommendations for inclusive sexual ethics in ELCSA. It concludes with final reflections and suggestions for future research.

1.11 Summary of Chapter One

Chapter one has laid the foundation for this study on a feminist analysis of Christian ethics and its impact on the sexuality of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA). It has provided the background of the study, highlighting the historical and theological context in which Christian ethics has shaped perceptions of female sexuality. The chapter has articulated the purpose and motivation of the research, noting the researcher's interest in addressing the exclusion of women from their sexuality and the broader implications of such marginalisation.

The research problem and problem statement were clearly outlined, emphasising how women have historically been entrapped in cycles of exclusion and alienation from their sexual agency. The chapter notes that this exclusion has persisted over time, continuing to negatively affect women's psychological well-being, self-identity, and overall human dignity, including within ELCSA. Despite its significance, this area remains underexplored in existing literature, further justifying the need for the study.

The chapter also presented the research objectives, key research question, and sub-questions, providing clarity on the study's focus and direction. The significance of the study was discussed, highlighting its potential contributions to academic discourse, theological reflection, church practice, and the promotion of gender justice. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' well-being, were addressed to ensure the study is conducted responsibly and sensitively.

This chapter outlined the structure and flow of the dissertation through a chapter outline, offering a clear roadmap for subsequent sections and ensuring coherence throughout the research process. This structured approach provides a framework for a comprehensive exploration of women's sexuality and the ethical considerations embedded in Christian teachings.

Lastly, the chapter positioned the study for the literature review in chapter two, which interrogates existing scholarship on Christian ethics and sexuality. The next chapter aims to

examine the historical, theological, and sociocultural dimensions of Christian ethical teachings and their influence on women's sexuality within the ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

2. Introduction

In chapter one, a general introduction of the whole study was presented, outlining the background behind this study, key objectives, motivation for undertaking the study, limitations in conducting this study and a summary of chapters in the whole thesis. This chapter presents a critical review of literature relevant to the study of Christian ethics and its influence on the sexuality of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit. The aim of this chapter is to answer the first sub-question in this study by identifying historical elements of Christian ethics that have been used within the church to shape the ethical regulation of women's bodies and sexual practices.

It examines the following, historical dimension of Christian ethics and highlight how Christian ethical teachings within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) have historically shaped and regulated women's sexuality. It further examines the theological dimension of Christian ethics and demonstrates the ways Lutheran theological and ethical discourses reflect patriarchal assumptions that marginalise women's sexuality. Feminist theological perspective in also included to provide a lens for critiquing and reinterpreting Christian ethics in relation to women's sexuality. Lastly, Women`s lived experiences are examined in order to outline women lived experiences and negotiations of sexuality within ELCSA.

2.1 Christian Ethics

Scholarly discussions on women's sexuality within contemporary church contexts such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) are closely linked to broader debates on Christian ethics and its interpretation in practice. Ethics is generally understood as the systematic study of moral reasoning and the principles that guide judgments of right and wrong (Prabhakar, 2011:3). Within Christian traditions, ethical reflection seeks to shape moral behaviour in ways that align with theological understandings of God, human dignity, and community life. However, the interpretation of these ethical principles varies across Christian communities, influencing how issues of sexuality, particularly women's sexuality, are addressed within ecclesial contexts.

Christian ethics is widely described as a complex and multifaceted field shaped by diverse theological traditions and moral interpretations. Pettit (2012:52) argues that Christian ethics reflects the diversity of beliefs within Christianity and that, although it is grounded in core values such as love and justice, its application differs significantly among communities. Ethical reasoning within Christianity often draws upon different philosophical approaches, including duty-based ethics, consequentialism, and virtue ethics, which together shape moral judgments about acceptable behaviour (Robinson & Dowson, 2012:4). In church contexts such as ELCSA, these ethical approaches contribute to shaping teachings on sexuality, moral discipline, and gender roles.

Contemporary theological discussions on sexuality have increasingly emphasised the importance of justice in sexual relationships. Margaret Farley's work on Christian sexual ethics is particularly influential in this regard. Farley proposes a set of justice norms that should guide ethical sexual relationships, including love of neighbour, recognition of the inherent worth of every individual, commitment to reconciliation, the pursuit of justice for marginalised persons, and responsible participation in community life (Yonan, 2011:402). These principles emphasise mutual respect, dignity, and responsibility in sexual relationships and offer a framework that can challenge traditional interpretations that restrict women's sexual agency. In the context of ELCSA, such perspectives open possibilities for re-examining how Christian ethics addresses issues of sexuality, equality, and justice.

Despite these ethical ideals, the diversity of Christian interpretations often results in differing positions on sexuality. Parsons (2004:84) observes that Christians approach moral debates with varying theological assumptions and moral reference points shaped by their traditions, experiences, and cultural contexts. As a result, ethical discussions within Christianity rarely produce uniform conclusions. This diversity is evident in debates about sexuality, where churches may adopt different moral stances on issues such as sexual relationships, gender roles, and sexual autonomy. Within ELCSA, these debates are further shaped by the intersection of Lutheran theology, African cultural values, and contemporary social realities.

While diversity exists, certain common features still characterise Christian ethical thought. Cahill (1996:18) notes that Christian ethics is distinguished by its emphasis on the relationship between human beings and God, a relationship that fundamentally shapes moral behaviour and ethical responsibility. From this perspective, sexuality is not viewed merely as a private matter but as an aspect of life that must be aligned with divine intentions and communal values.

Consequently, Christian teachings often frame sexual conduct within broader theological ideals of holiness, faithfulness, and moral discipline.

However, scholars also highlight the prescriptive nature of Christian ethics and its implications for personal autonomy. Davis (2004:105) argues that Christian ethics does not simply describe human behaviour but seeks to prescribe moral obligations believed to reflect God's will. In many church contexts, this prescriptive approach emphasises adherence to established doctrines and moral codes. While such teachings can provide moral guidance, they may also limit engagement with the lived experiences of individuals, particularly women whose experiences of sexuality may not conform to traditional norms.

In response to these limitations, scholars advocate for greater openness to dialogue and ethical reflection within Christian communities. Singer (2011:66) suggests that ethical living within Christianity requires humility, critical reflection, and a willingness to engage with complex social realities. Such openness is essential for addressing contemporary moral challenges, including questions surrounding sexuality, gender equality, and human dignity.

Within the context of ELCSA, these debates highlight the tensions between traditional ethical teachings and the lived experiences of women. While Christian ethics emphasises values such as love, justice, and reconciliation, its practical application may sometimes marginalise those whose experiences differ from dominant moral frameworks. As a result, critical engagement with Christian ethical teachings is necessary to examine how they shape women's sexuality and agency within the church. Understanding the development and contemporary challenges of Christian ethics therefore provides an important foundation for analysing how women in ELCSA negotiate their sexuality within the intersection of faith, doctrine, and social expectations.

2.1.1 Historical Background and the Development of Christian Ethics

The imitation of Jesus Christ's life was central to fourth-century Christian thought (Johnson, 2015:90). However, the early Christian community did not regard sexuality as a main or independent aspect of human life; rather, it was seen as one component of a larger existence dedicated to service and the anticipation of the Kingdom (Johnson, 2015:90). As a result, the requirement for participation in the Kingdom included "proper" sexual behaviour, which became a moral goal that every community member was expected to attain. This perspective is supported by Roberts and Donaldson (1880:17), who assert that early Christians sought to embody their faith through practices and behaviours that reflected their devotion to Christian

teachings. Their understanding of sexuality and personal conduct was shaped by their interpretation of biblical principles and by the desire to distance themselves from the pagan practices of their time.

However, this portrayal presents a somewhat idealised picture that fails to acknowledge the agency of early Christians as moral subjects. It suggests that believers were merely passive recipients of doctrine, wholly governed by religious prescriptions, and denies the complexity of human freedom and moral reasoning. While Christian teachings certainly influenced behaviour, individuals still possessed the capacity to interpret, negotiate, or even challenge these norms. To assume that all early Christians conformed uncritically to prescribed sexual ethics, is to risks overlooking people`s ability to make own choices.

Research in this area has primarily focused on how the early Christian community adopted a distinct lifestyle that fostered values differentiating them from surrounding pagan societies. Gudorf (2010:63) notes that "the early Christian society fostered a distinctive lifestyle aimed at cultivating virtues that set them apart from the prevailing cultural norms". This lifestyle emphasised extreme self-discipline, abstinence from indulgence, prayer, and acts of kindness. The commitment to purity manifested in asceticism, a mode of life characterised by the conscious rejection of worldly pleasures, the elevation of chastity, and the preference for communal living (Wiesner-Hank, 2010:109).

This perspective aligns with Gudorf (1983:77), who explains that asceticism entailed renouncing earthly pleasures, including sexual gratification, as an expression of devotion. Chastity, fidelity, and moral purity were considered markers of spiritual commitment (Roberts & Donaldson, 1880:361). Johnson (2015:111) further notes that adherents maintained this discipline through prayer, acts of service, and abstinence from indulgence, including sexual expression.

From my perspective, this practice of conscious suppression of sexual desire raises important questions about the psychological and emotional implications of such renunciation. Sexuality is an intrinsic aspect of human existence, and the idea that one can simply "switch off" sexual feelings to attain spiritual purity seems unrealistic and potentially harmful. The insistence on self-denial may have produced inner conflict, guilt, or shame rather than genuine holiness. It is, therefore, worth questioning whether ascetic ideals represented authentic spiritual growth or rather a form of moral coercion that constrained human wholeness.

Castelli's (1986:263) research highlights that some Christians indeed struggled to uphold this demanding lifestyle, prompting Apostle Paul's emphasis on celibacy as both a personal example and a communal ideal. Paul's letters suggest a tension between the aspiration for purity and the human struggle with desire. As Castelli (1986:264) notes, celibacy came to symbolise readiness for the imminent coming of God's Kingdom. Yet, in my opinion, this emphasis on celibacy as a spiritual virtue reinforced the notion that sexuality itself was a hindrance to divine communion. Such thinking contributed to the enduring ambivalence within Christian ethics toward the body and sexuality, an ambivalence that continues to shape moral discourses within Christianity today.

2.1.1.1 Asceticism

Asceticism in Christian practice was not merely about abstaining from physical gratifications; it represented a profound spiritual journey aimed at aligning oneself with divine will (Wiesner-Hank, 2010). As a model of self-discipline and celibacy, asceticism became deeply embedded in Christian identity, shaping not only personal behaviour but also believers' understanding of their moral and social responsibilities. Castelli (1986:267) traces the roots of asceticism to the core of the Christian tradition, particularly in Jesus' radical exhortations regarding discipleship, while Williams (1989) situates its rise within a context of social upheaval, political instability, and cultural transformation. According to Castelli (1986:267), "these exhortations emphasized the necessity of self-denial and the abandonment of worldly attachments in pursuit of spiritual fulfilment."

Chadwick (1986:114) adds that "the figure of Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) exemplifies the profound implications of asceticism and its philosophical underpinnings in the early church, reflecting a complex interplay between spiritual discipline, philosophical inquiry, and theological development." Augustine's life and writings demonstrate that ascetic practices functioned not simply as acts of self-denial but as essential means of cultivating inner purity, spiritual growth, and a deeper grasp of divine truth. In Confessions (Book VIII, 1991), Augustine recounts his early life of indulgence and intellectual exploration, contrasting it with his later embrace of ascetic ideals following his conversion to Christianity. His autobiographical reflections reveal the tension between human desire and spiritual aspiration, illustrating the transformative potential of disciplined self-restraint.

Augustine's example is both enlightening and problematic (Boone, 2016:202). On one hand, his emphasis on inner renewal through spiritual discipline reflects the deep human longing for

transcendence and moral coherence. On the other hand, Augustine's theology became a cornerstone for Christian suspicion of the body, particularly in relation to sexuality. Byers, (2017:88) further state that Augustine`s view that sexual desire was inherently linked to sin introduced a dualism between body and spirit that shaped centuries of Christian ethical thought. This theological dualism did not emerge in isolation; it became a tool through which patriarchal structures within the Church legitimised control over bodies, especially women's bodies (Byers, 2017:89).

Augustine's ascetic ideal, though rooted in a sincere quest for holiness, inadvertently contributed to the marginalisation of women by casting their sexuality as a potential source of moral weakness and temptation (Sawyer, 1995:3). In many ways, his writings reinforced the notion that women's bodies were sites of sin that needed regulation, modesty, and silence. This perception later informed doctrines that idealised virginity and motherhood as the only acceptable states of womanhood, leaving little room for sexual autonomy or diverse expressions of female identity.

According to Smith (2020:37), "the ascetic lifestyle, as promoted by Augustine, was seen not only as a personal discipline but also as a communal standard that defined the identity and mission of the early Christians". I argue that this communal expectation institutionalised gendered moral standards that privileged male spiritual authority while prescribing moral purity and sexual restraint as the measure of women's faithfulness. Asceticism, in this sense, became more than a personal pursuit of holiness, it evolved into a moral framework that upheld patriarchal order under the guise of spiritual discipline.

In my view, the legacy of asceticism within Christian ethics must therefore be critically re-examined. While its spiritual intentions were noble, its historical outcomes reveal deep gendered inequities. Feminist theological analysis offers a necessary corrective by reinterpreting Christian ethics through an embodied lens, one that acknowledges sexuality as integral to human wholeness rather than a hindrance to spiritual life. This reimagining invites a theology that affirms the body, embraces desire as part of divine creation, and challenges patriarchal readings that have long confined women to silence and moral scrutiny.

2.1.1.2 Early Church and Christian Ethics

The fourth century in particular marked a major turning point in the history of Christianity. The period spelt the beginning of a new age of sophistication and growth of the institutional church. It was an era of golden twilight, when church fathers like Ambrose (339-397); Augustine of

Hippo (354-436) and Gregory I (540-604) made immense contributions in the formulation of Christian theology and doctrines of the church as well as its spiritual development (Apeabu, 2020:17). Brown (1989:54) argues that "as the early church navigated the complexities of integrating diverse cultural and philosophical influences, it became evident that a rigorous moral framework was necessary to guide the behaviour of its members".

In his work, Horrell (1999:6) discusses how early Christianity engaged with various cultural and philosophical contexts, necessitating a clear moral framework to maintain unity and identity within the evolving church. Ehrman (2011:73) adds that as "the early church expanded into diverse cultural contexts, it faced the challenge of integrating various philosophical and moral traditions". To address this, Wogaman (2011:16) state that a comprehensive moral framework was developed by the Didache between 70 and 150 AD to guide the conduct of its members, emphasising virtues such as love, humility, and righteousness rooted in Christian teachings. This guide became an early handbook for Christian Ethics, rituals and community organization. Smith (2018:43) adds that this effort is also reflected in the writings of the early church fathers and in the development of Christian ethics, which sought to distinguish Christian morality from prevailing pagan philosophies.

Knotts, (2015:85) argue that Augustine integrated Neoplatonic ideas into his understanding of asceticism. He believed that the soul's journey involved turning away from material and bodily pleasures to attain union with God (Knotts, 2015:86). This perspective is evident in his concept of Neoplatonic ascent, where the soul elevates itself through rational and moral discipline (Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana). Brown (2000:128) argues that Augustine's emphasis on inner discipline is rooted in the Platonic notion that true knowledge and virtue are attainable through the purification of the soul, facilitated by ascetic practices. Chadwick (1986:88) notes that before his conversion to Christianity, Augustine was a follower of Manichaeism, a dualistic belief system that espoused a strict ascetic lifestyle. His exposure to Platonic thought and dualistic philosophy profoundly shaped his moral perspectives, particularly regarding sexuality. Brown (2000:130) further observes that Plato's view of the body as inherently flawed or immoral, with the soul alone worthy of divine consideration, laid a foundation for the Christian suspicion of bodily desires.

This dualistic view contributed to the broader perception that the body and its desires were to be regarded with suspicion or outright disdain, forming one of the theological roots of Christian moral teaching. Chadwick (1986:89) emphasises that Augustine's Manichaean and Platonic

influences shaped his subsequent Christian beliefs, particularly those concerning sexuality and the body. His ideas, in turn, informed a theological framework that necessitated the enforcement of sexual legislation within early Christian communities. Hill (1992:32) argues that such enforcement was not merely a form of social control but stemmed from a theological conviction that unrestrained sexuality could divert believers from spiritual fulfilment. As Neuhaus (1993:16) notes, "understanding the historical evolution of thought related to the body and sexuality is crucial for comprehending how Christian morality was constructed and codified". This study not only investigates that historical evolution but also examines how Christian ethics in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) continue to exclude women from full expression of their sexuality.

Brown (2000:131) points out that this dualistic approach exposed the complexity of early Christian ethics, which required balancing ascetic discipline with the acknowledgment of the body as part of God's creation. This framework incorporated sexual ethics deemed necessary to preserve the community's spiritual integrity. However, I argue that the maintenance of such integrity often came at the expense of women's bodily autonomy. To uphold spiritual "purity", women's bodies were subjected to control, silence, and surveillance. This form of self-denial, though conceived as a path to holiness, demanded the alienation of women from their sexual desires in exchange for acceptance within the Christian community and the promise of the Kingdom of God.

This dynamic is deeply troubling because it exposes the gendered cost of theological ideals. The moral framework of early Christianity, though shaped by genuine spiritual aspirations, also institutionalised patriarchal power under the guise of moral discipline. The emphasis on chastity and bodily denial reflected a distrust not of sin alone, but of female embodiment itself. This legacy persists in many Christian traditions, including ELCSA, where women's sexuality remains circumscribed by moral expectations rooted in centuries-old ascetic ideals.

It is crucial to revisit these theological foundations through a feminist lens, one that affirms the body as sacred and challenges dualistic hierarchies that privilege the soul over the flesh. By doing so, Christian ethics can be reimagined in ways that restore dignity to women's embodied experiences, affirm sexual integrity as part of human wholeness, and dismantle the patriarchal moral codes that have long governed the Church's understanding of sexuality.

2.2. Theological Dimension of Christian Ethics

Niebuhr (1951:66) argues that "the Patristic Period, spanning roughly from the 2nd to the 5th centuries, was a formative era for Christian ethics". During this time, early Christian theologians known as the Church Fathers developed foundational ideas concerning morality, virtue, and the ethical life in light of Christian doctrine. Their writings sought to articulate how believers should live in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures, often engaging with contemporary philosophical and cultural ideas (Niebuhr, 1951:66). Early Church Fathers such as Augustine (390–430), Aquinas (1225–1244), and later Martin Luther (1483-1546) began to articulate Christian ethics systematically. It is tempting to compare and contrast their arguments; however, it is important to remember that Aquinas leaned heavily on Augustine's theological foundation, and Luther himself was an Augustinian scholar. Ralph (1994:7) notes that Aquinas quoted Augustine more frequently than any other theologian, which suggests that although their arguments differ in tone and method, their underlying ideologies share substantial similarities.

Augustine (354–430 CE) emphasised the role of divine grace and the tension between the City of God and the City of Man, promoting virtues aligned with divine law (*City of God*, Book XIX). Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), on the other hand, integrated Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine, developing natural law theory, which posits that moral principles are rooted in human nature and accessible through reason (*Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q.90).

It is fascinating that these thinkers, despite being separated by centuries and philosophical influences, were united by a desire to define moral order through a distinctly Christian lens. However, it is also crucial to recognise that their efforts to construct universal ethical systems often reflected and reinforced the patriarchal norms of their time. Augustine's association of moral virtue with the subjugation of bodily desires laid the groundwork for the later idealisation of chastity and obedience, particularly for women. Aquinas, though more systematic and rational in his ethics, continued this legacy by situating women within a natural order that justified their subordination to men. Luther, despite his reformist zeal, inherited and perpetuated much of this patriarchal moral logic under the guise of divine vocation and marital obedience.

While the Patristic and Scholastic theologians were motivated by genuine efforts to align human morality with divine will; their ethical frameworks were deeply gendered and exclusionary. They established moral hierarchies that prioritised reason over emotion, spirit

over body, and men over women. These hierarchies not only defined the moral order of the early church but also shaped subsequent Christian doctrines that limited women's moral and sexual agency.

Therefore, it becomes essential to critically revisit the contributions of these foundational figures, not to dismiss their intellectual brilliance, but to interrogate the gendered assumptions embedded in their ethics. Doing so opens space for a reimagined Christian moral vision, one that values embodiment, relationality, and equality as intrinsic to divine creation rather than obstacles to holiness.

2.2.1 St Augustine's Contribution to the Development of Christian Ethics

St. Augustine of Hippo significantly contributed to the development of Christian ethics through his writings and teachings, emphasising the importance of divine grace, love, and the pursuit of the City of God over earthly cityliness (Augustine, Confessions, Book 8:1998). His insights and views laid foundational principles for Christian moral thought. He believed that human nature is inherently conflicted due to original sin, and that divine grace is essential for moral development and sanctification (Walker, 1992:378). In Confessions, Augustine explores the inner struggles of the human soul and the necessity of God's grace to overcome sin. According to Chappell, (2020:7) "this became the foundation of Augustine's Christian ethics". When humanity discovers satisfaction through faith in Christ, love becomes the driving force behind every ethical deed. People must love one another not merely for who they are, but for who God is. Thus, ethical action is rooted in the will, guided by one's love for God.

However, this raises a critical question: not everyone believes in God. What, then, becomes the foundation of ethical behaviour for non-believers? This question exposes a tension within Augustine's framework; while it provides a profound moral basis for believers, it may not fully account for ethical motivations outside the realm of faith.

In 'The City of God', Augustine contrasts the earthly city (representing human pride and self-love) with the heavenly city (representing divine love and the love of God) (Dyson, 2020:53). Within this dichotomy lies a rich space to examine the implications of love in human relationships, particularly regarding sexual ethics. As I reflect on Augustine's argument that love should be the basis for all ethical behaviour, I am compelled to ask: if love governs our moral actions, can it also guide ethical conduct in sexual relationships? Can two individuals who genuinely love and express their affection for one another through sexual intimacy be

considered moral, even if they are not married? This inquiry invites a deeper exploration of Augustine's conception of love and its ethical ramifications.

In his view, Dyson (2020:60) highlights that, For Augustine, love (*caritas)* is not merely emotional or sentimental; it is an act of the will directed toward the good. Grudem (1999:29) notes that this understanding of love transcends physical attraction or desire, anchoring it instead in the divine order established by God. Accordingly, sexual relationships are not mere expressions of affection but are laden with ethical significance. According to Cary (2006:1) Augustine's teachings suggest that sexual intimacy must reflect divine love, aligning human desire with God's intention for moral righteousness and human flourishing. It is therefore insufficient for individuals to simply profess love for one another; their relationship must embody divine order and purpose.

Cary (2006:3) further presents Augustine's view on the sanctity of marriage which represents the moral framework for such love which embodies divine order and purpose. This framework presents marriage as a sacred covenant that is designed by God for mutual support and the procreation of life. Thus, sexual activity within marriage is morally permissible, while sexual relationships outside marriage are ethically problematic, as they may deviate from divine order and risk reducing love to mere self-gratification (Cary, 2006:4). Van Oort, (2019:8) adds that, in Augustine`s view, when sexual intimacy is detached from divine love and commitment, it becomes an act of concupiscence, a disordered desire that distances humans from God.

Nonetheless, the complexities of modern human relationships cannot be ignored. In contemporary contexts, many individuals engage in sexual relationships grounded in mutual respect, emotional intimacy, and love, even outside marriage. Cary (2006:7) further argue that Augustine's framework, though deeply theological, does not easily accommodate such nuances. This tension invites a re-examination of his ethical vision in light of lived human experiences. Can genuine love, characterised by respect, care, and mutual responsibility, possess moral worth even when it exists outside traditional Christian boundaries?

From my perspective, love in its purest form should foster the growth, dignity, and flourishing of both individuals involved. Ethical love, therefore, cannot be reduced merely to adherence to institutional norms such as marriage but should be evaluated in light of mutual respect, consent, responsibility, and the promotion of each person's well-being. If a sexual relationship embodies these virtues and aligns with the principles of self-giving love that Augustine advocates, then

perhaps it may be viewed through an ethical lens, even if it does not conform to conventional religious expectations.

Moreover, Mueller, (2018:16) argue that Augustine's emphasis on community and the common good offers further guidance. Love for God and neighbour implies accountability, not only to oneself and one's partner but also to the broader moral community. Thus, ethical sexual relationships should contribute to mutual flourishing, justice, and respect, rather than exploitation or harm. In this sense, moral quality extends beyond legalistic definitions of marriage to the deeper question of whether the relationship reflects divine love and serves the good of others.

Slootweg, (2025:104) Argue that, ultimately, Augustine's theology of love, grace, and moral striving continues to shape Christian ethical discourse. Slootweg (2025:105) further state that Augustine insistence that true happiness and moral integrity are found in loving God and one another provides a powerful moral foundation. Yet, his framework also challenges contemporary society to discern how divine love can inform evolving understandings of human intimacy and sexuality. Based on the abovementioned argument, going forward, the enduring task is to hold together Augustine's commitment to divine order with a compassionate engagement of human experience, recognising that authentic love, rightly ordered, remains central to all ethical life (Singer, (2026:4)

2.2.2 Thomas Aquinas and the Development of Christian Ethics

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) is widely regarded as one of the most influential theologians and philosophers in the development of Christian ethics. His integration of Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrine laid the groundwork for a systematic approach to moral theology that continues to influence Western thought today (Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I-II, q. 89). Aquinas built upon the work of Augustine, adopting certain Neo-Platonic elements mediated through him. Like Augustine, he maintained that all creation is inherently good because it originates from God (Hill, 2003:70). However, he diverged from Augustine in significant ways regarding the moral nature of sexuality and the development of Christian ethics.

According to De Bruyn (1996:13), "Aquinas's stance on sex is extremely negative, whereby sexual intercourse is inherently bad and sinful". De Bruyn (1996:13) further argue that, for

Aquinas, sexual activity was tolerable only under specific circumstances, primarily for the purposes of procreation or as a safeguard against adultery. What is striking in this reasoning, Aquinas does not primarily contextualise sexual intercourse within the mutual intimacy and unity of marriage; instead, he offers it a kind of moral pardon when it serves a utilitarian end. By framing procreation as the justification for sexual activity, In his opinion, Milhaven, (1977:80) argue that Aquinas reduces sex to a functional necessity rather than an integral expression of love within marriage. Thus, sexual intercourse becomes, in his view, a necessary evil rather than a moral good.

Milhaven, (1977:82) further argue that even within marriage, Aquinas subjected sexual behaviour to strict moral regulation and discouraged sexual intercourse at certain times in the lives of Christian couples, prohibiting it on days devoted to worship or religious observance. For instance, intercourse rendered one unfit to receive the Eucharist the following day, and sexual relations were discouraged during periods of religious devotion or fasting (Milhaven, (1977:82). This categorisation of permissible and impermissible times for sexual engagement reveals a strong element of control, even within the sanctity of marriage. My concern here is the underlying question: who benefits from this control over sexuality? Such restrictions have often served to maintain patriarchal authority and reinforce moral hierarchies, where the regulation of women's bodies becomes a reflection of broader systems of power. When control yields benefit such as moral prestige, social order, or religious purity, it perpetuates itself through theological justification (Albertyn, 2009:18).

According to Murphy, (2006:103), Aquinas viewed sexual desire as sinful, irrational, and potentially dangerous to the spiritual life. He considered desire particularly perilous to men, associating it with weakness and moral decline. Murphy further outlines Aquinas`s framework where-by sexual sins are categorised according to their deviation from reason and nature: the least sinful acts are those directed toward procreation within marriage, while the most sinful are those outside marriage or against nature (Murphy,2006:104). However, (Reynolds, 2017:11) argue that Aquinas's insistence that sex must be tied to procreation underscores his conviction that moral sexuality is only permissible when it serves divine purpose rather than personal pleasure or emotional intimacy. However, this position raises several ethical and theological questions. If sexual desire is inherently sinful, how can human beings reconcile their natural, God-given instincts with the call to moral virtue? Does moral goodness, in this case, require the suppression of the body rather than its sanctification? In my perspective, Aquinas's approach seems to undervalue the relational and emotional dimensions of sexuality,

focusing instead on its biological and moral functions. This tension between body and spirit, control and desire, reflects a broader challenge in Christian ethics, the struggle to affirm human embodiment while maintaining spiritual purity.

Central to Aquinas's moral framework is his conception of natural law. He argued that all human beings possess an innate participation in God's eternal law, guiding them toward their natural ends (Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I-II, q. 94, a. 2). Moral reasoning, therefore, is accessible through human rationality; individuals can discern right from wrong through the proper use of reason. Yet, this raises an important question: if moral principles are derived from reason, whose reasoning becomes the standard for moral truth? Human perceptions and reasoning differ across individuals and cultures, Aquinas` historical milieu was also different. The diversity brought by human perception and reasoning challenges the universality of Aquinas's claim suggesting that what is "natural" or "rational" may, in practice, reflect the dominant moral logic of a particular time rather than an unchanging divine truth. Furthermore, this approach risks marginalising those whose experiences and moral intuitions differ from traditional frameworks, including women and marginalised sexual identities.

Aquinas also developed a virtue-based moral philosophy that emphasises the cultivation of both theological virtues (faith, hope, charity) and cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude) as essential for moral development (Summa Theologica, II-II, q. 55–57). Virtues are internal dispositions that enable individuals to live in harmony with natural law. Yet, even here, the interplay between divine grace and human free will remains critical. Aquinas (I, q. 83) acknowledges that while grace empowers moral action, humans retain the freedom to choose between good and evil. I find this tension deeply significant because believers, though graced with divine assistance, still act from within their human limitations and desires. Free will thus become both a gift and a burden, enabling moral growth but also opening the possibility of moral failure.

In synthesizing divine law, natural law, and virtue ethics, Aquinas provides a comprehensive framework for Christian moral life (Summa Theologica, I-II, q. 59). His thought underscores that moral reasoning involves not only obedience to divine commands but also the cultivation of virtue through rational reflection and disciplined will. However, his view of sexuality remains shaped by ascetic ideals that privilege spiritual purity over bodily expression. While his emphasis on reason and virtue contributes significantly to Christian moral philosophy, his

approach to sexual ethics reveals the enduring challenge of reconciling theological ideals with the embodied realities of human life.

Therefore, a contemporary reading of Aquinas must re-examine his restrictive approach to sexuality through a lens that acknowledges human dignity, mutuality, and consent as moral goods. If moral virtue is ultimately about orienting oneself toward love and human flourishing, as Aquinas himself believed, then ethical sexuality should not be defined merely by procreative purpose or hierarchical control, but by the quality of love, respect, and justice present in the relationship.

2.2.3 Martin Luther and the Development of Christian Ethics

Martin Luther, a former Augustinian monk, emerged as the leading theologian of the Reformation, challenging the established norms of the Roman Catholic Church. His dissatisfaction with the Church's hierarchical structure and doctrinal rigidity led him to question its authority and reinterpret its teachings. Luther's protest against the sale of indulgences culminated in his 95 Theses (1517), a document that rapidly spread across Europe and ignited the Protestant Reformation, transforming the religious and ethical landscape of the continent (Luther, 1517). Among the doctrines he contested, one of the most significant was the Catholic Church's long-standing ideal of celibacy. His critique extended to the broader theological assumptions surrounding sexuality, including prohibitions on marital pleasure and the belief that sexual acts were inherently impure.

According to Luther (1986:153), "Christian ethics should be centred on the divine indication of God's grace rather than merely the dictates of God's law". He argued that true freedom for the believer is realised through guidance by the Holy Spirit and the redemptive grace revealed in Scripture. In his theology, righteousness is attained through faith alone, not through works, a radical shift from the merit-based ethics of medieval Catholicism. However, Luther emphasised that ethical conduct is the natural fruit of redemption rather than its cause. This departure from Augustine and Aquinas who viewed happiness and virtue as the goals of moral striving repositions ethics as an outcome of grace rather than a human achievement.

According to Hendrix, (2004:18), Luther's understanding of sexuality and marriage represented a profound transformation. He regarded sexual participation as a natural and essential component of human life, not a shameful concession to sin (Hendrix, 2004:18). Roberts, (2007:244) adds that, for Luther, sexuality was not to be suppressed but sanctified within marriage, which he viewed as both a divine vocation and a safeguard against sin. By

marrying Katharina von Bora, a former nun, he not only renounced celibacy but publicly redefined the moral and theological meaning of marriage. This act symbolised his conviction that sexual desire, though corrupted by sin, is part of the human condition that can be redeemed by grace.

In my view, Luther's decision to marry was more than personal rebellion, it was a theological statement against the control of human bodies by ecclesiastical authority. In rejecting monastic celibacy, Luther reclaimed sexuality as a God-given capacity rather than a source of moral contamination. This perspective invites reflection on the liberative dimension of his theology: that holiness does not require denial of the body but its responsible and faithful expression. Yet, I also observed tension on how Luther's liberation of sexuality remained confined within the institution of marriage, leaving little room for alternative expressions of intimacy or human connection outside this structure.

Luther's views on sexual intercourse were deeply complex. De Bruyn (1996:17) observes that, like Augustine and Aquinas, Luther considered sexual activity to be linked to humanity's fallen state. He described sexual desire as a manifestation of human sinfulness, yet maintained that within marriage, it becomes sanctified by divine grace. In this sense, marriage transforms sexual intercourse from a potential sin into an act of obedience to God's will. However, Luther's approach is somewhat paradoxical, while he affirms the naturalness of sexual desire, he still labels it as inherently tainted, suggesting that redemption must continuously counterbalance the "sin" embedded in the act (Hendrix, 2004:22).

Strohl (2008:39) notes that "Luther viewed marriage as an antidote to lust". This metaphor of marriage as a "medicine" is telling; it portrays sexual relations as a problem to be managed rather than a gift to be celebrated. Luther's writings reveal his acknowledgment of mutual sexual need between men and women, but his framework still reflects a residual guilt surrounding sexuality. Strohl (2008:40) quotes Luther's remark that "we can hardly speak of [woman] without a feeling of guilt, and assuredly we cannot make use of her without shame," showing that even as he elevated marriage, he could not fully transcend inherited patriarchal and ascetic attitudes toward the body.

Reflecting on this, Luther appears as both revolutionary and restrained. He liberated sexuality from monastic repression but did not escape the moral anxieties that had long defined Christian thought about desire. His insistence that abstinence would still be preferable if it were possible indicates that, deep down, he still viewed sexual passion as morally suspect. This ambivalence

continues to shape Protestant attitudes toward sexuality where sex is affirmed in theory yet often burdened with moral tension in practice.

Witte Jr. (2002:63) expands on Luther's idea that marriage is not merely a preference but a necessity for all except those specially gifted with celibacy. Luther argued that marriage is essential to restrain sinful desires and prevent immorality. Hobbs (2005:125) notes his bold claim: "You cannot be without a spouse and stay sinless." This presents an interesting ethical dilemma if marriage is treated as the only moral solution to sexual desire; what then of those who remain unmarried by choice or circumstance? On reflection, such a view risks reducing marriage to a utilitarian function, a "moral solution" to lust rather than a covenant of mutual growth, love, and companionship.

Marius (1999:222) observes that Luther regarded sexual expression as sacred, healthy, and necessary for human flourishing. He understood sexuality not as an obstacle to holiness but as part of life's created goodness. In this sense, Luther's theology provides a powerful counterpoint to ascetic traditions that treated the body with suspicion. However, even here, I find it necessary to interrogate the gendered implications of his ideas. Although Luther acknowledged that women experience sexual desire, his framework still positioned men as the moral agents responsible for managing and directing sexual behaviour. The question then becomes: who benefits from this moral responsibility, and does it inadvertently reinforce patriarchal control under the guise of divine order?

Notably, Luther's suggestion highlighted by Marius (1999:225) that a husband should permit his wife to seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere if he cannot meet her needs, seems surprisingly progressive for his time. Yet even this idea reflects a pragmatic rather than liberative view of female sexuality. It was less about affirming women's sexual autonomy and more about maintaining social stability and moral order within the bounds of marriage.

Luther was uncompromising in his condemnation of premarital sex. De Bruyn (1996:88) records that he considered it "deeply sinful" and deserving of social ostracism. This reveals another layer of control over sexual morality, where forgiveness and grace are abundant within marriage but withheld from those outside it. Here, I note a recurring pattern in Christian sexual ethics: moral leniency granted within sanctioned structures and punishment imposed outside them. This raises important ethical questions about inclusion, judgment, and the moral policing of human intimacy.

Ultimately, Martin Luther's theology reshaped Christian ethics by shifting its foundation from law to grace and reinterpreting marriage as a divine vocation rather than a mere social contract. His views on sexuality, though marked by tension, opened the door for a more human and embodied understanding of faith. Yet, reflecting on his legacy, the paradox of his thought is compelling; he broke the chains of celibacy but not entirely the fear of desire. For contemporary Christian ethics, Luther's work invites both appreciation and critique: appreciation for reclaiming the goodness of human sexuality, and critique for leaving unresolved the deeper question of how divine grace might fully redeem human embodiment beyond the confines of marriage.

2.2.4 Incorporating a review of contemporary literature pertaining women`s sexuality in ELCSA

As discussed above, Martin Luther's dissatisfaction with certain practices of the Catholic Church, particularly the sale of indulgences, culminated in the posting of his *95 Theses* in 1517. This document quickly disseminated throughout Europe, sparking the Protestant Reformation and fundamentally transforming the religious landscape of the continent (Luther, 1517). Among the numerous doctrines he contested, one of the most significant was the Catholic Church's longstanding ideal of celibacy. Luther's critique extended to the theological advancements surrounding sexuality, which included prohibitions on enjoying sexual relations even within the bounds of marriage.

According to Luther (1986:153), "Christian ethics should be centred on the divine indication of God's grace rather than merely the dictates of God's law". He argued that true freedom for the believer is achieved through guidance by the Holy Spirit, as revealed in the Bible (Luther, 1986:153). In his theology, righteousness is attainable only through faith, not through human actions. However, he emphasised that ethical behaviour is a natural by-product of redemption. This marked a significant departure from the views of theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, who posited happiness as the cornerstone of ethical activity. Luther emphasised that ethical behaviour should be understood as a fruit of redemption, rooted in the grace received through faith alone.

Luther's understanding of sexuality and marriage was transformative. He portrayed sexual participation as an intrinsic part of the Christian experience, framing it as the fruit of redemption that reflects God's grace. He highlighted the importance of marriage, asserting that it was both a natural institution and essential for fulfilling human sexual desires (Roberts,

2007:244). In a radical move, Luther abandoned the Catholic Church's practices, renounced his priestly vow of celibacy, and married Katharina von Bora, a former nun. This act alone was revolutionary; it represented a significant shift in the perception of marriage and sexuality within the Christian tradition. Luther argued that the monastic vow of celibacy was unsustainable, asserting that the human sexual urge is a powerful and inevitable desire that cannot be controlled or suppressed (Roberts, 2007:244). He famously referred to marriage as "a medicine for the human sex drive".

Luther's views on sexual intercourse were complex. De Bruyn (1996:17) notes that while he believed intercourse was an essential component of marriage, he also held a dualistic view of sexuality, much like Augustine and Aquinas, considering sexual intercourse to be fundamentally tainted by sin. Luther acknowledged that sexual activity is intrinsically linked to human sinfulness, describing it as a manifestation of a sinful nature's evil lust. However, he maintained that God provides grace to excuse sinful acts within the confines of marriage, as the institution of marriage itself is divinely ordained. In this way, marriage transforms sexual activity into a moral virtue, reflecting God's will.

In his work, Strohl (2008:39) states that "Luther viewed marriage as an antidote to lust". For Luther, the institution of marriage served as a means to help believers overcome their carnal desires. Luther's writings reveal a nuanced understanding of the relationship between men and women, particularly in the context of marriage. He acknowledged that, following the fall, men and women seek each other not only for companionship and procreation but also to satiate lustful desires. This understanding of marriage as a venue for managing desire is crucial to Luther's theological framework. In addition, Strohl (2008:40) highlights that Luther expressed this sentiment by noting that: "In Paradise woman would have been an assistance for a duty solely, but now she is also, and for the most part, an antidote and a medicine; we can hardly speak of her without a feeling of guilt, and assuredly we cannot make use of her without shame." Luther believed that the dynamic between men and women in the post-fall world necessitated a re-evaluation of marriage and sexuality, leading to the conclusion that sexual activity within the bounds of wedlock, while still flawed, is tolerated and even encouraged.

While Luther's approach to sexuality and marriage was revolutionary for his time, it still reflected patriarchal assumptions that positioned women as objects of male desire or instruments to control lust. Although he moved away from the celibate ideal and embraced the sanctity of marriage, his framework continued to locate women's value primarily within their

sexual and domestic roles. This reveals that even as Luther's theology sought liberation from rigid Catholic dogma, it failed to dismantle gender hierarchies embedded within Christian ethics. His emphasis on marriage as the only legitimate outlet for sexual expression reinforced the notion that women's sexuality must be contained within male authority and divine order.

Furthermore, I find that Luther's theology still demonstrates an element of sexual control, a lingering trace of the same moral anxieties that characterized earlier theological traditions. While he sought to affirm sexuality as a divine gift, his insistence that sexual relations outside marriage are sinful perpetuated the idea that sexual desire is inherently dangerous unless regulated by religious or patriarchal structures. This suggests that although Luther's theology broadened the moral scope of Christian sexuality, it did not entirely liberate the body or the female sexual subject from moral restraint.

The above-mentioned perspective on Luther is supported by several scholars. Witte Jr. (2002:63) expands on this idea, noting that Luther viewed marriage as not merely a preference but a necessity for all sinful humans. He believed that without the institution of marriage, a person's distorted sexuality could lead to grave moral failings. In a world where nature itself tempts individuals toward various immoral behaviors such as concubinage, prostitution, and voyeurism, Luther argued that marriage serves as a protective measure against these temptations. Hobbs (2005:125) points out that Luther famously stated: "You cannot be without a spouse and stay sinless, and to reject marriage is to act against God's calling and nature's pushing." This stark assertion underscores Luther's belief that the call to marriage is fundamental for all individuals except for those who have received a special gift of continence from God; otherwise, he maintained that everyone should marry to mitigate the risks of sexual sin (Hobbs, 2005:125).

Marius (1999:222) further elucidates Luther's perspective, asserting that he regarded libido and sexual expression as sacred, healthy, and necessary for life and marriage. Luther believed that the decision to marry and the timing of that decision were critical components of living an obedient life in the sight of God. This understanding links an individual's sexuality with their spiritual life, emphasizing that sexuality is an integral aspect of human existence. In contrast to the Roman Catholic view, which often framed sex in terms of shame and functionality primarily for procreation, Luther believed that sexuality was just as vital to life as basic sustenance, such as eating (Marius, 1999:222).

Moreover, Luther challenged prevailing notions about gender and sexual rights within marriage. He argued that a woman's sexual drive could be as strong, if not stronger, than a man (Streufert, 2020:82). Streufert, (2020:82) further points out that, in a radical departure from the norms of his time, Luther asserted that women were not merely submissive to their husbands but possessed rights, including the right to sexual fulfilment. While Marius (1999:225) adds that Luther even went so far as to suggest that if a man loved his wife but was unable to meet her sexual needs, he should allow her to seek satisfaction elsewhere, even though relations with other men, provided that those men were also married (Marius, 1999:225).

In examining Luther's thoughts on sexual intercourse, he maintained a strong conviction that sexual relations outside of marriage were fundamentally wrong. Premarital sexual activities were unequivocally condemned, as Luther believed that engaging in such acts was a direct violation of God's law and would undoubtedly invoke divine wrath. According to De Bruyn (1996:88), "Luther characterized premarital sexual intercourse as deeply sinful, to the extent that those who partake in it should be ostracized from society for a designated period". This form of social condemnation was intended not only as punishment but also as a deterrent, serving as a public example of the consequences of such behavior (De Bruyn, 1996:88). With this, I note that an element of sexual control resurfaces, a moral boundary that continues to regulate women's sexual agencies under the guise of divine order.

Martin Luther's theological contributions laid the groundwork for a re-examination of marriage and sexuality within the Christian tradition. His views challenged the rigid structures of the Roman Catholic Church, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of human sexuality, the necessity of marriage, and the role of grace in redeeming human actions. Yet, from a feminist theological perspective, his teachings invite critical engagement: they reflect both liberation and limitation, liberation from celibate asceticism, but limitation in sustaining patriarchal dominance over women's bodies and desires.

However, Agustine, Aquinas and Luther share some similarities It should be noted that the view that sexual intercourse should occur within matrimony was advocated by both Augustine and Luther. Ozorowski, (2020:50) argue that Augustine explained his opposition to the unmarried state as the scratching of the itching scab of lust, since this state does not provide an outlet for man's lust. In this regard, Luther's stance included the concession for engaged couples to engage in sexual activity, given the promise of their subsequent marriage (Hendrix

,2004:25). This view of Luther is not shared by Augustine or Aquinas. Although Luther did not reject a celibate life outright, he only considered it appropriate for those who have been granted this gift that should be used in service to the Lord. Luther's opposition thereto related to its practice by individuals not imbued with the gift to do so.

It is interesting that Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther acknowledge the goodness of sexuality as created by God. However, they all suggest that sex outside marriage is sinful. In the context of this study, women engaging in sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage are being viewed as committing a sin. Vampoulas, (2024:66) argue that, for Luther, celibacy is impossible to maintain, and he suggests marriage as a remedy to escape a celibate life. It is also interesting that he affirms sexuality, regards it as sacred and healthy (Vampoulas, 2024:66). What is more interesting for this research on his view is that he believes that women have sexual rights and should be allowed a right to sexual satisfaction. With this view in mind, it raises a critical question: do Lutherans truly embrace women's right to sexual satisfaction? What happens when women cannot maintain celibacy, yet marriage doors remain closed to them? These questions are central to understanding how Christian ethical teachings continue to regulate and discipline women's bodies, even under the guise of grace and divine order.

From my perspective, this comparison between the Church Fathers and Luther exposes a persistent pattern of patriarchal moral control disguised as divine morality. Although Luther made significant strides in affirming the goodness of sexuality, his theology, like that of Augustine and Aquinas, continues to confine sexual expression within patriarchal structures of marriage. This confinement assumes that women's sexual morality is dependent on male authority and marital status. The insistence on marriage as the only legitimate space for sexual activity excludes women who, by choice or circumstance, are unmarried, thereby silencing their sexual agency and subjecting them to moral scrutiny.

Furthermore, while the early theologians promoted abstinence and marital sexual exclusivity, none of them fully considered the social or psychological implications of enforcing these moral codes particularly on women. The silence of Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther on the consequences of their teachings underscores a patriarchal blind spot within Christian ethics: the assumption that women exist primarily as moral subjects to be regulated, rather than as autonomous beings capable of ethical discernment. This study, therefore, identifies a critical gap in these traditional frameworks, their failure to interrogate how moral prescriptions designed for social control have historically restricted women's sexual freedom and spiritual

agency. By highlighting this gap, the research contributes to feminist theological scholarship that seeks to reimagine Christian ethics in ways that affirm women's full humanity and sexual autonomy.

2.3 African Feminist Theology and Women's Sexuality in Contemporary Church Contexts

African feminist theology provides a critical framework for analyzing women's sexuality within contemporary African church contexts such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA). Emerging from the lived realities of African women, this theological movement challenges patriarchal interpretations of Christianity and seeks to reconstruct theology in ways that affirm women's dignity, agency, and embodied experiences. African feminist theologians argue that Christian theology in Africa has often been shaped by patriarchal cultural norms and missionary interpretations that marginalize women's voices, particularly regarding issues of sexuality, gender roles, and bodily autonomy. Consequently, African feminist theology calls for the reinterpretation of Christian teachings through the experiences of African women.

Oduyoye (2001: 20) is widely regarded as one of the pioneers of African feminist theology. In Introducing African Women's Theology, Oduyoye argues that theology must emerge from the lived experiences of African women rather than from abstract doctrinal formulations that ignore their realities (Oduyoye, 2001:21). She emphasizes that both African cultural traditions and Christian institutions have historically reinforced patriarchal structures that regulate women's bodies and sexuality. According to Oduyoye (2001:38), African women's theology seeks to expose these structures and promote a theology that affirms the full humanity of women within church and society. She also emphasizes the concept of relational justice, arguing that Christian communities should embody relationships characterized by mutual respect, partnership, and equality between men and women (Oduyoye, 2001:85). In the context of sexuality, this perspective challenges moral frameworks that measure women's worth primarily through sexual purity or marital status.

Adding on Oduyoye's work, Dube (2000:15) has developed a postcolonial feminist theological approach that examines how colonialism, biblical interpretation, and patriarchal power intersect in shaping Christian discourse on gender and sexuality. Dube argues that missionary Christianity often imposed Western moral frameworks on African societies while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal structures within church institutions (Dube, 2000:18).

Through postcolonial feminist hermeneutics, she calls for a re-reading of biblical texts from the perspectives of African women and other marginalized communities. In her later work, Dube expands this approach by linking feminist theology with decolonial and ecological concerns, emphasizing that struggles for gender justice must also address broader systems of oppression that affect women's bodies and livelihoods (Dube, 2017:44). Dube's scholarship highlights how biblical interpretation can either reinforce or challenge systems that regulate women's sexuality and silence their experiences.

Phiri (2004:19) has also made significant contributions to African feminist theology, particularly in relation to gender justice and women's lived experiences within church communities. Phiri argues that African women's theology must address concrete social realities such as HIV and AIDS, gender-based violence, and sexual inequality, all of which disproportionately affect women in African societies (Phiri, 2004:21). She emphasizes that Christian theology should not only critique oppressive structures but also provide practical responses that promote healing and justice within communities. Phiri's work demonstrates that discussions of women's sexuality cannot be separated from broader social and economic conditions that shape women's lives.

In Southern African context, Nadar (2009:130) played a key role in advancing feminist theological scholarship on religion, gender, and sexuality. Nadar emphasizes the importance of feminist biblical interpretation in challenging patriarchal readings of scripture that regulate women's bodies and behavior. She argues that religious texts often function as powerful tools in shaping social attitudes toward sexuality and gender roles (Nadar, 2009:134). By critically engaging these texts, feminist theologians can expose how certain interpretations reinforce gender inequality while also recovering alternative readings that affirm women's agency and dignity. Nadar's work is particularly relevant in contexts where church teachings continue to influence cultural perceptions of women's sexual morality.

Moyo's(2010:72) scholarship further develops African feminist theology by emphasizing the intersection of religion, sexuality, and social justice. Moyo argues that African feminist theology must move beyond theoretical critique to engage directly with issues affecting women's everyday lives, including sexual health, HIV and AIDS, and gender-based violence (Moyo, 2010:75). She stresses the importance of creating safe spaces within church communities where women can speak openly about their experiences of sexuality and faith. For Moyo, theology must be both transformative and practical, addressing the structural

conditions that shape women's lives while empowering women to participate actively in theological reflection and church leadership.

More recent African feminist voices continue to expand these conversations by examining the intersections of religion, sexuality, and power in African societies. Scholars such as Chitando and Chirongoma, have explored how Christian teachings can either challenge or reinforce harmful gender norms, particularly in relation to sexuality and HIV/AIDS in African contexts (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:10–13). Their work highlights the need for churches to critically examine inherited theological traditions and to develop ethical frameworks that promote gender justice and human dignity. Collectively, African feminist theologians emphasize that discussions of sexuality within African churches must be grounded in women's lived experiences and attentive to the social realities that shape their lives. Their scholarship demonstrates that Christian teachings on sexuality have often been interpreted through patriarchal lenses that priorities control over women's bodies and behavior. At the same time, African feminist theology offers constructive alternatives by reinterpreting Christian traditions in ways that affirm women's dignity, agency, and sexual autonomy.

Within the context of ELCSA, these perspectives provide a valuable lens for examining how Lutheran ethical teachings intersect with African cultural norms to shape women's sexuality. While Lutheran theology historically affirmed marriage as the legitimate context for sexual expression, African feminist theologians challenge the assumption that women's sexual identities should be confined within patriarchal structures of marriage and moral regulation. By foregrounding women's voices and experiences, African feminist theology opens space for reimagining Christian ethics in ways that promote gender justice, relational equality, and the flourishing of women within church communities

2.4 Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern African context, sexuality, and gender-based violence

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) operates within a unique Southern African socio-cultural and religious context, where historical Lutheran teachings intersect with contemporary issues of sexuality, gender inequality, and gender-based violence (GBV). Southern African Lutheran contextual studies show that while Lutheran ethics historically promoted the sanctity of marriage and the moral regulation of sexual activity, these teachings continue to influence women's sexual agency, often reinforcing patriarchal structures inherited from European Lutheran traditions and local socio-cultural norms (Roberts,

2007:244; Strohl, 2008:39). The Lutheran emphasis on marriage as the sole legitimate site for sexual expression reflects Martin Luther's theological concern that sexual desire, though natural, must be regulated through divinely ordained institutions (De Bruyn, 1996:17). While this perspective marked a departure from Catholic celibate ideals, it still confines women's sexual autonomy within male-defined marital and moral structures (Streufert, 2020:82).

Contemporary South African research highlights that such moral frameworks have tangible effects on women's lived experiences. Gender studies scholars report that religious teachings often intersect with local cultural practices to police women's bodies and sexual behavior, particularly in rural and township settings (Nadar, 2009:130; Moyo, 2010:72). For instance, women who deviate from socially sanctioned sexual norms such as engaging in premarital sexual activity or resisting marital expectations may face moral censure or communal ostracism, creating a dual burden of spiritual and social policing (De Bruyn, 1996:88; Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:12). These studies underscore that Lutheran ethics, while doctrinally grounded in divine grace, cannot be divorced from the social realities of patriarchy, which continue to shape perceptions of women's sexual morality.

African feminist theology provides a critical lens to interrogate these dynamics. Oduyoye (2001:20) emphasizes that theology must emerge from the lived experiences of African women and critique both cultural and ecclesial practices that perpetuate gendered oppression. She highlights the ways in which Christian ethics can reinforce patriarchal hierarchies, particularly when sexual morality is regulated primarily through male authority. Oduyoye advocates for relational justice and partnership between men and women, challenging churches to develop frameworks in which women's voices, sexual agency, and moral perspectives are respected within theological discourse (Oduyoye, 2001:86). In the Lutheran context, this perspective calls for re-evaluation of ethical teachings on sexuality to ensure they affirm women's embodied experiences rather than simply prescribing behavioral norms.

Dube's postcolonial feminist approach complements this analysis by demonstrating how biblical interpretation and church practice often sustain colonial and patriarchal power structures that constrain women's sexual autonomy (Dube, 2000:18; Dube, 2017:41). Dube argues for re-reading Scripture from the perspectives of marginalized communities, emphasizing that theology should empower women to critically engage with church teachings that have historically silenced their voices. Her more recent work connects gender justice with broader social concerns, including ecological sustainability and structural oppression,

demonstrating that feminist theological critique in Southern Africa must be intersectional, addressing sexuality alongside broader societal injustices (Dube, 2024:3–5).

Phiri expands this conversation by linking theological reflection on sexuality with concrete social challenges such as HIV and AIDS, gender-based violence, and sexual inequality (Phiri, 2004:19–21). Phiri contends that church interventions must address the lived realities of women rather than rely solely on doctrinal prescriptions. In this view, sexuality is inseparable from the broader social and material conditions that shape women's lives, and Christian ethical teaching must respond in ways that promote holistic justice and healing. Similarly, Nadar (2009:134) highlights the power of feminist biblical interpretation to challenge patriarchal readings of scripture that govern sexual morality. She observes that religious texts often function as tools of social control, regulating women's behavior and limiting their participation in church life. Nadar's work demonstrates that Lutheran churches in Southern Africa, including ELCSA, can use feminist hermeneutics to re-examine scriptural interpretations that have historically constrained women's sexual agency and to promote a more inclusive theology that respects women's rights and dignity.

Moyo's scholarship further develops African feminist theology by emphasizing the intersection of religion, sexuality, and social justice. Moyo argues that African feminist theology must move beyond theoretical critique to engage directly with issues affecting women's everyday lives, including sexual health, HIV and AIDS, and gender-based violence (Moyo, 2010:75). She stresses the importance of creating safe spaces within church communities where women can speak openly about their experiences of sexuality and faith. For Moyo, theology must be both transformative and practical, addressing structural conditions that shape women's lives while empowering women to participate actively in theological reflection and church leadership.

Contemporary South African research on gender-based violence reinforces the importance of integrating feminist theological critique with church practice. Studies show that churches often play dual roles: they can either perpetuate patriarchal norms that normalize GBV or serve as agents of social justice and protection (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012:13; Moyo, 2010:72). In Lutheran contexts, this dual potential is evident. While ethical teachings emphasize moral responsibility and communal care, they must be reinterpreted through an African feminist lens to ensure they actively combat GBV, affirm women's sexual rights, and challenge structural oppression.

The integration of Southern African Lutheran contextual studies with African feminist theology thus provides a robust framework for understanding women's sexuality in contemporary ELCSA. It highlights how historical theological norms continue to shape moral expectations, yet it also opens space for liberative interpretations that foreground women's experiences, challenge patriarchal authority, and address the realities of GBV. This dual focus on historical doctrinal structures and contemporary feminist critique enables churches to engage ethically with sexuality in ways that promote gender justice, relational equality, and the holistic flourishing of women within both ecclesial and social contexts.

The intersection of Lutheran theology, African feminist scholarship, and contemporary South African gender research underscores the need for the church to critically engage with ethical teachings on sexuality. By integrating feminist hermeneutics, lived experiences, and contextual analysis, ELCSA and similar Lutheran churches can move toward more inclusive, just, and transformative approaches that affirm women's sexual agency, challenge gender-based violence, and foster equitable participation in church and society. African feminist theology thus provides both the conceptual and practical tools to reimagine Christian ethics in Southern Africa, ensuring that theology serves as a vehicle for liberation rather than control.

2.4.1 Engaging LWF Gender Justice Theology in Southern African/Lutheran Contextual Studies

In addition to African feminist theological engagement with women's sexuality and gender-based violence, the contemporary Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Gender Justice Policy and related documents provide an important theological and ethical resource for contextualizing ELCSA's response to gender justice, sexuality, and violence against women. The LWF framework underscores the theological grounding of gender justice in equality, dignity, and the elimination of oppressive structures, and invites member churches to adapt these principles to their local realities.

The LWF Gender Justice Policy (2013) presents a biblically rooted framework that calls member churches to pursue gender justice as an expression of Lutheran theology, understood as part of the gospel's call to dignity for all human beings. The policy emphasizes that discrimination, institutional power imbalances, and cultural norms that privilege some over others must be addressed in church teaching, practice, and structures (LWF Gender Justice Policy, 2013). This foundational document reaffirms justice as central to Lutheran identity and

affirms that gender justice is inseparable from biblical and theological commitments to human dignity in creation and redemption.

Crucially, the policy calls for the elimination of systems of privilege and oppression, including gender-based discrimination and violence, and encourages churches to develop contextualized measures that promote equality and dignity in both church and society (LWF Gender Justice Policy, 2013). It explicitly identifies the church's responsibility to engage in gender analysis, awareness building, and action to dismantle harmful gender norms. Within ELCSA's context, this represents an invitation to theological reflection that resonates with African feminist theologians who critique patriarchal interpretations that regulate women's sexuality without regard for women's lived experiences.

The LWF Assembly resolutions further strengthen this emphasis by calling on member churches to focus on sex education and the elimination of sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, rape, and sexual coercion (LWF Resolution on Gender Based Violence, 2023). This ecclesial invitation for comprehensive theological and ethical engagement with gendered violence directly intersects with Southern African gender studies research, which highlights the church's dual role in both perpetuating and contesting norms that regulate women's bodies and sexuality.

Recent LWF documents and messages reaffirm a strong ecclesial commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women, emphasizing that all people are created in the image of God with equal dignity. For example, the Thirteenth Assembly message explicitly rejects all forms of violence and discrimination based on gender and calls for theological education on gender justice that reflects Lutheran commitments to human dignity (LWF Assembly Message, 2023). This aligns with feminist theologians such as Dube and Phiri, who advocate for theological reflection that both recognizes the embodied realities of women's lives and actively resists structures that harm women.

LWF's Gender Justice Toolbox (2025) demonstrates the ongoing evolution of this theological commitment by offering practical resources for implementing gender justice principles in church and community settings. The toolbox highlights how gender justice initiatives can be contextualized, recognizing that issues such as violence against women and discriminatory gender norms manifest differently across cultural environments. It also emphasizes that theological reflection must be accompanied by gender-responsive practices that address power imbalances, social norms, and spiritual understandings of gender and sexuality.

Moreover, LWF programming increasingly integrates gender justice with leadership, theology, and community engagement. For instance, the LWF's Theology, Gender Justice, and Leadership Education program equips women (and men) with theological and practical tools to challenge harmful stereotypes and promote inclusive notions of gender in ministry and community life (LWF New Skills Program, 2024). This reflects a shift toward gender-transformative theological education that supports leaders in engaging church teachings on sexuality, gender roles, and justice.

2.5 Patriarchal Lutheran theological and ethical discourses limit women`s sexuality

Benne (1998:155) defines Lutheranism as a way of life that is shaped by the vision of God's activities and purpose. Stumme (1998:199) adds that "Lutheranism is constituted and sustained by practices of liturgical, religious, moral, and intellectual teachings rooted in scripture. Central to these practices is ethics, which is a disciplined reflection on a Christian moral way of life" (Stumme, 1998:199). Within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), these ethical frameworks have been interpreted and implemented within historically patriarchal contexts, significantly shaping understandings and regulations of women's sexuality. Lutheran theological and ethical discourses, when situated in patriarchal contexts, have historically perpetuated inequality and subordination by privileging male authority while restricting female agency in matters of sexual identity, expression, and decision-making (Ruether, 1983:60). These patriarchal interpretations are deeply embedded in male-centred readings of Scripture and reinforced through ecclesial structures, creating a moral and social environment in which women's sexuality is monitored, regulated, and constrained. The consequences of these patriarchal frameworks are visible across multiple domains of church life, including marriage, sexual ethics, and the role of women in spiritual leadership. In my perspective, this has resulted in a duality where Lutheran ethics simultaneously claim to promote moral order and spiritual well-being yet systematically marginalise women by controlling their sexual agency.

2.6 Interpretation of Biblical Text

Male-centred interpretations of Scripture have reinforced male dominance over women and justified patriarchal control over their sexual lives. Biblical passages such as Ephesians 5:22–24 and 1 Corinthians 11:3 have been traditionally interpreted to mandate female submission to male authority, which has legitimised male headship within both marriage and ecclesial governance (Migliore, 2004:15). Within Lutheran contexts, these interpretations position men as the moral and spiritual overseers, relegating women to a passive, obedient role whose

identity is primarily defined in relation to male authority. Phiri and Nadar (2006:17) argue that such male headship functions to preserve patriarchal power structures in both domestic and church spheres, with women's sexuality framed as subject to male regulation rather than personal autonomy.

From my perspective, this theological framing inherently denies women equal partnership, effectively rendering them subordinate dependents whose ethical and sexual choices are circumscribed by male authority. The ethical implications are profound: by defining sexual morality through male-centric interpretations, Lutheran patriarchal teachings foster a culture in which women's bodies are sites of surveillance and regulation, reinforcing cycles of shame, obedience, and control. Rakoczy (2004:38) observes that practices such as enforcing female virginity before marriage, condemning contraception, and rejecting divorce in abusive relationships demonstrate the tangible ways patriarchal interpretations constrain women lived realities. This aligns with my understanding that the moral codes prescribed by these interpretations often function less as pathways to spiritual growth and more as mechanisms for maintaining male dominance and institutional control.

The continued predominance of male clergy and theologians in shaping Lutheran ethics has entrenched this dynamic. The pulpit serves as a space in which male authority is continually reinforced, while women are positioned as recipients of moral instruction rather than as active contributors to theological knowledge. As Ruether (1993:64) notes, the absence of women's voices in the construction of sexual ethics ensures that interpretations of texts such as Ephesians 5: 22-24 and Corinthians 11:3 remain one-sided, privileging obedience and submission over mutuality, consent, and partnership. I posit that this exclusion is not merely accidental but reflective of a broader patriarchal logic: women's sexual subjectivity is subordinated to the institutional and theological authority of men. Furthermore, from a feminist theological standpoint, it is clear that these readings are not neutral or divinely mandated; rather, they are socially and culturally constructed interpretations reflecting historical biases. When left unchallenged, they continue to shape church policies and social attitudes in ways that constrain women's sexual freedom and perpetuate systemic inequalities. This underscores the importance of incorporating women lived experiences into theological reflection. Without this inclusion, Lutheran ethics risks remaining complicit in the ongoing marginalisation of women, perpetuating structures that control sexuality under the guise of spiritual fidelity.

2.7 Practical Manifestations in ELCSA

The patriarchal shaping of Lutheran ethics in ELCSA is reinforced through practical church policies and social expectations. For example, teachings on premarital sex, marriage preparation, and female participation in leadership roles reflect and perpetuate patriarchal control over women's sexual agency. Church-led premarital counselling sessions often emphasise chastity and adherence to male-dominated moral frameworks, framing sexual activity outside of marriage as sinful and socially destabilising. In these sessions, women are frequently advised to regulate their sexual desires to maintain marital suitability, while men are positioned as moral supervisors and gatekeepers. These practices demonstrate how Christian ethics, while framed as spiritual guidance, function as instruments of social control over female bodies and sexuality.

The participation of women in church leadership within ELCSA remains limited, reflecting the lingering influence of male-centred theological interpretations. While women may serve as catechists, educators, or pastoral assistants, full pastoral authority often remains the domain of men. This institutional structure reinforces the message that moral and sexual authority is male-defined, and that women's ethical agency is subordinate to ecclesial hierarchy. I argue that this lack of representation not only diminishes the diversity of theological perspectives but also ensures that sexual ethics continue to be interpreted primarily through a male lens, leaving women's experiences of desire, consent, and sexual fulfilment largely invisible in church discourse.

Another manifestation of patriarchal influence is seen in marriage rituals and doctrinal teachings surrounding divorce and contraception. Women in ELCSA communities are often discouraged from initiating divorce, even in cases of abuse or marital neglect, reflecting a theological assumption that marital obedience supersedes personal safety and well-being. Contraception is frequently presented as morally questionable or discouraged, further restricting women's control over their reproductive and sexual choices. From my perspective, these teachings exemplify how patriarchal ethics constrain women not only morally but physically, by limiting access to autonomy over their bodies and life decisions. While framed as protective measures for the family and spiritual order, the actual impact is a reinforcement of gendered hierarchies that disadvantage women and curtail their freedom.

The social expectations surrounding female virginity and sexual purity reinforce the policing of women's sexuality. Young women are often taught that their moral worth is tied to their

sexual behaviour, whereas men are rarely subjected to equivalent scrutiny. This asymmetry perpetuates double standards that further marginalise women within both church and society. In my view, the moralisation of women's sexual conduct functions as a mechanism of control, ensuring compliance with male-defined ethical standards and limiting women's capacity to negotiate consent, desire, and relational intimacy on their own terms.

Ultimately, the patriarchal structuring of Lutheran ethics in ELCSA reveals a tension between the professed goals of Christian moral life, spiritual growth, virtue, and mutual love, and the lived reality of gendered inequality. While ethics is intended to guide all believers toward faithful living, in practice, these teachings have disproportionately burdened women, subordinating their sexual agency to institutional and male authority. From my perspective, this underscores the importance of feminist theological critique, which seeks to uncover these biases and advocate for interpretations of Scripture and Christian ethics that affirm women's dignity, agency, and right to sexual self-determination.

By documenting these practices and reflecting critically on their impact, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how patriarchal ethics continue to shape the moral and sexual lives of women in ELCSA. It also emphasises the need for inclusive theological reflection that integrates women's voices, challenges male-dominated interpretations, and promotes an ethic of justice and mutuality in which women's sexual rights are recognised as integral to their spiritual and moral flourishing. In my view, engaging with these critiques does not undermine the moral integrity of Lutheranism but rather revitalises it by aligning ethical practice with principles of justice, equality, and human dignity.

2.8 Virginity, Purity, and Chastity Norm

The ethical discourse of sexual morality within Lutheranism is deeply shaped by ideals of female purity and chastity (Hillerbrand, (2026:6). Hillerbrand, (2026:6) further adds that women are expected to preserve virginity before marriage and maintain fidelity within it, with their moral and social value often tied to these expectations. While Isherwood and McEwan (2001:101) argue that such discourses reduce women's sexuality to a matter of control and surveillance, leading to stigmatisation and shame for those who transgress. In my view, these norms reflect a theological and cultural convergence in which women's bodies become symbolic sites of moral regulation, rather than recognised as expressions of human dignity, desire, or agency. While these ideals are often framed as protecting communal morality or

spiritual health, they function primarily to uphold patriarchal structures by restricting women's sexual freedom.

In the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), these purity ideals are embedded in both formal teachings and informal congregational practices. For example, young women who experience pregnancy outside of marriage often face public shaming, exclusion from Holy Communion, and prohibition from participating in youth fellowships or choirs. Phiri and Nadar (2006:28) note that men in similar circumstances rarely experience comparable sanctions, highlighting the gendered nature of these moral expectations. In my perspective, this differential treatment illustrates how purity discourses operate as tools of social control, disproportionately burdening women with the moral policing of sexuality while minimizing male accountability. It signals an implicit message: women's sexual behaviour is subject to communal scrutiny, whereas men's is either tolerated or overlooked.

Case studies in rural ELCSA congregations reveal further complexities in the enforcement of these ideals. In some communities, such as the South Eastern Diocese (SED) in KwaZulu-Natal, practices like "virginity testing" have been tacitly endorsed or tolerated by local church leaders under the pretext of promoting chastity and moral protection. Haddad (2016:28) argues that such practices objectify young women, reducing them to the status of moral symbols rather than recognising their full humanity. From my standpoint, these interventions represent a troubling conflation of cultural and theological norms, in which the church inadvertently participates in systemic violations of bodily autonomy and personal dignity. Furthermore, survivors of sexual violence are often doubly victimised: their experiences are judged through the lens of purity and shame rather than understood as harm requiring care and justice. In these circumstances, women are penalised for circumstances beyond their control, perpetuating cycles of trauma and marginalisation.

African Lutheran feminist theologians have critiqued these contradictions extensively. Fulata Moyo (2005:12) contends that ELCSA's ethical discourses on female purity collude with patriarchal cultural norms to silence women's sexual autonomy. Haddad (2016:29) similarly emphasises that purity ethics discourage open discussion of sexuality, contributing to a church culture that inadequately responds to women's sexual realities. Within ELCSA, women constitute the majority of congregants but remain underrepresented in leadership and decision-making structures. This structural exclusion compounds the impact of purity-centred theologies: women are not only morally policed but also denied authority to shape the ethical

frameworks that govern their lives. This situation underscores a fundamental tension within Lutheran ethics: the promotion of moral ideals without corresponding inclusion or recognition of women's lived experiences results in a system that enforces control under the guise of piety.

While ELCSA maintains that purity and chastity are essential moral virtues, feminist theological critique offers an alternative reading that emphasises liberation, dignity, and agency. From this perspective, virginity and chastity should not be instruments of shame or surveillance but understood as personal choices made freely within the context of faith, mutual respect, and holistic well-being. Women are not passive bearers of communal morality, but active moral subjects created in the image of God, capable of discerning and directing their own sexual and ethical decisions. In my view, the failure to integrate women's voices in shaping these ethical frameworks represents a significant limitation in Lutheran praxis, one that perpetuates patriarchal assumptions and restricts women's access to spiritual and sexual flourishing.

Moreover, the imposition of purity norms often obscures broader systemic issues affecting women's sexuality, including gender-based violence, poverty, and lack of access to reproductive healthcare. By focusing exclusively on individual moral conduct, the church risks absolving itself of responsibility for structural injustices that shape women's sexual experiences. I argue that a reorientation of ethical discourse is necessary, one that situates female sexuality not as a problem to be controlled but as an aspect of human life to be affirmed, respected, and ethically engaged. Such a reorientation aligns with Lutheran principles of vocation, grace, and care for neighbour, extending them to include women's sexual and bodily autonomy.

In practical terms, this requires ELCSA to critically evaluate practices and teachings that reinforce shame, exclusion, or differential treatment based on gender. Policies on premarital pregnancy, virginity, and female participation in church life should be revisited to ensure that they respect dignity, foster inclusion, and provide equitable pastoral care. Additionally, promoting spaces for dialogue about sexuality, where women can speak openly about desire, consent, and ethical concerns can contribute to a more holistic understanding of Christian moral life. Such interventions do not undermine the theological value of chastity or moral integrity but rather reframe these concepts in ways that affirm justice, equality, and the ethical agency of all congregants.

A critical feminist lens invites reflection on the intersection of theology, culture, and social power. It highlights how patriarchal interpretations of Lutheran ethics operate alongside cultural norms to perpetuate gender inequities. Indeed, recognising and addressing this intersection is essential not only for ethical consistency but also for the church's credibility and spiritual mission. The transformative potential of Lutheran ethics lies not in maintaining rigid, punitive standards but in fostering moral frameworks that empower women, honour their lived experiences, and integrate their voices into the ongoing construction of Christian moral life. By centring dignity, agency, and justice alongside traditional ideals of chastity and virginity, ELCSA can cultivate an ethic that both respects faith and promotes the flourishing of all its members, particularly women whose sexuality has historically been subordinated to patriarchal control.

While the ethical norms of virginity, purity, and chastity have historically served as markers of moral virtue in Lutheranism, they have simultaneously functioned as mechanisms of control over women's sexuality. From my perspective, a critical feminist theological approach is necessary to reinterpret these ideals in ways that affirm women's autonomy, agency, and dignity, transforming them from instruments of surveillance into principles that support equitable moral and spiritual development. Such a reframing not only addresses historical inequities but also positions ELCSA as a church committed to justice, inclusion, and the holistic well-being of all its members.

2.9 Clerical Authority over Female Bodies

As demonstrated in the above discussions, patriarchal church leadership has historically assumed custodianship over women's sexuality. Male clergy, positioned as guardians of morality, enforce ethical norms on issues such as premarital sex, contraception, abortion, and divorce (Phiri & Nadar, 2006:32). This regulatory function has created a culture of surveillance and discipline, where women who deviate from prescribed sexual norms face censure, exclusion, or spiritual condemnation. From a Lutheran feminist perspective, this custodianship is both theologically and socially problematic. Feminist theologians argue that male-dominated leadership structures have historically interpreted Scripture in ways that prioritise male authority, reinforcing gendered hierarchies in both ecclesial and domestic spaces (Ruether, 1993:69). By positioning men as judges of sexual morality, the church effectively controls women's bodies and limits their agency, perpetuating a system in which female sexuality is policed rather than celebrated or affirmed.

African Lutheran feminist scholars like Chisale, (2020), Chireshe,(2023) and Maponya (2021) to name a few, highlight the intersection of patriarchal theology and local cultural norms in shaping women's sexual experiences. Fulata Moyo (2005:16) contends that "African churches often collude with societal patriarchy by presenting moral codes as divinely mandated, thereby silencing women's voices and legitimizing male authority over sexual decision-making". Haddad (2016:32) further notes that women's compliance with church sexual ethics is frequently enforced through spiritual discipline, gossip, or social ostracization, creating an environment where fear and shame govern female sexual behaviour. I argue that the church functions less as a site of spiritual liberation and more as an instrument of social control, where the female body is the locus of moral regulation rather than an expression of God's image and agency.

In this study, Lutheran feminist theology emphasises the need to reconceptualise sexuality as a domain of mutuality, respect, and agency. Musa Dube (2001:32) argues that women must be recognised as co-creators of theological knowledge, particularly in matters relating to sexual ethics. This perspective challenges the notion that male clergy are the sole interpreters of moral norms, advocating instead for inclusive frameworks in which women's lived experiences inform ethical reflection and church praxis. Following this logic, until women are allowed to participate fully in shaping sexual ethics, Lutheran moral teaching will continue to reflect male-centred priorities rather than equitable engagement with all congregant's lived realities.

In the context of ELCSA, patriarchal structures manifest in various ways. For instance, the inclusion of wives of bishops, deans, and pastors as ex-officio members in women's leagues, such as the Prayer Women's League (PWL), has been identified as a barrier to gender equality within the church's leadership (Chisale, 2020:11). While ostensibly symbolic, these positions often restrict broader participation and reinforce patriarchal control by privileging status and familial connection over merit or theological insight. In addition, ELCSA's engagement with HIV and AIDS issues has revealed both the promise and limits of church intervention in matters of women's sexual ethics. While the church participates in interfaith dialogues on women's rights and gender equality, the implementation of policies that promote equality within church structures remains inconsistent. This inconsistency leaves women ministers and congregants vulnerable to patriarchal interpretations of sexual morality (ACT Ubumbano, 2021). I contend that this demonstrates the gap between public advocacy and internal structural reform, showing that church-endorsed policies often fail to translate into tangible empowerment for women in everyday congregational life.

Feminist critique situates the regulation of women's sexuality within broader structures of patriarchal power in the Lutheran church. Women's bodies, in this lens, are not merely biological or spiritual entities, they are politically and socially mediated sites where authority is exercised. I posit that controlling female sexuality through clerical authority perpetuates a culture of moral surveillance and reinforces inequitable power dynamics that marginalise women in both spiritual and social realms. Furthermore, by framing moral transgression as a woman's failure, the church obscures the responsibility of male partners and wider congregational structures, creating a one-sided moral accountability that enforces gender hierarchies.

The path toward just and inclusive Lutheran ethics requires a radical reconceptualization of authority and agency. Women must be recognised as moral agents whose sexual autonomy is not contingent on male oversight or ecclesial approval. This involves not only revising doctrinal interpretations of Scripture but also restructuring leadership and decision-making bodies to ensure equitable representation. Only through such reforms can Lutheran ethics move toward justice, equality, and the recognition of women as full participants in theological reflection. Sexuality, in this view, becomes a space for empowerment rather than control, for dialogue rather than shame, and for co-creation rather than unilateral moral prescription.

Moreover, in considering the lived experiences of women in ELCSA, it becomes evident that clerical authority over female bodies has far-reaching implications beyond church walls. Patriarchal teachings reinforce societal norms that restrict women's sexual agency, influence marriage negotiations, and impact women's health choices, including access to contraception and reproductive healthcare. By failing to address these systemic issues, the church inadvertently perpetuates the marginalisation of women in broader societal structures. From my perspective, a truly Lutheran ethical framework must therefore engage not only with theology but also with the social realities of women's lives, ensuring that moral guidance is both just and liberative.

Ultimately, the control of women's sexuality by male clergy is not an inevitable feature of Lutheranism; it is a historically and socially constructed phenomenon that can and should be challenged. In reimagining sexual ethics within ELCSA, Lutheran feminist theology offers an opportunity to decentre patriarchal authority, affirm women's agency, and cultivate a church that reflects the dignity and equality inherent in all of God's creation. The liberation of

women's sexuality is inseparable from the broader project of theological reform, social justice, and the recognition of women as co-creators of Christian moral life.

2.10 Silencing of Women's Voices in Theology

Patriarchal Lutheran discourse systematically excludes women lived experiences of sexuality from theological reflection. Ruether (1993:72) argues that the construction of sexual ethics has largely been shaped by male theologians, resulting in a one-sided framework that neglects women's perspectives. This exclusion is not merely an oversight but a deliberate structuring of theology that prioritises male authority, sustaining social and ecclesial power hierarchies. The silencing of women's voices reinforces structural inequality and denies women the ability to articulate theological understandings of their own bodies, desires, and sexualities (Ruether, 1993:72).

African Lutheran feminist theologians like Phiri and Nadar,(2009), Selokela,(2005) and Rubaya,(2022) emphasise that this marginalisation is both theological and sociocultural. According to Phaliso (2012:5), within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), women's contributions have historically been restricted in both formal doctrinal discussions and informal pastoral care, particularly on issues concerning sexuality, marriage, and reproductive rights. I contend that this dual exclusion, both public and private, serves to normalise male interpretation as the ultimate authority, rendering women's perspectives invisible and invalid. Moyo (2005:14) adds that African churches often reinforce male-centred readings of Scripture, framing women's sexual behaviour as a problem to be controlled rather than as a legitimate expression of human agency and divine creativity. This framework systematically prioritises obedience, purity, and submission over women's lived realities, often masking the harm caused by such rigid moral codes under the guise of spiritual discipline.

Haddad (2016:36) further notes that the silencing of women's perspectives extends into practical pastoral care. Women who seek divorce, exercise contraceptive choice, or consider abortion are frequently denied platforms to articulate their reasoning or theological perspectives. Instead, male clergy interpret their situations through moralistic lenses, enforcing punitive measures or social censure rather than offering empathetic guidance. From my observation, this reflects a deeper pattern in which ecclesial structures not only exclude women from theological discourse but also actively police their sexualities, embedding patriarchal control into everyday congregational life. This control perpetuates systemic oppression within

both the church and broader society, suggesting that the church's ethical teachings may at times function more as instruments of social discipline than as vehicles of spiritual formation.

There is a critical need to reclaim women's experiences as legitimate sources of theological insight. Dube (2001:12) contends that integrating women's narratives is essential for transforming sexual ethics in African Lutheran contexts. Indeed, centering women's experiences does not merely "add" their voices but fundamentally reshapes the theological and ethical landscape. Women's narratives illuminate the lived realities of desire, consent, and intimacy, highlighting gaps between doctrinal prescriptions and human experience. By engaging these narratives, theologians can construct ethical frameworks that uphold mutuality, respect, and justice while affirming bodily autonomy as a divine gift rather than a site of moral suspicion.

Within ELCSA, initiatives such as women's leagues, leadership programs, and gender justice advocacy represent important efforts to disrupt patriarchal control and amplify women's voices. However, while these structures are promising, they often exist within broader systems of male-dominated governance, limiting their transformative potential. True liberation requires not only structural inclusion but a reimagining of theological authority itself, where women are recognised as co-creators of moral knowledge and ethical reflection. Only through such a reorientation can the church foster a space where sexual ethics are informed by diverse experiences, rather than imposed through top-down moral adjudication.

Silencing of women in theology perpetuates a cycle of disempowerment that extends beyond ecclesial walls, affecting women's social status, health, and agency in African societies. Ethical frameworks that exclude women fail to address the realities of sexual violence, reproductive health, and gendered power imbalances, reinforcing structural inequalities and moral double standards. By contrast, a Lutheran feminist ethic that centres women's voices challenge the historic monopoly of male interpretation, creating a more holistic and inclusive vision of Christian moral life.

The exclusion of women's sexual experiences from Lutheran theological reflection represents a profound site of patriarchal control within ELCSA. From my perspective, integrating women lived experiences is not simply a corrective measure; it is a transformative theological act. By reclaiming women's narratives, the church affirms women as moral agents, restores justice to sexual ethics, and aligns more faithfully with a vision of God's creation as inclusive, equitable, and grounded in mutual respect. This approach redefines theology not as a top-down imposition

but as a dialogical process where lived experience and divine wisdom intersect to foster justice, dignity, and human flourishing.

2.11 Feminist Theological Critiques of Christian Ethics

Feminist theology provides a critical lens to interrogate patriarchal interpretations of Christian ethics. Scholars such as Ruether (1997) and Dube (2000) emphasize centring women lived experiences, challenging doctrines and teachings that perpetuate exclusion, stigma, or silencing. Importantly, feminist theology does more than critique patriarchal structures, it actively reconstructs ethical frameworks that honour women's agency, bodily autonomy, and moral authority. This approach insists that women's experiences are not peripheral but central to understanding the moral and spiritual dimensions of human life. By prioritising women's perspectives, feminist theology questions traditional assumptions about sin, virtue, and sexual morality, exposing the ways in which Christian ethics have historically reinforced gender hierarchies.

McDonough, (2025:2) argue that the emergence of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1960s provides crucial historical context for understanding this critique. Amid social turmoil, anti-Vietnam War rallies, and civil rights movements, women reasserted their political and social visibility. Nott (2018:16) describes this period as a "resurrection of the women's movement", building upon the suffrage victories of the early twentieth century. This movement was not only about political enfranchisement but also about questioning societal norms that had long constrained women's personal, sexual, and professional lives. Hewitt (2002) notes that the Women's Liberation Movement examined systemic inequalities and sought to dismantle social, political, and economic structures that perpetuated oppression. From my point of view, the relevance of this movement for feminist theology lies in its insistence that oppression is multi-dimensional, intersecting with race, class, sexuality, and religious affiliation. Feminist theology, therefore, extends this analysis into the moral and spiritual realms, interrogating doctrines that have historically justified male authority over women's bodies and choices.

Jackson (1994:16) highlights that the second wave of feminism empowered women to challenge gender injustice, emphasising the maxim that "the personal is political". The relevance of this principle is particularly salient for understanding Christian sexual ethics. Women's private experiences of desire, marriage, sexual autonomy, and reproductive decision-making have often been policed in the name of divine or ecclesial authority. By recognising

these experiences as sites of theological reflection, feminist theology transforms private struggles into legitimate ethical and moral inquiry. Steinem (1989) notes that second-wave feminists expanded their critique to include sexuality, family structures, and reproductive rights, challenging the assumption that women's moral and social value is inherently tied to male approval or oversight. This expansion is pivotal; it situates sexuality at the heart of feminist moral critique, making it inseparable from broader questions of justice, autonomy, and human dignity.

Parsons (2004:81) observes the diversity of feminist movements, reflecting different ideologies, methods, and goals. This diversity enriches feminist theological critique because it allows for multiple lenses, intersectional, contextual, and culturally specific, through which to evaluate Christian ethics. In African contexts, particularly within ELCSA, feminist theologians contend that patriarchal readings of scripture have often been imposed as universal norms, disregarding women`s lived realities. Moyo (2005:14) asserts that these readings present women's sexual behaviour as a moral problem, reducing female sexuality to an object of control rather than acknowledging it as a site of agency, creativity, and relational ethics. In my opinion, this approach not only marginalises women in church life but also entrenches gendered inequalities in broader society by framing obedience and submission as religious imperatives.

Feminist theology also challenges dualistic paradigms that privilege spirit over body, male over female, and reason over relational experience. Rakoczy (2005:25) critiques the historical framing of women as vessels of reproduction, arguing that moral knowledge and agency are inseparable from bodily experience. Similarly, I argue that women's bodies are not merely sites of temptation or sin; they are central to ethical reflection, relationality, and moral decision-making. Harrison (1985:67) advances a "spirituality of sensuality," asserting that knowledge of God and ethical discernment emerges from tangible, embodied relationships. This insight resonates with the study's focus on female sexuality: understanding morality, desire, and agency requires centring women's embodied experiences, including their sexual autonomy. By doing so, ethical frameworks become "worldly" rather than abstract, grounding moral reasoning in the lived realities of those historically excluded from theological discourse.

Importantly, feminist theological critique is not limited to deconstruction; it also reconstructs ethical frameworks that affirm life, agency, and relationality. Ruether (1983:11) posits that religion can reconnect individuals with fundamental truths of existence, offering a moral compass that is responsive to contemporary realities. I argue that women's narratives,

especially regarding sexuality and bodily integrity, must inform this moral compass. By reclaiming these narratives, feminist theology challenges static, male-centred interpretations of scripture, highlighting stories of women such as Deborah, Esther, and Mary Magdalene as sources of empowerment and moral instruction. At the same time, it critiques narratives that glorify passivity and submission, such as idealised readings of Mary, which can perpetuate cycles of oppression (Hinga, 2017).

Ultimately, feminist theology in this study frames sexual autonomy as a critical dimension of liberation. It posits that women's bodies and experiences are not sites of shame or moral regulation but instruments for rethinking ethics, power, and justice. By centring female voices, experiences, and moral reasoning, Christian ethics can evolve to reflect a more inclusive, relational, and just understanding of God's creation. This approach is transformative: it bridges theology and lived experience, challenges patriarchal control, and affirms women as active moral agents capable of shaping ethical discourse within both the church and society at large.

Building on the feminist theological critique outlined above, it becomes evident that ELCSA's patriarchal structures have systematically constrained women's sexual agency and autonomy. The church's ethical frameworks, historically developed and maintained by male theologians and clergy, have often imposed restrictive norms that privilege male authority while marginalising women's experiences. For instance, the emphasis on virginity, purity, and chastity within ELCSA, as discussed earlier, exemplifies the intersection of patriarchal theology and cultural expectations. Young women are frequently subjected to moral surveillance through practices such as public shaming, exclusion from congregational activities, and even tacit endorsement of virginity testing in some dioceses (Haddad, 2016:28). From a feminist theological standpoint, these practices reduce female sexuality to a site of control rather than agency, perpetuating a system in which women's bodies are disciplined under the guise of moral or religious necessity.

Feminist scholars like Fulata Moyo (2005:12) and Musa Dube (2001:32) highlight that this regulatory framework does not occur in a vacuum but is reinforced by socio-cultural patriarchal norms. The church's insistence on female sexual purity, for instance, aligns with broader societal patterns that judge women's worth based on compliance with male-centred moral codes. I argue that such practices exemplify the dual oppression women face: they are not only subject to ecclesiastical moral control but also constrained by cultural expectations that reinforce the subordination of women. This compounding of religious and cultural control

underscores the necessity of feminist theological intervention, which seeks to interrogate, critique, and ultimately transform these structures in ways that affirm women's agency, dignity, and moral competence.

Clerical authority over women's bodies further illustrates the patriarchal configuration of sexual ethics in ELCSA. As previously noted, male clergy act as moral gatekeepers, regulating issues ranging from premarital sex to contraception and abortion (Phiri & Nadar, 2006:32). Feminist theology critiques this monopolisation of ethical interpretation, arguing that it silences women's voices and enforces a male-centric moral code (Kanyoro, 2021). I note that such clerical control positions women as passive subjects whose sexual behaviour must conform to externally imposed rules, rather than as autonomous agents capable of making ethical decisions informed by their lived realities. This dynamic not only marginalises women's participation in theological discourse but also reinforces social hierarchies that normalise gender inequality under the guise of divine mandate (Ruether, 1993:69).

The silencing of women's voices in theological and ethical reflection constitutes another critical site of patriarchal control. In ELCSA, women's experiences of sexuality, desire, and reproductive choice have historically been excluded from formal doctrinal deliberation and informal pastoral guidance (Phaliso, 2012:5). By privileging male interpretations of Scripture, the church perpetuates ethical frameworks that emphasise obedience, purity, and submission over women lived realities. Feminist theological critique insists that women's narratives must be incorporated into ethical reflection to construct more holistic and just moral frameworks. As Dube (2001:12) asserts, recognising women as co-creators of theological knowledge is essential for disrupting patriarchal authority and fostering inclusive, relational ethics that centre mutual respect and human dignity. I posit that this re-centring is crucial not only for theological scholarship but also for practical church life: it allows women to reclaim moral agency, articulate ethical concerns, and challenge oppressive structures without fear of censure or exclusion.

Moreover, feminist theology foregrounds the body as a site of moral and theological knowledge. Rakoczy (2005:25) argues that women's bodies, rather than being sources of shame or sin, are foundational to ethical reasoning and moral reflection. Applying this insight to ELCSA, it is apparent that the persistent control over women's sexuality reflects a denial of their embodied moral authority. Practices that shame, survey, or discipline women's sexual expression undermine their capacity to participate fully in ethical deliberation. Conversely, a

feminist-informed approach affirms that women's experiences of desire, consent, and intimacy are central to constructing ethical frameworks that reflect justice, equity, and divine intention.

Integrating feminist theology with the analysis of ELCSA's sexual ethics reveals the profound ways in which patriarchal structures limit women's agency, moral participation, and theological voice. By centring women lived experiences, interrogating male-dominated interpretations of Scripture, and recognising the body as a source of moral knowledge, feminist theology offers both critique and reconstruction. This approach not only challenges structural inequities but also reimagines Lutheran ethics in ways that affirm women as active moral agents, capable of shaping sexual ethics that are relational, just, and reflective of God's holistic vision for humanity. In practical terms, such an approach necessitates structural reforms within ELCSA, including increased representation of women in leadership, inclusive pastoral care practices, and ethical guidelines that validate women's autonomy and dignity in matters of sexuality and moral decision-making.

2.11.1 African Feminist Theology

To address the cultural limitations of Western feminist frameworks in this study, I will integrate insights from African feminist theology, which emphasizes the importance of interpreting gender, sexuality, and ethics within African cultural, religious, and communal contexts. Incorporating African feminist theology in this study helps address cultural gaps in feminist ethical frameworks by situating discussions of women's sexuality within African socio-cultural and religious realities. African feminist theologians emphasize that women's experiences of oppression are shaped simultaneously by culture, religion, and historical structures such as colonialism and patriarchy. Therefore, theological reflection must critically engage both African cultural traditions and Christian teachings while affirming women's dignity and agency. Phiri (2025:381) argues that African women's theology seeks to expose and transform the religious and cultural systems that perpetuate women's marginalization while centering women's lived experiences as a source of theological knowledge.

Siwila (2014:134) highlights how African religious and cultural discourses often regulate women's bodies and sexuality through patriarchal interpretations that silence women's voices in religious spaces. She argues that feminist theological analysis must interrogate how these discourses shape women's identities and well-being while opening space for women to reclaim agency over their bodies and spiritual lives (Siwila & Kisitu, 2016:188).

In addition, Nyawo (2021:74) emphasizes that discussions of gender, religion, and social development in Africa must consider the intersection of theology, culture, and socio-economic realities that influence women's lives and sexual ethics. African feminist theology therefore provides a contextual framework for engaging sexuality, gender justice, and religious ethics in ways that are relevant to African communities and church contexts (Nyawo, 2021:78). By integrating these perspectives, this study strengthens its analytical framework by ensuring that feminist theological critique remains contextually grounded in African realities. African feminist theology thus enables a more nuanced engagement with Christian ethics and women's sexuality within ELCSA, challenging patriarchal interpretations while affirming women's embodied experiences and ethical agency**.**

2.11.2 Feminist Theological Interventions in ELCSA

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), patriarchal norms have historically dictated how women's sexuality is understood and regulated. For example, adolescent girls experiencing premarital pregnancies have often been subjected to public shaming, exclusion from church activities, or formal church discipline, while male counterparts are rarely sanctioned to the same degree (Chisale, 2020:15). African Lutheran feminist scholars have been instrumental in initiating reforms within ELCSA. Moyo (2005:20) emphasises that centring women's narratives allows the church to recognise female agency in matters of sexuality, consent, and reproductive health. Dube (2001:15) also stresses that theological reflection must be informed by the lived realities of African women, particularly those navigating social, economic, and health vulnerabilities. In practical terms, feminist insights have influenced ELCSA's pastoral programmes, where women leaders now play central roles in education, counselling, and policy discussions, helping to shift the discourse from moral surveillance to empowerment and care (ACT Ubumbano, 2021).

Another example is the increasing involvement of women in leadership structures, such as diocesan committees and women's leagues. While historical structures often limited women to supporting roles, feminist advocacy within ELCSA has created spaces for women ministers and lay leaders to articulate alternative ethical frameworks that affirm women's sexual autonomy, challenge stigma, and promote gender justice. As a result, ELCSA elected the first female bishop who was consecrated in May 2021. These reforms reflect a practical integration of feminist theology, where women's voices and experiences directly shape policies, pastoral care, and ethical guidance.

Further feminist theological interventions in ELCSA have produced tangible reforms in sexual ethics, pastoral care, and leadership structures, demonstrating the practical relevance of centring women lived experiences.

- One of the most notable initiatives is the HIV and AIDS Pastoral Programme in the Umgeni Circuit of KwaZulu-Natal. Historically, women living with HIV faced intense stigma, exclusion from church activities, and lack of access to sexual health education. Feminist theology informed the design of this programme by emphasising women's dignity, autonomy, and agency in matters of sexual and reproductive health. Women leaders and ministers conducted workshops, counselling sessions, and advocacy campaigns, fostering an environment in which female congregants could access information and pastoral support without fear of judgment. As a result, stigma was reduced, women were empowered to participate in policy discussions, and pastoral care became more inclusive and supportive (ACT Ubumbano, 2021).
- Another area of reform is the inclusion of women in diocesan committees and leadership structures, where decisions about sexual ethics and pastoral care were traditionally dominated by men. According to Chisale (2020:4) "Feminist advocacy within ELCSA highlighted the exclusion of women ministers and lay leaders from these processes". Drawing on feminist theology, women were able to assert the legitimacy of their perspectives, centring their lived experiences of sexuality, reproductive health, and family life in theological deliberations. This led to greater participation in the creation of ethical guidelines, policy recommendations, and pastoral strategies, allowing women's voices to shape church praxis (Chisale, 2020:5).
- The Prayer Women's League (PWL) provides a further example of feminist intervention. Historically, membership and influence in the PWL were limited to clergy wives, which reinforced patriarchal control and marginalised ordinary women (Chisale, 2020:7). Through feminist-informed workshops and advocacy campaigns, women outside clergy families began to participate meaningfully in discussions around sexual ethics and pastoral care. This structural reform expanded women's influence within the church and challenged male-dominated gatekeeping practices, allowing a wider range of female experiences to inform ethical discourse.
- Pastoral responses to premarital pregnancy also illustrate the intersection of feminist theology and ethical practice. Phaliso (2012:3) argues that previously, adolescent girls who became pregnant outside marriage were publicly shamed, disciplined, or excluded

from church life. Feminist theological perspectives emphasised non-judgmental counselling, respect for dignity, and pastoral support. Clergy trained in these approaches shifted the focus from moral punishment to care and empowerment, gradually transforming congregational attitudes toward female sexuality and reducing the stigma attached to young women's reproductive choices (Haddad, 2016:20).

- Finally, gender justice advocacy programs within ELCSA championed by LUCSA (Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa) have addressed structural inequalities affecting women's roles in both church and family. According to Moyo (2005:18), "Workshops, seminars, and leadership training sessions drew on feminist theology to equip women with the tools to articulate ethical perspectives, advocate for reproductive rights, and participate in theological reflection". These programmes have strengthened women's capacity to influence church policy, challenge patriarchal norms, and promote sexual ethics grounded in agency, justice, and dignity.

Collectively, these case studies demonstrate how feminist theology functions both as critique and praxis within ELCSA. By centring women's lived experiences, these interventions have disrupted patriarchal control over sexuality, expanded women's participation in ethical deliberation, and fostered more inclusive, just, and contextually relevant frameworks for sexual ethics within the African Lutheran context. In conclusion, feminist theology in ELCSA serves both as critique and as praxis: it interrogates patriarchal control over women's sexuality while enabling women to reclaim voice, influence church ethics, and participate as moral agents. By embedding women lived experiences into theological reflection and sexual ethics, feminist theology fosters more inclusive, just, and contextually relevant practices within the African Lutheran church.

2.12 Women's Negotiation of Sexuality in ELCSA

Women's negotiation of sexuality within religious contexts reveals the practical implications of ethical and doctrinal norms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study highlights the effects of ethical teachings in ELCSA.

ELCSA, like many other faiths, exhibits a patriarchal mentality, and this is evident in the presence of gender discrimination within its structures and practices. The church has historically favoured male leadership and perspectives, often side-lining the voices and experiences of women. This systemic bias positions women in roles that primarily serve to support men, thereby reinforcing traditional gender norms. ELCSA is complicit in gender-

biased practices that stifle women's growth rather than encourage it. Dreyer (2011:110) argue out that “women are urged to make sacrifices for others and blend in, often at the expense of their own aspirations and identities”.

He further argues that in most instances, the church's teachings promote the idea that a woman's primary purpose is to nurture and support her family, which can limit her opportunities for personal and professional development. The expectation for women to prioritise the needs of their husbands and children often leaves them with little room to explore their own ambitions or to express their individuality (Dreyer, 2011:112). This dynamic can lead to frustration and a sense of inadequacy, as women grapple with the dichotomy between their personal desires and the roles assigned to them by the church.

In my view, the Church shapes women's sexuality as early as their youth and adolescence, prescribing how and when to engage in sexual behaviour. These teachings often come laden with guilt and shame, particularly surrounding premarital sex, which is frequently condemned. Young women are taught to remain chaste until marriage, and those who deviate from this expectation can face ostracism or judgment from their peers and church leaders. I am of an opinion that moral policing not only impacts women's self-esteem but also influences their relationships with men, fostering an environment where open discussions about sexuality are stifled.

This study demonstrates the above assertion by focusing on several themes that encapsulate the intersection of gender, sexuality, and the church's influence.

The first theme concerns single women engaging in sexual relationships within the church context. In many ecclesial environments, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), single women who engage in premarital sexual relationships are frequently subjected to heightened scrutiny and social stigma. Church teachings that emphasise chastity and sexual purity before marriage often contribute to a moral climate characterised by fear, judgement, and silence surrounding women’s sexuality. As a result, women may feel discouraged from openly discussing their sexual experiences or seeking pastoral guidance. The internalisation of the expectation that women must remain sexually “pure” until marriage can generate significant psychological and emotional tension, particularly as women negotiate the dissonance between personal desires, embodied realities, and the moral expectations imposed by religious doctrine and community norms.

The second theme relates to married women who are not engaging in sexual relationships within marriage. While the church frequently upholds marriage as the legitimate context for sexual expression, this idealised framework often fails to account for the complexities that shape couples' intimate lives. Married women may experience challenges such as differences in sexual desire, emotional disconnection, or relational strain, yet these realities are rarely acknowledged within church discourse. The absence of open conversations about marital sexuality can result in limited pastoral support for women navigating these experiences. Consequently, a culture of silence is perpetuated in which women feel unable to articulate their needs, struggles, or expectations regarding intimacy. This lack of engagement can contribute to feelings of isolation, dissatisfaction, and emotional distress within marital relationships.

The third theme addresses single women who have children outside of marriage. Within many church communities, single motherhood is frequently perceived as deviating from the normative ideal of the heterosexual nuclear family that is often promoted within Christian teaching. As a result, single mothers may encounter forms of rejection, judgement, or marginalisation within the faith community. The dominant narrative surrounding single motherhood can portray these women as morally deficient or irresponsible, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that fail to recognise the complex social, economic, and relational circumstances that shape their lives. Such perspectives not only alienate single mothers but also overlook their resilience, agency, and need for communal support. The church's reluctance to affirm and support single mothers can therefore hinder their participation within the faith community and perpetuate patterns of exclusion.

The final theme concerns married women who do not have children. In many Christian contexts where procreation is closely associated with the purpose of marriage, women who remain childless, whether by choice or circumstance may experience subtle or overt forms of pressure from both congregants and church leadership. The strong cultural and theological emphasis on motherhood can overshadow women's autonomy in making decisions regarding their reproductive lives. As a result, women who do not have children may encounter assumptions, judgement, or questioning that implicitly frames motherhood as a primary measure of feminine fulfilment. These expectations can produce feelings of inadequacy, guilt, or perceived failure among women who believe they are not meeting the normative standards upheld by their faith community. This dynamic highlights the need for a more nuanced and compassionate theological engagement with women's diverse reproductive experiences.

The interplay of gender and sexuality within ELCSA reflects broader patterns of patriarchal control and gender discrimination. By examining the experiences of single and married women in relation to sexuality and motherhood, we can better understand the detrimental effects of these entrenched beliefs. The church's gender-biased practices not only impede women's growth but also perpetuate cycles of shame and stigma that can have lasting impacts on their lives. Addressing these issues requires a critical examination of the church's teachings and a commitment to fostering an environment that champions gender equality and supports the diverse experiences of all women. The study interrogates these themes for better understanding of sexuality for women in ELCSA.

2.12.1 Single Women in ELCSA

In his view, Dykstra (2013:82) argues that researchers in sexuality studies have extensively examined teenagers' perceptions of sexuality and the various factors influencing their development. Within this context, virginity is often esteemed in Christian churches as a critical symbol of purity, especially among adolescent females. Maluleke (2007:9) adds that this reverence for virginity is deeply rooted in a tradition that promotes Christian morality, which underscores the importance of abstaining from sexual activity until marriage. While virginity is universally valued as a representation of purity, it is essential to recognise the gender biases inherent in this ideology. Frequently, the virginity of young girls is scrutinised both within the church and through traditional cultural practices, effectively placing immense pressure on them to conform to these expectations.

Moyo (2004:6) argues that "the church's emphasis on virginity not only valorises purity but also reinforces patriarchal structures by instilling in both young girls and boys the belief that women must be taught how to navigate their sexuality, while men are often perceived as innately knowledgeable about sexual matters". This dichotomy creates a scenario where the sexual agency of women is undermined, and their sexual experiences are often viewed through a lens of morality that prioritises male perspectives and control. Chisale (2014:2) points out that "according to various cultural and religious beliefs, a woman's sexual purity is often seen as compromised through acts such as sexual penetration or unwed pregnancy," which further complicates the discourse surrounding female sexuality.

Within the context of the Prayer Women's League (PWL), Section 3.2, subsection 3.2.3 of their Constitution explicitly states that the responsibility for sexuality education within the church falls on the Prayer Women, particularly for young adolescent females participating in

Sunday School and confirmation classes. This allocation of responsibility highlights a significant gap: there is no corresponding league or organisation within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) that addresses sexual education for young and adolescent boys. This oversight underscores a systemic bias where adolescent girls are expected to receive guidance on their sexuality, while boys are presumed to already possess a certain level of sexual knowledge and understanding.

Chisale (2014:3) highlights this disparity, noting that in some congregations, the onus of sexual education is placed solely on adolescent girls, reinforcing the notion that their sexuality must be controlled and managed, while boys are not subjected to the same scrutiny. This pattern of sexual socialisation within religious frameworks effectively subordinates women's sexuality to that of men, positioning men as the gatekeepers of sexual knowledge and agency. Consequently, adult women often perpetuate these teachings, guiding adolescent girls through the complex journey into adulthood while reinforcing a patriarchal worldview.

From my perspective, this internalisation of patriarchal norms among women in ELCSA is one of the most pressing ethical challenges in the church today. The Prayer Women's League, while a space intended to empower women spiritually and socially, paradoxically becomes a vehicle for reproducing the very ideologies that constrain women's freedom. Women who lead these programmes, often shaped by decades of patriarchal teachings, inadvertently pass on gendered expectations that define womanhood through chastity, obedience, and service rather than self-determination and moral agency. I believe this is where feminist theology must intervene, not to condemn the League but to transform it into a platform of liberation. Feminist theological engagement should encourage critical reflection on how sexual education can affirm both dignity and equality.

The patriarchal structuring of sexuality education reveals how Christian moral teachings have been selectively applied to maintain gender hierarchies. When boys are left without structured sexual education, the church effectively reinforces the notion that male sexuality is natural and beyond regulation, while female sexuality is moralised and policed. This asymmetry distorts the development of healthy sexual ethics among both genders. Boys grow up internalising entitlement and dominance, while girls internalise shame, silence, and submission.

Kaunda and Nadar (2012:349) remind us that in the patriarchisation of Africa by Christian missionaries and the church, women's roles were systematically minimised or destroyed. Missionaries promoted teachings of women's silence and men's divine access, reinforcing

male-centred spiritual authority. Thus, as they assert, “the God whom Christian scripture teaches created both women and men in God’s image was now being interpreted through the perception of men who defined their own role, their own values, as well as those of the women within society” (Kaunda & Nadar, 2012:350).

Chisale (2014:5) observes that this dynamic persists in modern ELCSA congregations, particularly through the expectations set by older, traditional church women, who insist that young unmarried women and girls adhere to customs introduced by missionaries. These customs contribute to a culture of silence and submission, socialising women into roles that diminish their voices and agency within both religious and societal contexts.

The interplay between religious teachings, cultural practices, and gendered expectations thus creates a complex landscape for adolescent girls navigating their sexuality. Virginity becomes less about personal choice and more about community honour, morality, and respectability. I argue that until ELCSA adopts a holistic approach to sexuality education, one that includes both boys and girls and emphasises mutual respect, equality, and informed choice, the cycle of patriarchal dominance will persist.

African women’s cultural hermeneutics provide valuable insight here. By interrogating inherited patriarchal interpretations and reclaiming indigenous notions of mutual respect and relational balance, this framework calls for a theology that affirms life, dignity, and equality. Through this lens, the PWL could evolve from a moral policing body into a transformative space for gender justice, nurturing both young women and men to view sexuality as sacred, relational, and empowering.

Addressing gender bias in sexual education within ELCSA requires a radical theological reorientation. Virginity and purity teachings must be reframed not as instruments of control but as expressions of self-worth and spiritual autonomy. True Christian ethics, rooted in love and justice, should empower all individuals, regardless of gender, to embrace their sexuality as a divine gift, exercised responsibly, freely, and without fear or shame.

2.12.2 Single Women and Sexual Intercourse in ELCSA

When church teachings falter, the repercussions for unmarried women can be severe. Abstinence is often disregarded, virginity becomes a casualty, and unintended pregnancies occur, leading to significant social and spiritual consequences for these women. In many cases, they face censure from church authorities, which can result in a profound sense of shame and

isolation. Oduyoye (2001:84) posits that “the goal of church discipline is ostensibly to uphold moral standards and call out public sin, particularly among unmarried women and girls who have not adhered to the church's teachings”. This approach employs biblical analogies and is rooted in interpretations of Scripture that emphasise punishment over compassion.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) exemplifies this punitive approach by penalising unmarried women and girls for perceived violations of the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery”. This commandment raises two significant issues in this context. Firstly, it is inherently gender-biased; the term “adultery” is primarily applied to women, as pregnancy is viewed as tangible proof of having engaged in premarital sexual intercourse. Conversely, the boys and men responsible for these pregnancies often escape scrutiny and punishment, suggesting a societal double standard that absolves them of wrongdoing. This inequity not only reinforces harmful stereotypes but also perpetuates a culture of victim-blaming where women are seen as the sole perpetrators of sin.

The second issue with the interpretation of the sixth commandment is its vagueness regarding whom it applies to. The commandment addresses adultery, which, by definition, occurs within the context of a marital commitment. In this light, the church's application of the commandment to unmarried women and adolescent girls is problematic. Chisale (2004:7) argues that “this commandment should not apply to individuals who are not in committed relationships, such as marriage”. This misinterpretation leads to a distortion of the scripture's intent and, consequently, the unfair targeting of vulnerable populations within the church community.

Moreover, the teachings of the Lutheran church, as articulated in its *Little Catechism* intended for children and teenagers preparing for confirmation, contextualise this commandment within the framework of married life (Luther, 2011:63). The catechism does not directly address premarital sexual activity, suggesting that the commandment is not meant to serve as a tool for chastising unmarried women and girls. This discrepancy indicates that the commandment's application as a disciplinary measure is more reflective of the church's cultural biases than of its theological foundations.

This selective and punitive interpretation of Scripture reveals a deeper moral and pastoral crisis within the ELCSA. The church, meant to embody Christ’s love and compassion, has too often become an instrument of control rather than healing. I`m of an opinion that when theology is shaped without the inclusion of women lived experiences, it risks losing touch with the realities of faith in daily life. The insistence on moral purity as the sole indicator of faithfulness

disregards the grace-centred message of the Gospel. Instead of guiding the faithful toward understanding and redemption, it alienates those who fall short of an ideal that is, in many ways, shaped by patriarchal expectations rather than divine intention.

Furthermore, the psychological and emotional burden placed on women is immense. Women who conceive outside of marriage often experience deep guilt, social rejection, and spiritual alienation. Yet, these consequences rarely lead to moral transformation or restoration of faith; they more often produce resentment and departure from the church community. This outcome contradicts the very mission of the church, which is to reconcile rather than reject, to heal rather than harm. The faith community should be a space of refuge, where individuals are met with understanding, guidance, and the assurance of God's forgiveness.

A more compassionate theology would move beyond moral condemnation toward redemptive accompaniment. This means recognising human sexuality as part of God's creation, complex, relational, and capable of reflecting divine love when grounded in respect and mutual care. Churches should, therefore, prioritise pastoral care that affirms dignity rather than enforces shame. Open discussions about sexuality, reproductive health, and responsible decision-making should replace silence and secrecy. Empowering both young men and women to understand the ethical dimensions of their choices can foster shared accountability rather than perpetuating gendered blame.

In addition, the reinterpretation of the sixth commandment through a feminist theological lens invites a more just understanding of sin and grace. Adultery, in its biblical sense, is not merely about sexual transgression but about covenantal betrayal and misuse of trust. When the church singles out unmarried women for discipline while excusing men, it betrays its own covenant of justice and equality before God. A theology rooted in love, mercy, and human dignity calls for accountability that is mutual, not punitive, and for moral education that reflects the inclusive nature of Christ's message.

Ultimately, the church's credibility depends on its willingness to confront these internal inconsistencies. The ELCSA must embrace a reformative stance that upholds gender justice and prioritizes compassion over condemnation. By adopting an approach grounded in empathy and equality, the church can reclaim its prophetic role, guiding its members toward wholeness rather than deepening their wounds. In this way, theology becomes not a weapon of judgment but a tool for liberation, restoring both women and men to the fullness of their humanity within the grace of God.

2.12.3 Married Women in Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA)

There are expectations on married women within Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA). The Bible has been used to address issues like the use of contraception and abortion. The section below addresses these two themes.

Holtzhausen (1996:277) state “Augustine believed that God created sex so that humans could multiply, which he referred to as "good sexuality." He defended marriage as beneficial because it resulted in offspring. Sexual connection between married couples symbolizes Christ's union with the church. Sex in marriage is allowed only if the couple respects one another and intends to have children. Since sex for enjoyment was thought evil, Augustine allowed for "spiritual marriage," in which the couple refrains from sexual activity unless it is done with the intention of procreation. Fuchs (1983:30) adds that, “based on this rationale, Augustine categorically prohibited the use of any type of contraception, which became the foundation for the Roman Catholic Church's rejection of women who use contraception”.

In stark contrast, Martin Luther viewed marriage as a saving influence, one that provides grace to counteract the destructive forces inherent in human sexuality. He believed that marriage allows individuals to fulfil their natural desires for love, companionship, and the desire for offspring (Strohl, 2008). According to De Bruyn's (1996: 218) study of Luther's stance on sexual intercourse within matrimony, the aim of marriage after the fall is not solely the union of a man and woman in a relationship of mutual support and procreation but is also complicated by the presence of wicked lust. This provides a perceptive that married women are expected to have children thus rejecting the use of contraception, thus provide the Lutheran stance on the use of contraceptives.

Above stated argument emphasizes that Martin Luther’s view of marriage as a "saving influence" and a means to counteract human sexuality's destructive tendencies might overlook the complexities and potential limitations of such a perspective. I argue that framing marriage primarily as a remedy for human lust risks reducing marriage to a moral remedy or containment strategy, rather than recognizing it as a genuine partnership rooted in mutual love, respect, and individual fulfilment. Furthermore, this view could inadvertently marginalize those who are unable or choose not to marry, suggesting that their natural desires for companionship and love are less valid or incomplete without the institution of marriage. It might also reinforce traditional gender roles, especially with the expectation that married women should have

children, thereby constrain personal choice and reinforce societal expectations rather than acknowledging the diversity of human experiences and desires.

Additionally, I contend that emphasizing marriage to combat lust and promoting procreation could perpetuate a view that sexuality is inherently problematic or sinful outside the context of marriage, which may overlook the importance of healthy, consensual sexual and romantic relationships beyond institutional boundaries.

While Davis (2004:62) argues that, unlike Augustine, Luther and other Protestant reformers, such as John Calvin, emerged in the twentieth century to publicly endorse the moral acceptability of artificial contraception. It was not until 1930 that the Anglican Bishops made a significant step by publicly acknowledging the use of artificial contraception. Despite the theological shifts brought about by figures like Luther and Calvin, the social implications of these beliefs continue to present challenges in contemporary contexts, particularly within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA).

Many married women from diverse cultural backgrounds face significant pressure and rejection if they are unable to produce children during marriage or if they express objections to having more children, especially if it means delaying childbearing. This situation illustrates the continued prevalence of traditional views regarding women's roles and reproductive rights. In certain cultures, such as among the Batswana and Zulu, the husband and his family often have the authority to decide when and how many children a woman will have. This patriarchal control over reproductive choices effectively violates women's reproductive rights, reducing them to mere vessels for procreation rather than autonomous individuals capable of making their own choices.

Jackson (1994:10) states that “Feminist movements have emerged to advocate for the rights of married women, striving to address these imbalances of power”. However, these movements do not typically advocate for the complete abolition of marriage; rather, they often operate under the assumption that most women will choose marriage and motherhood as their primary vocation (Jackson, 1994:10). The challenge lies in the persistent power dynamics, abuse, and control that occur within the institution of marriage itself. Feminists argue that marriage, while potentially beneficial, can also perpetuate systemic inequalities that restrict women's autonomy and reinforce traditional gender roles.

Moreover, the intersection of faith and culture complicates these issues further. Women in religious communities, such as those belonging to ELCSA, may experience additional layers

of scrutiny and pressure regarding their reproductive choices. The teachings of their faith, often rooted in historical interpretations of scripture, can exacerbate feelings of guilt or inadequacy if they deviate from traditional expectations. Thus, the need for a more nuanced understanding of women's rights within the context of marriage and faith becomes paramount.

As society evolves, it is crucial for religious institutions to engage in thoughtful dialogue about these issues and consider how theological perspectives can adapt to promote not only the sanctity of marriage but also the dignity and rights of women. Emphasizing mutual respect, communication, and shared decision-making in marriage can help to mitigate the challenges women face, fostering an environment where both partners can flourish without the constraints of outdated norms. By recognizing the complexity of human relationships and the multifaceted nature of love and sexuality, religious communities can better support their members in navigating these profound and deeply personal matters.

While Luther’s perspective highlights the moral and spiritual benefits of marriage, I put forward an opposing view that advocate for recognizing individual autonomy, diverse relationship structures, and the importance of personal fulfilment beyond traditional or religious frameworks that restrict married women in ELCSA from using contraceptives.

With regards to abortion, women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) face a complex moral dilemma regarding their reproductive rights, particularly in the context of unexpected pregnancies. The question of whether they have the right to terminate such pregnancies is multifaceted, raising critical discussions around a woman's autonomy and the sanctity of life. On one hand, there is the assertion of a woman's freedom to choose, while on the other, there exists the fundamental debate concerning the right to life of the unborn child. This duality presents a challenge for religious communities, particularly those grounded in Christian doctrine, where the implications of abortion can lead to significant ethical and theological discussions.

Davis (2004:71) highlights the morality of abortion, emphasizing two primary scenarios: abortion on demand and abortion to save the life of a mother. Abortion on demand is characterized by a woman's decision to terminate a pregnancy based solely on personal choice, reflecting her autonomy over her body and reproductive decisions. This perspective aligns with a broader view of individual rights, particularly in societies that emphasize personal freedoms. However, the moral implications of such choices are often contested, especially within religious contexts.

From a theological standpoint, Beckwith (2001:86) argues that “life begins at conception, positing that embryos and fetuses should be regarded as human beings deserving of protection”. This perspective informs a broader understanding that abortion is not merely the termination of a pregnancy but rather the act of taking a human life, thus presenting a moral conflict for believers who adhere to the sanctity of life principle.

Conversely, Kress (1999:2) presents an alternative perspective, arguing that embryos and fetuses do not possess the same moral status as fully developed human beings. He posits that the lack of a soul in the unborn renders them less valuable in moral terms, suggesting that personhood and thus the rights associated with it emerge only when a fetus can sustain independent life outside the womb. This viewpoint raises critical questions about the criteria used to define human life and the ethical ramifications of those definitions.

The tension between these perspectives is palpable when considering the broader implications of legalizing abortion on demand. It poses a challenge to the government's role in safeguarding the right to life while simultaneously respecting individual reproductive rights. Ethical dilemmas arise, particularly when considering cases in which a woman's life is at risk due to pregnancy complications. Davis (2004:74) argues that abortion in these circumstances is ethically justified, emphasizing that the decision is not about valuing one life over another but rather about the complex realities faced by women in dire situations. The overarching question remains, can one life be sacrificed for another, and under what conditions?

Furthermore, the ethical landscape becomes even more intricate when considering the role of the church in advocating moral standards. There is a pressing concern regarding whether religious institutions, in their pursuit of upholding Christian ethics, inadvertently infringe upon individual rights and freedoms. The challenge lies in finding a balance between maintaining moral integrity and respecting the autonomy of individuals faced with difficult choices.

Ultimately, the discourse surrounding abortion, particularly within the context of the ELCSA, necessitates a nuanced understanding of both theological teachings and the lived experiences of women. It is essential for the church to engage in open dialogues that consider the complexities of reproductive health, recognizing that women may encounter situations where their rights and responsibilities are in direct conflict. The way forward requires a compassionate approach that respects both the sanctity of life and the dignity of women's choices, fostering a community where moral convictions can coexist with an understanding of personal autonomy and rights. Only through such dialogues can the ELCSA hope to navigate the challenging

waters of reproductive ethics in a manner that honors both faith and the realities of human experience.

2.13 Synthesis of Findings

Across the abovementioned areas, premarital sex, abortion, contraception, and the choice not to have children, ELCSA's Christian ethics demonstrate how patriarchal interpretations constrain women's sexual and reproductive agency. These ethical frameworks, rooted in male-dominated theological reasoning, often reflect historical and cultural biases rather than equitable moral guidance. According to Dube (2000:23), feminist theological perspectives provide a critical lens for analysing these effects, emphasising that moral frameworks often privilege male authority, silence women lived experiences, and perpetuate inequality. The arguments presented in this section illustrate that women's autonomy is curtailed not only in formal church structures, such as leadership positions and decision-making forums, but also in everyday pastoral practices, where women are subject to moral surveillance, censure, and exclusion.

Premarital sex, in particular, has been a site of intensive moral regulation within ELCSA. The emphasis on virginity, especially for women and adolescent girls, creates a gendered double standard where male sexual activity is often ignored or excused, while female sexual behaviour is scrutinised and disciplined. In my opinion, this reveals a fundamental tension between theological ideals and lived realities. While the church presents abstinence as a moral imperative, it often does so without accounting for the complex social, emotional, and economic factors that shape young women's sexual experiences. From a feminist theological standpoint, it is evident that such moral frameworks, while presented as divinely sanctioned, function to maintain patriarchal authority and control over women's bodies rather than to promote holistic spiritual or moral development. This pattern of oversight and moral policing not only restricts sexual agency but also fosters shame, secrecy, and fear among women, undermining their ability to engage meaningfully with their faith.

Abortion is another area in which patriarchal Christian ethics profoundly limits women's autonomy. ELCSA, like many Christian denominations, largely condemns abortion, framing it as a moral transgression with spiritual consequences. While this stance is often justified through appeals to scriptural authority, in practice it disproportionately affects women who may already be marginalised due to age, socioeconomic status, or social stigma. This ethical approach fails to consider the full spectrum of women lived realities, such as the need to make

decisions in situations of poverty, abuse, or health risks. Feminist theological critiques argue that condemning women for abortion without providing pastoral support or addressing structural inequalities is both morally and theologically problematic. An ethical framework that punishes women for exercising reproductive agency does not reflect the justice, compassion, or inclusivity that Christian ethics ideally embody. Instead, it perpetuates a culture of control in which women's decisions are subordinated to patriarchal interpretations of morality.

Contraception, similarly, is framed within ELCSA ethics primarily as a tool for controlling women's sexuality rather than as a mechanism for promoting health, family planning, or informed choice. Women are often taught that the use of contraceptives outside the context of marital planning constitutes moral failure, while men's reproductive choices are rarely interrogated with the same intensity. This imbalance reflects a systemic gender bias that reduces women to moral gatekeepers of sexual behaviour, assigning them responsibility for both preventing pregnancy and maintaining sexual morality. Feminist theological perspectives challenge this approach by affirming that women have the right to make informed reproductive decisions in ways that respect their bodily autonomy and spiritual dignity. Thus, a critical re-evaluation of ELCSA's teachings on contraception is necessary, not to undermine moral guidance but to ensure that ethical frameworks are equitable and grounded in the realities of women's lives.

The choice not to have children, whether motivated by personal, health, or professional considerations, is similarly constrained by patriarchal ethics. ELCSA, reflecting broader societal norms, often frames motherhood as a woman's primary vocation, emphasising biological reproduction as a moral duty and spiritual calling. Women who decide not to bear children may be viewed as deviating from divine expectations or as failing to fulfil their God-given role. Consequently, this perspective reinforces structural inequalities by tying women's spiritual and social value to reproductive function rather than to their broader contributions to church and society. Feminist theological critiques argue that reproductive choice should be recognised as an expression of women's moral agency and spiritual discernment. In my opinion, honouring such choices is essential to creating an ethical framework that respects diversity, promotes justice, and affirms women as full moral subjects within both religious and societal contexts.

African Lutheran feminist scholars have consistently highlighted the interplay between patriarchal theological interpretations and local cultural norms in shaping women's sexual and

reproductive experiences. Moyo (2005:15) notes that ethical frameworks often collude with societal expectations to reinforce male dominance and marginalise women's voices. As a result, this confluence of culture and theology makes it even more critical to adopt transformative approaches that centre women lived experiences. By including women in decision-making processes and validating their insights, ELCSA can create moral frameworks that are both contextually relevant and ethically just. Such inclusion is not merely a theoretical concern; it is a practical necessity for the church to fulfil its mission of justice, care, and compassion in a society marked by historical and ongoing gender inequalities.

Pastoral practices are also central to understanding how patriarchal ethics constrain women. The church's emphasis on monitoring and disciplining women's sexual behaviour often eclipses the provision of supportive, non-judgmental pastoral care. Women who seek guidance on issues related to premarital sex, abortion, contraception, or childbearing frequently encounter moral censure rather than empathetic counsel. This disciplinary approach can alienate women from the faith community, discourage open dialogue about sexual and reproductive health, and perpetuate cycles of secrecy and shame. Thus, a reformed pastoral approach must shift from punitive surveillance to compassionate engagement, prioritising women's well-being and moral agency over rigid adherence to patriarchal norms.

Education also plays a pivotal role in shaping sexual and reproductive ethics within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA). Historically, instruction regarding sexual behaviour has been highly gendered, with adolescent girls receiving detailed guidance on virginity and purity, while boys are largely exempted from such scrutiny. However, Boys are circumcised, but girls do not undergo female genital mutilation (FGM). Male circumcision is done partly because of cultural values, and partly as a component of HIV reduction strategies. Men who undergo circumcision are seen as dominant over women and uncircumcised men (Banwari, 2015:16).

This approach reinforces the perception that women's sexuality must be controlled, whereas men are positioned as inherently knowledgeable and autonomous. Addressing this imbalance through inclusive educational initiatives that engage both genders is essential for dismantling patriarchal ethical structures. Feminist theological perspectives underscore that equitable education fosters informed decision-making, mutual accountability, and the development of ethical norms that respect the dignity and autonomy of all individuals. Nagel, et.al (2024:617) argue that African scholars advocate for transformative ethical frameworks that centre on

Ubuntu, an African philosophy that privileges life over materiality. These frameworks aim to create an institutional culture that values ethical existence and human dignity. They emphasize the importance of Ubuntu ethics in various sectors of society, including education, healthcare, and the economy, to promote racial healing and shared humanity. The frameworks also focus on decolonization and social justice, providing alternative epistemologies beyond the dominant Western-centric conventions (Nagel, et.al ,2024:617). These frameworks are essential for fostering inclusivity and equity and also provide concrete strategies for reforming patriarchal practices within ELCSA. These framework emphasise the integration of women's voices into theological reflection, leadership structures, and pastoral care. Creating spaces for women to participate meaningfully in decision-making not only enhances the legitimacy of ethical frameworks but also ensures that these frameworks are responsive to lived realities. Programmes that support informed reproductive choice, equitable sexual education, and pastoral care that prioritises empathy and guidance over punishment are essential for fostering an inclusive moral community.

Ultimately, addressing the constraints imposed by patriarchal interpretations of Christian ethics requires a multifaceted approach. In my view, ELCSA must engage in sustained critical reflection on its teachings and practices regarding premarital sex, abortion, contraception, and reproductive choice. This involves re-evaluating scriptural interpretations through a feminist theological lens, restructuring leadership to amplify women's voices, and fostering pastoral and educational practices that prioritise agency, dignity, and justice. By adopting such reforms, the church can move toward ethical frameworks that are inclusive, compassionate, and reflective of the complex realities faced by women in Southern African Lutheran communities.

The limitations imposed by patriarchal Christian ethics on women's sexual and reproductive agency are deeply entrenched but not insurmountable. Feminist theological perspectives provide a roadmap for addressing these limitations, emphasising the centrality of women's experiences, the affirmation of bodily autonomy, and the creation of equitable leadership and pastoral structures. Thus, meaningful reform within ELCSA requires a commitment to justice, empathy, and inclusivity, ensuring that moral guidance empowers rather than constrains, supports rather than punishes, and recognises women as full moral agents capable of shaping both their spiritual and social realities. Such a reorientation not only enhances the ethical integrity of the church but also aligns its practices with the broader Christian mission of love, grace, and human flourishing.

2.14 Gaps in Literature

Most existing scholarship on Christian ethics and its impact on the sexuality of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) like Friesen (1990:175), McClintock (2001:12) and Müller (2007:379) focuses narrowly on promoting abstinence or limiting sexual activity strictly within marriage. While the abovementioned scholars offer insights into the moral frameworks upheld by the church, they rarely critically examine the real-world implications, effectiveness, or outcomes of enforcing these moral guidelines. Evidence, such as rising rates of teenage pregnancies and sexual activity among unmarried women, suggests that these strategies may be insufficient or even counterproductive when applied in isolation.

Several literature gaps have been identified that this study seeks to address:

- A lack of empirical or critical assessment of abstinence-focused sexual ethics: Most studies describe the promotion of abstinence as morally desirable without examining whether such teachings effectively shape behaviour, reduce unintended pregnancies, or empower women to make informed choices about their sexuality. There is a scarcity of research that interrogates the actual outcomes of abstinence-centred moral instruction, particularly from the perspectives of women and youth themselves.
- Absence of exploration into alternative approaches to promoting sexual morality: Current scholarship rarely investigates whether frameworks grounded in sexual agency, mutual consent, bodily autonomy, or feminist ethical principles could offer more effective, equitable, or contextually relevant ways of guiding sexual behaviour. There is minimal attention to strategies that combine moral guidance with sexual education, critical reflection, and pastoral support.
- Insufficient attention to women lived experiences: Much of the literature assumes a generalised, often idealised notion of Christian female sexuality without examining how church teachings intersect with the everyday realities of women and girls in ELCSA communities. Studies often overlook the social, cultural, and economic factors that influence women's sexual decisions and how church-sanctioned moral codes affect their psychological, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.
- Limited critique of patriarchal structures within church ethics: Existing literature frequently documents moral guidelines without interrogating the underlying power dynamics that shape them. There is a gap in exploring how male-dominated leadership,

gendered pastoral practices, and patriarchal interpretations of Scripture systematically constrain women's sexual agency, reinforce inequality, and silence women's voices in theological discourse.

- Neglect of intersectional perspectives: While some studies examine sexual morality in Christian contexts, few consider how factors such as race, class, rural-urban location, and age intersect with gender to shape women's sexual experiences. African feminist theologians, such as Fulata Moyo and Musa Dube, emphasise the importance of intersectionality in understanding how patriarchal ethics operate differently across diverse social contexts, a perspective largely missing in current ELCSA-focused research.
- Inadequate exploration of pastoral care practices: There is limited scholarship examining how pastoral counselling, church disciplinary measures, and youth programmes either support or undermine women's autonomy and sexual wellbeing. Few studies analyse whether the guidance provided by pastors, confirmation instructors, or women's leagues aligns with the ethical principles the church espouses, and how these practices influence women's experiences of shame, exclusion, or empowerment.
- Scarcity of longitudinal or comparative studies: Most research offers cross-sectional or descriptive analyses, often focused on one congregation or region. There is a lack of longitudinal studies tracking the impact of sexual ethics over time, or comparative studies examining different Lutheran communities, which could provide a richer understanding of how ethical teachings shape sexual behaviour across contexts.
- Limited integration of feminist theological frameworks: While feminist theology has been applied globally to critique patriarchal interpretations of Christian ethics, its application within the ELCSA context remains sparse. Existing research does not sufficiently explore how feminist ethical frameworks could inform more inclusive, equitable, and contextually relevant sexual morality teachings that respect women's agency and lived experiences.

Addressing these gaps is central to this study, as it aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how church teachings intersect with women's sexual experiences. By incorporating empirical investigation, feminist theological critique, and a contextual understanding of Southern African Lutheran communities, this research seeks to develop ethical frameworks that are both reflective of women lived realities and capable of fostering equitable, empowering

approaches to sexuality. Bridging these gaps is not only a scholarly necessity but also a pastoral and ethical imperative, as it holds the potential to transform the church into a space that supports rather than punishes, educates rather than silences, and affirms rather than marginalises women's sexual and reproductive agency.

2.15 Summary of the Chapter

Chapter two provided a critical review of literature on Christian ethics, Lutheran theology, and the sexuality of women, with particular reference to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit. The chapter explored how Christian ethical teachings have historically shaped and regulated women's sexuality, often reflecting patriarchal assumptions that marginalise female sexual agency.

The literature establishes a strong rationale for how ELCSA's historical-theological inheritance and contemporary institutional practices have shaped women's sexuality in ways that merit critical, contextually informed engagement; Lutheran theology contains resources both for critique and for reconstructive work; and feminist/African women's theological methods offer principled, context-sensitive means to develop more inclusive sexual ethics.

The chapter also engaged with feminist theological perspectives, demonstrating how these frameworks serve as a critical lens for interpreting and challenging traditional ethical norms. By centring women lived experiences, feminist scholarship illuminates the exclusions, silencing, and stigma that have emerged from historical and contemporary interpretations of Christian ethics. In addition, the literature review identified gaps in scholarship, particularly the limited research on how these ethical frameworks operate within ELCSA and affect women's sexual experiences. These gaps reinforce the significance of the current study, which seeks to provide insights into inclusive, feminist-informed approaches to sexual ethics.

However, this literature review also shows that empirical, voice-centred, and theologically reflexive studies in the ELCSA context are still scarce. This study can therefore contribute in the following ways:

- By documenting women lived experiences of sexual regulation within ELCSA
- By using feminist theological hermeneutics to propose a contextually grounded theoretical framework that aligns Lutheran commitments which are justice, vocation, human dignity with inclusive sexual ethics.

In conclusion, chapter two established a theoretical and empirical foundation for the study, linking historical, doctrinal, and experiential perspectives on women's sexuality. It sets the stage for subsequent chapters by providing the context, debates, and scholarly grounding necessary to inform the study's methodology, data analysis, and interpretation of findings. The next chapter explores the theoretical framework and methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER THREE - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

3. Introduction

The previous chapter interrogated literature that outlined elements of Christian ethics that exclude women in ELCSA from their sexuality. It also highlighted the need for the church to create space for engagements on deconstructing Christian ethics so that it can be used as a tool to promote positive sexuality. The first section of this chapter aims to address sub-question number two (2) that interrogates theoretical constructs of Christian ethics and provides a theoretical framework for the study, serving as a prism through which to examine the sexuality of women in ELCSA. As Swanson (2013:16) asserts, theories test and extend existing knowledge within the constraints of key boundary assumptions. This becomes particularly relevant when examining the complex interplay between faith, sexuality, and cultural expectations in the context of women's experiences in the church (Nnaemeka, 2004).

This chapter is structured under the following themes: the definition of a theoretical framework, with theories to be used for this study and their relevance; and the methodology utilised to acquire data for this investigation, with an overview of the specific techniques employed in data collection, ensuring that the research is built on a solid foundation. Additionally, the chapter highlights various patterns that emerged from the collected data, providing insights into the shared experiences of women within the church.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

A number of scholars have contributed to the definition of a theoretical framework. Van der Waldt (2024:2) defines a theory as a collection of interconnected constructs or variables, definitions, and propositions that provide a systematic view of phenomena by establishing relationships between variables to explain natural events. Omodan (2022:275) argues that “researchers use theories because they assist in comprehension, interpretation, prediction, and explanation of events they are studying”. Neuman (2014) further argues that a theoretical framework helps to contextualise the research within existing knowledge and theories, ensuring that the study is grounded in established concepts. It describes the ideas that explain why the research problem in question exists. The purpose of a theoretical framework is to provide a foundational structure that guides the research by framing the study within existing theories and concepts. It helps clarify the key variables, relationships, and assumptions underlying the research, thereby ensuring coherence and focus.

Additionally, Brydges and Batt (2023:89) state that a “theoretical framework assists researchers in interpreting findings, identifying gaps in existing knowledge, and situating their study within the broader scholarly context”. A good theory helps to explain the meaning, nature, and difficulties of a phenomenon.

The appropriateness, ease of application, and explanatory strength of a theory should all be considered when choosing a theoretical framework (Rivero, 2021:16). The challenge in this study was to choose appropriate theories that would explain the nature and meaning of the phenomenon. In this study, the natural phenomenon under discussion is female sexuality, and the researcher sought a framework that would help provide a systematic understanding of how Christian ethics has been used to exclude women from their sexuality.

Creswell (2014:77) defines a theoretical framework as “a structure that provides support for the study's theory, guiding the research design, data collection, and analysis”. Theories play an essential role in scrutinising and understanding everyday activities, which informs theory development. Theoretical frameworks adopted in this study is essential in guiding the inquiry into the intersection of Christian ethics and women’s sexuality within the church. By employing body theology and indecent theology, the research aims to shed light on the complexities of women's bodies and their experiences, ultimately contributing to a more profound understanding of how religious beliefs shape identity and sexuality. These frameworks not only inform the analysis but also serves as catalysts for broader discussions on the implications of Christian ethics in excluding women from their sexuality.

This study situates itself at the intersection of feminist theology and sexual ethics. Peterson-Iyer, (2022:53) state that to theorise how Christian ethics shape women’s sexuality, the frameworks as mentioned above, draws primarily on body theology, which is a feminist revaluation of embodied experience as a legitimate theological source, and indecent theology, which is a radical sexual hermeneutic that deliberately provokes and subverts normative disciplinary narratives about sex, gender and morality (Peterson-Iyer, 2022:53) Juxtaposing these two approaches is both constructive in terms of reclaiming the body and dignity, and provocative, which includes destabilising respectability and exposing power. These approaches provide analytic tools for reading church doctrine, practice, and women`s lived experiences. The combination offers the conceptual breadth needed to examine not only what the church teaches, but how those teachings performatively produce, regulate, and constrain female sexuality.

Other theories that could have been used in this study includes African womanist narrative theology, which emphasises a dialogue between African women and their faith communities and culture, or postcolonial theory, which focuses on subverting the coloniser's discourse that distorts the experiences and realities of colonised people, inscribing inferiority and exercising control over them (Khatri & Tyagi, 2014). Postcolonial theory also concerns the creation of literature by colonial peoples that articulates their identity and reclaims their history. However, considering that the research aims to critically analyse the sexuality of women within Christian spaces, as well as the role of Christian ethics in exclusion of women from their sexuality, body theology emerges as the most appropriate theoretical framework for this study.

The study could have also used feminist liberation theology; however, this approach may have been less effective due to its potential lack of sexual honesty compared to indecent theology (Althaus-Reid, 2000). Therefore, the chosen frameworks (body theology and indecent theology) provide a rich and multifaceted lens through which to explore the complexities of women's sexuality in a Christian context.

3.1.1 Suitability of Theoretical Framework

The selection of body theology and indecent theology as theoretical frameworks for this study is deliberate and rooted in the research aim of interrogating how Christian ethics within ELCSA construct and regulate women's sexuality, while also seeking liberating alternatives informed by feminist theology.

First, body theology is suitable because it affirms the body as a valid theological source. Historically, Christian ethics have subordinated the body to the spirit, often framing women's sexuality in terms of sin, shame, or reproduction. By reclaiming embodied experiences as central to theology (McFague, 1993), body theology provides constructive tools to analyse how ELCSA's teachings are lived out in women's bodies, through shame, silence, fertility, desire, or resistance. It allows this study to highlight women's testimonies as legitimate theological resources and to reframe sexuality as integral to human dignity and flourishing.

3.1.1.1 Body Theology

The study utilises body theology because it emphasises the significance of the body and bodily experiences in forming moral knowledge and demonstrates how embodied experiences inform our theology. Rogers (2005:111) defines body theology as "a theological perspective that emphasizes the significance of the human body in understanding spiritual truths, Christology,

and the human experience of divine relationship". Kittelson (1986:79) provides insights into Lutheran view on women, morality, and the human body during the Reformation and argues that body theology can help illuminate how moral knowledge has influenced Lutheran theology and its perception of women and their experiences.

Furthermore, body theology offers a valuable feminist perspective by emphasising the significance of women lived experiences in shaping theological understandings. Bryant (2003:99) adds that this approach challenges traditional, often male-centred, interpretations of religious doctrines by highlighting how embodied experiences influence faith and spirituality. While Grosz (1994:203) state that "by centering the body and lived experience, body theology seeks to recover marginalized voices and foster a more inclusive and holistic understanding of theology that acknowledges the realities of women's lives. Such perspectives are essential in feminist theology, as they advocate for the recognition of women's unique bodily and experiential realities as legitimate sources for theological reflection and development" (Grosz 1994:203).

3.1.1.2 Indecent Theology

Indecent theology is equally suitable because it deliberately destabilises the boundaries of "decency" that the church uses to regulate sexuality. Althaus-Reid (2000:17) argues that Christian ethics often uphold respectability politics that exclude or stigmatise bodies and sexualities that fall outside marital, heterosexual, or "pure" norms. In the ELCSA context, this is evident in the policing of women's bodies through teachings on abstinence, modesty, and marriage.

In this study, the approach of Indecent Theology is transformative, pushing theology from the light into the dark and embracing the intimacies of bodies and desires. It questions boundaries, including the boundaries of knowledge, law, economy, and self, and encourages a transformation of theological knowledge (Stobie, 2011:170). One of its strength lies in its ability to reflect with theological honesty on issues concerning women, economic struggles, images of God, and the flow of sexual desires while challenging the traditional liberationist context of doing theology (Lloyd, 2013:11). This approach is essential because it allows for a more nuanced understanding of how women might use their sexual experiences to inform their understanding of God. Indecent theology enables this study to expose how such norms reproduce patriarchal and colonial logics, rendering some women's experiences invisible or morally suspect. This reflection will help researchers better understand the sexual experiences

of women at ELCSA in the Pretoria Circuit, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of how Christian ethics intersect with the lived experiences of women.

These two frameworks are mutually reinforcing yet distinct. Body theology provides a restorative approach, valuing women's embodied experiences and offering inclusive ethical resources. Indecent theology, in contrast, supplies a disruptive critique, revealing the church's complicity in oppressive sexual moralities and giving voice to those excluded from "respectable" theological discourse. Juxtaposing them ensures that this study is both constructive and critically attentive to women lived realities while also interrogating the power structures that shape those realities. Finally, these frameworks are contextually relevant in Southern Africa. Missionary legacies embedded Western purity ideals within Lutheran ethics, often silencing African women's voices and sexual realities. Body theology resonates with African feminist approaches that centre lived embodiment, while indecent theology aligns with postcolonial critiques that expose how imported notions of morality discipline women's sexuality. Together, they provide a robust framework that speaks both to women's immediate experiences in the Pretoria Circuit and to the broader theological and cultural systems that shape them.

In summary, body theology and indecent theology are suitable for this study because they equip this study with the dual capacity to affirm women's embodied testimonies as theological and critique the patriarchal, colonial, and disciplinary systems that regulate sexuality in ELCSA. Their combined application ensures a balanced, feminist theological analysis that is both liberative and contextually grounded. A more detailed explanation is provided in the section below.

3.1.2 Relevance of Body Theology for this Study

Body theology centres the body as theological source and locus of meaning rather than treating embodiment as secondary to spirit, abstract doctrine, or institutional norms. Feminist body theologians such as (Phiri 2004, Moyo 2004) and (Althaus-Reid & Isherwood 2008) argue that theologies that marginalise bodily experience (especially female bodily experience) perpetuate gendered hierarchies and moral regimes that regulate sexuality, including norms of purity, modesty, fertility and the control of desire (Siwila, and Kisitu, 2016:195). Thus, reclaiming the body involves these three connected approaches:

- Epistemological approach which treats women's embodied experiences and testimonies as legitimate theological data not just a pastoral problems.

- Hermeneutical approach which advocates for the re-read of scripture, liturgy and doctrine from the perspective of embodied experience, asking how texts function when lived out in bodies with gendered vulnerabilities and resistances.
- Ethical approach which reform ethical frameworks so they honour bodily integrity, sexual agency and relational flourishing rather than policing bodies into moral categories.

3.1.2.1 Epistemological Approach

Isherwood and Stuart (1998:10) argue that "Christian theology has always been an embodied theology, centred on creation, incarnation, resurrection, and sacraments". However, for millennia, theology has overlooked the fact that when we reflect theologically, we do so as embodied beings. According to Farley (2008), the human body has long been a source of dispute. The issue has revolved around dualism and monism. Dualism implies that humans are composed of two distinct parts: body and soul. Kisutu and Siwila (2016:191-192) state that "for the indigenous people of southern Africa, the introduction of Christianity meant that they had to deal with the dualistic nature of faith adherence in their conceptualizing of the female body". They further argue that dualism had a considerable impact on the way Africans perceived their humanness within religious spaces. For Africans, Christianity forced them to view themselves as people of two separate entities, body and soul, of which the soul was superior to the body (Kisutu and Siwila, 2016:191-192). Within this reasoning, various religious traditions have emphasised either the separation of body and soul or the union of body and spirit. However, Rakoczy brings an interesting critique on dualism. She states that "feminist theologians reject the dualistic model because it assumes that the male is the better, stronger and more gifted one between the male and female and that women need men in order to be complete" (Rakoczy, 2005:49). This perception locates women in a biological context as though women are only created for procreation.

Religious traditions have also been preoccupied with conversations involving dualism. The study has established that ELCSA is one of the religious bodies that have adopted this stance. Conversations around dualism have been crucial in moral evaluations of the body and the moral cognition of sexuality within religious spaces. Themes of embodiment are inextricably linked to ideas about creation, good and evil, the order of the universe, and other theological topics. Kisutu and Siwila (2016:192) further argue that "a woman's body and her sexuality has not always occupied an appraised space in the history of religions such as Christianity". For this reason, practical religious issues have prompted research into the moral positions regarding the

body, as well as evaluations of physical experiences in connection to human wholeness and divine ties. As Farley (2008:134) points out, it is critical for the women in this study to comprehend their embodied selves and how their bodily experiences relate to their interactions with God. This understanding can empower women to reclaim their bodily experiences as integral to their spiritual lives, rather than viewing them as secondary or inferior. However, this empowerment is futile if policies and structures of the church remain static.

3.1.2.2 Hermeneutical Approach

van der Westhuizen, (2024:90) states that "the conventional way of doing theology has been to start from an abstract propositions and attempted to advance from the abstract to the concrete". As a result, the human body has caused many issues and discomforts among Christian theologians over time. Contemporary feminist theories like Judith Butler(2011), Sara Ahmed(2016), and Elizabeth Grosz(2000) have attempted to address issues about the body in various ways, aiming to reshape the landscape of views on the human body (Diprose, 2015). However, they took a different perspective; they have not so much centred on whether being human means being a body or a soul, or even how body and soul interrelate (monism or dualism). Nussbaum (1995) points out that the primary goal of most feminist theorists is and has been to correct the flaws of previous theories, particularly those that have been exploited to violate women. These previous theories introduced beliefs and practices that played a crucial role in shaping the understanding of the human body, often placing women in subordinate positions. Consequently, this study uses a feminist lens to examine elements of Christian ethics that have excluded women from their sexuality. The focus on body theology is significant because it addresses the realities of women's experiences, particularly in feminist theology. It begins with the body theologies of second-wave theologians like Heyward (2000) and Harrison (2016), and moves to postmodern feminist challenges to the reified and essentialized body. It also considers Christian bodily practices and the critical concerns raised by feminism about the subjugation of women's bodies in the church.

According to Piper (2003:281), "men and women are equal in worth and dignity; however, their physical and physiological differences suggest that God has assigned different roles and purposes to them". This perspective, while seemingly egalitarian, can still perpetuate hierarchical structures that reinforce gender inequality. In contrast, Kisutu and Siwila (2016:186) expose a discovered hierarchical framework in which bodies are rated in first and second-class positions, with men placed in the first category and women in the second.

This perception was grounded in the biblical perspective of Adam and Eve. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:10) argue that “the moment humans learned that Eve was formed from a rib extracted from Adam, they were led to believe in a body-centred theology that suggested Eve (women) were secondary because they were created from Adam's (man) rib”. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:10) further argue that this narrative has characterised a woman's status in religion and theology as the "other", and an outcast from the trinity of man, church, and God (Isherwood and Stuart 1998).

The implications of this theological stance are profound. A woman has been led to feel that something is inherently wrong with her. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:15) point out that “the exclusion from the trinity was exploited to convince her that she possesses a flaw in her biological makeup”. Consequently, she has been conditioned to distrust herself, particularly her moral understanding, which she has gained through gut and body experiences. In chapter VI of his rule, St Augustine points out that women had no decision or control that informed their behaviours but could be dictated upon by the desires of men (Augustine, IV, 4 as cited in Karen & Hermes 2009:196). As a result, women find it difficult to rely on their intuition as a source of morality. They have become vulnerable to male authority and have been educated to obtain moral knowledge through and from a man's perspective. Foucault (1975) discusses how power structures, including gendered power relations, shape individuals' perceptions and identities. He further states that a man is able to control a woman because he is the source of her moral knowledge, thereby wielding the power to define how she perceives herself and the world around her.

Parsons (2004) adds to the issue by arguing that for a long time, women have been viewed as the second sex and treated as such by men, who define her life and specify the boundaries of her existence. According to Parsons (2004), males have treated and viewed women in an adulterous manner. Essentially, men's treatment and exclusion of women has concentrated on rejecting her body rather than rejecting her as a person. Women have traditionally been and continue to be judged based on their bodies, rather than their intrinsic worth or identity. A woman’s body and her sexuality have not always received the respect or appreciation they deserve in the history of religions.

As Isherwood (2000:21) notes, “women's bodies have long been demonized, particularly when women were reduced to reproductive instruments”. This perspective was heavily influenced by early church founders such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, both of whom harboured

qualms about women's bodies. According to Brown (2000), St. Augustine, an early exemplar of Christian conversion and monasticism, argued that for men to achieve holiness, they must maintain a certain distance from women. Consequently, women's bodies have been spiritualised and used to judge morality, reflecting a broader societal tendency to devalue and objectify female bodies.

Colonialism, Christianisation, African traditional religions, and other forms of epistemologies influenced by patriarchal tendencies have all significantly impacted the spiritualisation of women's bodies. Parsons (2004:64) argues that “because of these factors, women's bodies have become objects of contestation”. In addition, Schüssler-Fiorenza (1992:96) emphasises the importance of feminist hermeneutics that centre the experiences and bodies of women within biblical and theological contexts, and that is why there is a need for a re-evaluation of theological perspectives surrounding the body, particularly considering feminist critiques that seek to reclaim the dignity and worth of women as embodied beings (Schüssler-Fiorenza, 1992:96). By engaging with these issues, this study aims to contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Christian theology that respects and values the embodied experiences of all individuals, particularly women.

In engaging issues of women as embodied beings, the study interrogates the contribution of body politics. According to Ruether (1993:64), “body politics are permanent determinants of women's positions and hierarchies in religious spaces”. The Catholic Church, for example, challenges women's ordination by alluding to the apostolic tradition, which never saw women ordained. The Lutheran Church currently does not have such a challenge; they ordain women, but it has yet to be demonstrated that these women in ministry are unaffected by body politics. Chitando (2015:80) analyses how African Christian women, including those in Lutheran denominations, navigate societal expectations and body politics that impact their roles in ministry. Changing social norms and practices have expanded and influenced the Church's teachings, particularly those on sexual intercourse, cohabitation, and marriage. As a result, Pope John Paul II (Pope John Paul II, 2006) devoted significant attention to what he called the "Theology of the Body", emphasising the importance of understanding the human person, sexuality, and dignity through a biblical and spiritual lens. He delivered a series of Wednesday audiences from 1979 to 1984, which collectively are known as the "Theology of the Body" lectures (Pope John Paul II, 2006). In these teachings, he highlighted the scriptural foundations of human sexuality and the moral and spiritual significance of living in accordance with Catholic teaching. West (2008:159) contends that living a clean life entails respecting the

dignity of one's body as created by God and worthy of respect; purity is the grandeur of the human body before God. However, West (2008) does not define what purity means. His statement is problematic because it implies that impure bodies separate us from God. That is why definition of purity of the body is important.

3.1.2.3 Ethical Approach

West (2008:160) argues that to retain moral purity, a good Christian's life must prioritise sexual purity over lust and sexual impulses like masturbation and pornography, and sexual intercourse is saved for a loving relationship between husband and wife. West (2008:167) defines Christian celibacy as a term meaning "to refrain from sexual intercourse of any kind".

The backdrop of the Pope's sexual morality had a significant impact on the Church's posture and approach to teaching and preaching, particularly when discussing human dignity, sexual purity, marriage, contraception, and abortion (West, 2008:169). Pope John Paul II's moral teachings developed a structure of Catholic theology which he saw as encouraging attitudes of sexual impurity and leading Catholics away from Church teaching. According to West (2008:169), Pope John Paul`s Theology of the Body was an attempt to provide moral guidance based on "religious truth". However, his "religious truth" is not absolute. Fonseca-Martinez (2024:15) states that these teachings emphasised returning to the fundamental concepts of Christian ethics, human dignity, and sexuality. Pope John Paul II's moral teachings became so influential in the wider Catholic Church that it was even fundamental to the education process of young Catholics in the different Catholic school systems across the world.

3.1.2.4 Theories on construction of human body

According to Farley (2008:34), "theories about the social and cultural construction of comprehending the human body, particularly among feminists, have evolved throughout time with the goal of rectifying such hegemonic errors". Grosz (1994:74) points out that most feminists have worked to revalue women's bodies as gendered and distinct, drawing on women's experiences to gain new insights into the various forms of human embodiment. Butler (1993:79) argues that other feminist scholars propose postmodern approaches to the social construction of the body, recognising the role of social forces in moulding our experiences and perceptions of our bodies. All these feminists, despite their differing approaches, share one common goal: to improve understandings of the human body and to correct the exclusionary effects of previous ideologies that deemed some women's bodies unimportant.

Even if all these feminist tactics are successful, nonetheless the spiritualisation of women's bodies in religious settings is still a barrier for women to live out their sexuality. According to Farley (2008:15), women's bodies will continue to be controlled and assaulted in religious places until we engage in historical interpretation debates, challenge biased readings, and provide fresh theological interpretations. Further, Kisutu and Siwila (2016:194) add, women's bodies will continue to be subordinated, perpetuating negative perceptions of women's identities in society and undermining women's agency in responding to current challenges. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:16) state that contemporary feminists support the understanding of women's bodies as a site of oppression from a theological perspective and has carried a lot of weight under patriarchal theology.

Nelson (1992:91) states that "body theology begins with the concreteness of our bodily experiences, which are filtered through a web of meanings that we attach to our corporeal existence". This means that it is impossible to have body theology that ignores our fleshy life experiences (Kugelmann, 2004:358) including our passions, emotions, hunger, a touch from a loved one, our desires, the pain we feel when we are violated, raped, and torn apart, our experiences of loving and being loved by someone. All these lived experiences inform not only our body theology but also our understanding and response to the world. Moral knowledge is also an embodied experience since the gut feels what is just and unjust, fair and unfair, what is wrong or right. Our bodily realities shape our moral lens through which we view things (Nelson, 1992:93). This means that the women in Pretoria Circuit's body experiences also shaped their worldview; thus, it is essential to incorporate their bodily experiences in doing theology.

Women's experiences have a significant impact on theological growth, just as embodied experiences inform body theology. For a long time, women were forbidden from discussing their bodies and were judged solely based on their physical appearance. Isherwood and Stuart (1998:18) argue that "Feminists underline that women's bodies have been oppressed and have fought to alleviate the realities of women's physical confinement". West (2009:157) further adds that when women reconnect spirituality with their bodies, they begin to love themselves and use their bodies to love others, rather than for selfish pleasure and objectification. Feminist theologians contend that applying our lived experiences is essential theological data (Nelson, 1992).

In this study, it is critical to integrate women's embodied experiences in the Pretoria Circuit while doing theology and defining moral knowledge since these experiences informs the core of their theology. Thus, it is problematic for ELCSA to condemn women's sexual encounters as immoral without first attempting to comprehend their embodied experiences, which define their body theology. Nelson (1992:101) states that "for women, body theology focuses on their bodily experiences as a crucial aspect of their interactions with God". Therefore, Christian ethical theories that ignore women's experiences in determining morality skew their experiences with God.

Jacson (1994:208) argues that the feminist movement was founded on the core feminist idea of a woman's freedom to govern her own body. Parsons (2004:33) adds that "early feminist literature reflected key assumptions of the liberal paradigm of moral reasoning. The first of these assumptions is that the free and transcendent action of reason is the most important representation of our humanity". Human dignity is realised and affirmed by reason, as is objective truth. Humans, unlike animals, can think, and reason takes us out of the world into the ultimate. This serves to move us from the particular to the universal, from the contingent to the free, and from the physical to the spiritual (Parsons, 2004).

Theologically, this concept implies that individuals come to know and approach God through reason. Craig (2008:3) argues that knowing God allows people to seek ultimate truth, spiritual awareness, and displays of faith. Moral decision-making and action principles are discovered through reasoning. While these ideas are meaningful within certain religious traditions, the following alternative viewpoints can be considered. According to Kabat-Zinn (1994:354), "associating knowing God with spiritual awareness and displays of faith is consistent with religious teachings". However, spiritual awareness can also be cultivated through non-theistic means, such as mindfulness and meditation practices in secular contexts (Kabat-Zinn, 1994:354). In addition, faith, as defined in some traditions, involves trust beyond empirical evidence, whereas reasoning emphasises evidence-based understanding.

Liberal feminists contend that consistency and universality in moral principles necessitate the involvement of women in all moral decisions. Falola and Akua (2012:15) state that "many Christian denominations' discourses on body-based arguments appear to take women's liberation theologies for granted and have failed to positively address issues related to body theology". One of the reasons for this failure is that society has failed to respond positively to

issues related to women's bodies, especially issues of historical, social, and religious constructions of women's bodies.

Another reason for the failure identified has been the alienation of women from the centre and confining them to the margins. Through the interpretation of the Bible on who a woman is and what her capabilities entail, the church has positioned women in a childlike state, effectively rendering them as needing care, attention, and direction to function properly in society and live a righteous life (Falola & Akua, 2012:98).

This view does not discredit some traditions that have made efforts to deconstruct and reconstruct the position of women in religious spaces. While this development is noteworthy, the platonic sexism that denounces the woman's body seems to still exist in most religious circles (Parsons, 2004). Mkhize (2004:19) adds that in the postcolonial democratic South African context, such a history of the alienation of women continues to exist in our churches, including ELCSA. Colonial vestiges are thus still dominant even in the postcolonial era, perpetuating outdated notions of gender roles and sidelining women's voices in theological discussions.

3.1.2.5 Feminist Approach to Body Theology

A feminist approach to body theology emphasises that women's bodily experiences are central to understanding morality, spirituality, and ethical decision-making. Unlike traditional patriarchal theology, which often abstracts moral principles and ignores the realities of women's lives, feminist body theology recognises that women's bodies are sites of knowledge, moral insight, and divine creativity. It challenges male-centred interpretations of scripture and ethics that have historically constrained women's sexual and reproductive agency, instead proposing frameworks rooted in lived experience, relationality, and justice.

In the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), the integration of a feminist body theology can offer a transformative approach to sexual ethics. Historically, ELCSA has upheld patriarchal frameworks that position women's sexuality under strict surveillance, with moral prescriptions emphasising virginity, abstinence, and fidelity primarily in relation to male authority. These frameworks frequently neglect the realities of women's sexual lives, often punishing unmarried women for perceived transgressions while absolving men of responsibility. A feminist body theological approach directly addresses this imbalance by centring women's voices and lived experiences in ethical reflection.

3.1.2.5.1 Centring Women's Lived Experiences

Feminist body theology begins with the recognition that women's experiences of sexuality, desire, and embodiment are epistemologically valid and morally significant. For ELCSA, this entails actively listening to women within congregations, ranging from adolescents to adult women, and understanding the social, cultural, and spiritual pressures they navigate. These narratives provide critical insight into the consequences of existing ethical frameworks, including shame, exclusion, and restricted agency. Integrating these experiences ensures that sexual ethics are not abstractly imposed but reflect the lived realities of the women they aim to guide. For instance, understanding the experiences of women who have faced censure for premarital sex or unintended pregnancies allows the church to craft guidelines that are compassionate, contextually relevant, and supportive rather than punitive.

3.1.2.5.2 Challenging Patriarchal Interpretations

A feminist body theological approach interrogates male-centred readings of scripture and moral teachings that have historically subordinated women. Texts that have been used to justify surveillance of women's sexuality such as Ephesians 5:22–24 or 1 Corinthians 11:3 are reinterpreted through the lens of justice, equality, and relational ethics. Women's experiences illuminate how these texts have been applied in ways that reinforce male authority and perpetuate systemic oppression. For ELCSA, this means creating interpretive practices that actively include women's perspectives, ensuring that scriptural interpretation does not remain a tool for control but becomes a foundation for equitable ethical reflection.

3.1.2.5.3 Ethical Frameworks Rooted in Relationality and Agency

Feminist body theology emphasises that morality is relational and embodied. Women's experiences of intimacy, consent, and sexual desire provide the context for ethical discernment. In practice, ELCSA could develop sexual ethics that prioritise relational accountability over unilateral surveillance. This includes encouraging open dialogues between men and women about sexual ethics, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour. By foregrounding women's agency, feminist body theology affirms that women are not merely passive recipients of moral instruction but co-creators of ethical frameworks that honour bodily autonomy and lived experience.

3.1.2.5.4 Integration into Pastoral Care and Education

A feminist approach informs not only ethical reasoning but also pastoral care and educational initiatives. In ELCSA, women's experiences can shape programmes on sexuality, reproductive health, and relational ethics. For example, confirmation classes and youth programmes can move beyond fear-based abstinence messages to provide comprehensive guidance that acknowledges sexual desire, teaches responsible decision-making, and affirms bodily integrity. Pastoral care should be grounded in empathy, supporting women through challenges such as unintended pregnancy or relationship complexities rather than punishing them. By using women's experiences as the basis for these initiatives, the church can cultivate moral guidance that is humane, just, and reflective of God's inclusive love.

3.1.2.5.5 Structural and Leadership Implications

A feminist body theological approach also calls for structural changes within ELCSA. Women must be meaningfully included in decision-making bodies that shape sexual ethics and pastoral practices. Leadership structures that historically privileged male authority, such as male-only clergy or the dominance of male voices in moral instruction, should be re-evaluated. Including women in these processes ensures that ethical frameworks are co-created, incorporating diverse perspectives and addressing the lived experiences of women in congregations. Such inclusion is not merely symbolic but foundational to dismantling patriarchal control over sexual and reproductive norms.

3.1.2.5.6 Promoting Justice and Dignity

Ultimately, integrating feminist body theology into ELCSA's sexual ethics affirms women's dignity, autonomy, and moral agency. It challenges traditional notions that link morality solely to chastity or obedience and reframes sexuality as a domain of relational responsibility, mutual respect, and ethical discernment. By centring women's bodily experiences, the church recognises that ethical living emerges from real-world contexts, not abstract ideals, and that women are active participants in moral reasoning, spiritual formation, and theological reflection.

3.1.2.5.7 Practical Applications

- Inclusive Ethical Deliberation – Women's narratives, collected through surveys, interviews, or focus groups, inform theological discussion and moral instruction.

- Educational Reform – Programmes on sexuality within ELCSA move beyond abstinence-only teachings to include reproductive health, consent, and relationship ethics.
- Pastoral Care Transformation – Pastoral counselling becomes empathetic and supportive, addressing women lived challenges rather than imposing judgment.
- Leadership Inclusion – Women occupy key roles in ethics committees, church councils, and educational programs to co-shape sexual ethics.
- Scriptural Reinterpretation – Patriarchal readings are reassessed using women-centred hermeneutics to promote justice and equality.

This is the practical application of body theology. By applying feminist body theology, ELCSA can transform its sexual ethics from a system of control and punishment to one that honours human dignity, embraces relational morality, and centres the voices of those most affected by its teachings, which are women. This approach not only addresses historical injustices but also aligns Christian ethics with the lived realities of contemporary congregants, promoting inclusion, agency, and transformative pastoral care. Women lived experiences are not peripheral but foundational to ethical reflection, serving as both a moral compass and theological lens for a faith that seeks justice, love, and holistic well-being.

3.1.2.6 Relevance of body theology in this study

Body theology invites the Church to reconsider the ways in which women's bodies have historically been interpreted through rigid doctrinal lenses that often detach morality from lived experience. Within many Christian traditions, including Lutheran contexts, women's bodies have frequently been framed as sites of temptation, moral risk, or spiritual vulnerability, which has justified strict moral regulation and surveillance of women's sexuality. Such interpretations have contributed to the reinforcement of patriarchal authority within ecclesial structures, where male-dominated theological discourse has shaped moral expectations without adequately engaging the voices and experiences of women themselves. By foregrounding the body as a legitimate theological source, body theology disrupts these inherited assumptions and reframes the body not as a problem to be controlled but as a sacred site of divine encounter and ethical reflection.

This perspective resonates strongly with feminist theological approaches that emphasise the importance of lived experience as a source of theological knowledge. Women's embodied realities shaped by cultural expectations, social pressures, and religious teachings, offer

valuable insights into how Christian ethics is understood and practiced within everyday life. In the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), particularly within the Pretoria Circuit, women often navigate complex intersections between church doctrine, cultural norms, and personal identity. Body theology provides a framework through which these intersections can be critically examined, allowing theological reflection to engage more authentically with the moral dilemmas and negotiations that women encounter in relation to their sexuality.

Furthermore, integrating body theology into ELCSA's theological discourse can contribute to reshaping pastoral care and ecclesial practices. Pastoral engagement that recognises women as moral agents with the capacity to interpret and negotiate ethical teachings encourages dialogue rather than judgment. Instead of approaching issues of sexuality through condemnation or silence, the Church can cultivate spaces where women feel safe to articulate their experiences, struggles, and questions. Such an approach fosters pastoral sensitivity and acknowledges that ethical formation is not merely about enforcing doctrinal rules but about accompanying believers as they discern faithful ways of living within their social and relational contexts.

In addition, theological education within ELCSA could benefit significantly from incorporating body theology into ministerial formation and congregational teaching. Future church leaders who are trained to engage with feminist theological insights and embodied perspectives are more likely to develop ethical frameworks that are attentive to gender justice and human dignity. Educational programs that critically examine the historical development of Christian sexual ethics, including its patriarchal foundations, can equip clergy and lay leaders with the tools necessary to interpret doctrine in ways that are both faithful to the Gospel and responsive to contemporary realities. Such pedagogical transformation is crucial for cultivating a Church that embodies compassion, inclusivity, and justice.

Ultimately, the integration of body theology into ELCSA's ethical reflection has the potential to transform how sexuality is discussed, understood, and lived within the Church. Rather than perpetuating systems that marginalise women or silence their experiences, the Church can embrace a more holistic theological vision that recognises the body as integral to spiritual life and moral discernment. This transformation does not require abandoning Christian moral traditions but rather reinterpreting them in ways that affirm the dignity, autonomy, and agency of all believers. By doing so, ELCSA can move toward a more liberative and contextually

grounded Christian ethic, one that reflects the Gospel's commitment to justice, compassion, and the flourishing of human life.

3.1.2.7 Relevance of Indecent Theology to this Study

Indecent theology, as articulated by Althaus-Reid (2000:5), is a sexual political theology that endeavours to extend the insights of feminist liberation theology through a multidisciplinary approach. This approach draws on various fields, including sexual theory, postcolonial criticism, queer studies, Marxist studies, continental philosophy, and systematic theology (Althaus-Reid, 2000:5). I believe that integration of these diverse disciplines, allows indecent theology to engage with complex questions of identity, power, and oppression in ways that traditional liberation theology may overlook. This makes it suitable theory for this study as it continues to identify elements of Christian ethics that exclude, oppress and marginalise women on matters of sexuality.

Indecent theology's key contribution is its radical disruption of Christian sexual ethics, revealing how ideas of "decency" maintain patriarchal, heteronormative, colonial, and class hierarchies. It insists that women embodied, sexual, and marginalised experiences are valid sites of theology, opening space for liberation. Application of indecent theology in this study involves the following approaches: decency and indecency; sexuality as a site of theological reflection; queering theology; and embodiment and desire as sacred

3.1.3 Decency and Indecency

Althaus-Reid (2000:6) critiques how mainstream Christian theology has historically been shaped by what she terms the politics of decency. Within this framework, theology has aligned itself with socially acceptable, bourgeois, patriarchal, and heteronormative values, upholding institutions such as marriage, chastity, monogamy, and heterosexuality as the only legitimate expressions of sexuality. These "decent" norms, she argues, have been used by the church to discipline bodies and regulate desire, ensuring conformity to middle-class, colonial, and patriarchal standards of morality (Goss, 2003).

Isherwood and Stuart (1998:28) argue that in response, indecent theology deliberately seeks to disrupt these normative understandings of decency by bringing into theological discourse those experiences, bodies, and sexualities that have been deemed shameful, scandalous, or perverse. It destabilises boundaries between what is considered sacred and profane, pure and impure, holy and unholy. By asking critical questions such as "Who decides what is decent?" and

“Whom does decency exclude?”, indecent theology exposes the power dynamics embedded within Christian ethics, revealing how dominant theological constructions often silence women, the poor, LGBTQ+ persons, and others whose lives do not fit within the imposed standards of “respectable” sexuality (Althaus-Reid, 2004). In doing so, indecent theology not only critiques the oppressive underpinnings of mainstream Christian ethics but also opens possibilities for alternative, liberative, and inclusive understandings of sexuality that embrace the diversity and complexity of human embodiment.

3.1.3.1 Sexuality as a Site of Theological Reflection

Indecent theology brings sexual desire, practices, and identities into theology as valid sites of knowledge about God. It insists that theology cannot ignore the messy, embodied realities of people’s lives, particularly of women (Althaus-Reid, 2003).

Beattie (2003:45) states that, “one of the most ground-breaking aspects of Indecent Theology is its unapologetic embrace of sexuality as a central theme in theological discourse”. It is characterised as an out-of-the-closet approach to theology, wherein sexual narratives and experiences are not merely ancillary or taboo topics but are integral to the understanding of divine and human relationships. For instance, the exploration of figures such as the Virgin Mary and Christology may incorporate sexual stories drawn from diverse contexts, including fetishism, leather lifestyles, and transvestism (Beattie, 2003:45).

This bold engagement with sexual narratives challenges conventional theological frameworks, inviting believers and scholars alike to reconsider how they approach sacred texts and traditions.

Beattie (2003:49) points out the following as limitations of liberation theology: It has failed to adequately address issues surrounding sexuality and, as a result, has lost its cutting edge in challenging established values and power relations. This failure is particularly evident in the context of contemporary social movements and the evolving understandings of identity and sexuality. In contrast, Jordan (2000:2) states that postcolonial and 'queer' theologies offer a more transgressive and radical perspective that can interrogate these entrenched power dynamics. Indecent theology, a term coined by theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, excels precisely where liberation theology has fallen short. It is defined as a feminist Latin American theology that is political, postcolonial, and queer in nature (Beattie, 2003:49).

According to Schutte (2014:130), “Indecent Theology becomes a better alternative than liberation theory because it seeks to provide a fresh lens through which to view theological concepts and discussions”. He further adds that in addressing sexuality, indecent theology serves as a critical lens through which to examine the layers of oppression that exist in Latin America, particularly in relation to issues of gender, class, and race. Indecent theology exposes the complexities of oppression and the ways in which they are perpetuated through religious and cultural narratives (Schutte, 2014). This approach challenges traditional interpretations of religious texts and practices that have historically marginalised certain groups. This makes it an appropriate theory to apply in deconstructing elements of Christian ethics that exclude women`s experiences of their sexuality in its norms and teaching.

Keller (2012:43) adds that by interrogating these narratives, indecent theology aims to uncover and dismantle structures of oppression embedded within religious and cultural contexts. This theological perspective begins at the intersection of liberation theology and queer thinking, recognising the need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of liberation that accounts for the diverse experiences of marginalised communities. LeRon (2018:201) highlights the fact that “Indecent Theology questions the traditional liberationist framework that often prioritizes economic and political struggles while sidelining issues of sexuality and gender”. He further argues that indecent theology emphasises the importance of conducting theology with theological honesty, reflecting critically on the lived experiences of women, the economic struggles they face, and the representations of God that emerge from these contexts (LeRon, 2018:201). This approach highlights the necessity of acknowledging and validating the flow of sexual impulses as part of the broader theological discourse. Althaus-Reid (2000:7) points out that in this way, indecent theology acts as both a continuation and a disruption of liberation theology.

Felder (2010:229) points out that” Indecent Theology represents a vital and necessary evolution within theological discourse which presents certain shortcomings”. In addressing the shortcomings of liberation theology relating to sexuality and identity, it is important to acknowledge that traditional liberation theology has primarily focused on economic and social liberation, often neglecting issues of sexuality and personal identity. He further argues that integrating perspectives on sexuality and identity can enrich liberation theology’s transformative potential (Felder, 2010:229). Kretzschmar (2014:10) adds that this gap points to a need for a more inclusive framework that recognises diverse identities and experiences,

aligning with liberation theology's core emphasis on justice and liberation for all marginalised groups.

By incorporating insights from queer theory and feminist theology, liberation theology can develop a more comprehensive approach to personal and communal liberation. Such integration fosters a transformative framework capable of addressing the interconnected oppressions related to race, class, gender, and sexuality (Felder, 2010:230). This expanded approach not only challenges structural injustices but also affirms individual identities, promoting holistic liberation.

By challenging the normative assumptions that have historically dominated theological discussions, indecent theology opens up new avenues for understanding and engaging with faith (Madzar & Trindade, 2016). It encourages a re-examination of the ways in which religious beliefs and practices intersect with social and sexual identities, promoting a more comprehensive and inclusive theological framework. This is particularly important in a contemporary context where issues of sexual identity and expression are increasingly recognised as essential components of human experience.

Furthermore, Keller (2012:44) argues that indecent theology advocates for the reimagining of theological symbols and narratives to reflect the plurality of human experiences. It challenges the patriarchal and heteronormative constructs that have long influenced traditional theological discourse and seeks to create a space for voices that have been historically marginalised. He further adds that, the emphasis on inclusivity within indecent theology allows for a richer and more diverse understanding of the divine, one that resonates with the lived realities of individuals across a spectrum of identities (Keller, 2012:44).

3.1.3.2 Queering Theology

Indecent theology is intentionally queer in its orientation and purpose, designed to destabilise fixed sexual norms and open theological discourse to fluid, diverse, and transgressive sexualities (Althaus-Reid, 2004:19). Unlike mainstream Christian theology, which has historically privileged heterosexual marriage, chastity, and reproductive sexuality, indecent theology challenges the legitimacy of such restrictive boundaries by embracing the lived realities of bodies and desires considered scandalous, shameful, or "out of order". In this sense, indecent theology aligns itself with the broader project of queer theology, which critiques heteronormativity and celebrates sexual diversity. However, Althaus-Reid (2003) insists that indecent theology is not merely a Western queer theological import; rather, it emerges out of

and remains rooted in liberation theology, with its concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalised.

By positioning itself at this intersection, indecent theology exposes the gaps in early liberation theology, which, while radical in its critique of economic and political oppression, often neglected questions of sexuality and gender. As Hulse (2009:204) observes, early liberation theologians tended to overlook or even marginalise LGBTQ+ experiences, thereby reproducing heteronormative assumptions and traditional views on sexuality that conflicted with contemporary understandings of human dignity and rights. Indecent theology responds to this shortcoming by queering liberation theology itself, expanding its vision of justice and liberation to include those marginalised on the basis of sexuality as well as class, race, or gender (Goss, 2003). Indecent theology thus represents both a continuation and a radical transformation of liberation theology, insisting that the struggle against oppression cannot be separated from the affirmation of sexual diversity, bodily autonomy, and erotic freedom as integral dimensions of theological reflection.

LeRon, (2018: 217) states that "Indecent Theology has the potential to inspire social change by fostering a sense of solidarity among those who have been oppressed". It can be argued that entering the experiences of marginalised communities encourages collective action and advocacy for social justice. This emphasises the importance of recognising that struggles for liberation are interconnected and that true justice cannot be achieved without addressing the multifaceted nature of oppression.

Moreover, as Beattie (2003) argues, indecent theology's engagement with sexual narratives enables a radical rethinking of theological concepts such as sin, redemption, and grace. This view promotes a departure from traditional understandings that often stigmatise sexual expression and instead invites a celebration of the complexities of human sexuality. This view has profound implications for how individuals, including women in ELCSA, relate to their faith and seek meaning within their spiritual lives.

3.1.3.3 Embodiment and Desire as Sacred

The body and sexual desire, long treated with suspicion in Christian ethics, are reclaimed as sites of divine encounter. Indecent theology insists that God is not confined to "decent" spaces but is also found in what the church has labelled shameful, sinful, or obscene.

Through its multidisciplinary approach and commitment to inclusivity, indecent theology not only challenges established values and power relations, secrecy and sites of divine encounter, but also provides a pathway for reimagining theology in ways that are relevant to contemporary social and cultural contexts. As society continues to grapple with issues of identity, power, and oppression, the insights offered by indecent theology will undoubtedly remain a crucial resource for those seeking a more just and equitable world.

To fully leverage the insights that indecent theology offers within this inquiry, it is essential to delve deeply into liberation theology and to critically assess its limitations. Liberation theology is not merely a static doctrine; rather, it is characterised as a continuously evolving process of re-contextualisation that invites perpetual engagement with serious theological doubts. This dynamic process necessitates the integration of new contextual perspectives, particularly those informed by the metaphors surrounding God, Christianity, and sexuality, into the established theological discourse. Historically, liberation theology has often overlooked the lived experiences of women, thereby marginalising their voices and perspectives, especially in relation to their sexuality.

This oversight compels us not only to ask alternative questions but also to adopt a fresh approach to contextual theology (Althaus-Reid, 2000). The current state of women's existence, especially within the framework of patriarchal struggles for power and control, reveals that women continue to push forward and dismantle barriers, even amidst significant challenges. This raises the question of how women's bodies can be utilised as instruments to transform the pervasive landscape of abuse and control. The intersection of liberation theology with feminist perspectives becomes increasingly relevant in this context, as it invites a re-examination of the theological discourse to include women's experiences and voices (Gutiérrez, 1973). Liberation theology, rooted in the preferential option for the poor, emphasises social justice and the liberation of oppressed peoples, which aligns with feminist critiques of systemic gender oppression.

3.1.3.4 Feminist Approach to Indecent Theology

Feminist theology challenges traditional interpretations of scripture and church doctrine that have historically marginalised women's experiences, advocating for a more inclusive, participatory, and contextually responsive approach to theology (Daly, 1978). This inclusivity is not merely a theoretical exercise; it is a necessary corrective to centuries of ecclesial and doctrinal practices that have silenced women and restricted their agency. By creating spaces

where women's voices, perspectives, and lived realities are integral to theological discourse, feminist theology reshapes the very foundation of what constitutes ethical and spiritual authority within religious communities (Rogers, 2002:62).

Liberation theology and postcolonial theory share common ground in their focus on identity, marginalisation, and consciousness; however, feminist liberation theology distinguishes itself through its explicit commitment to sexual honesty. Sexual honesty is critical because sexuality is a core aspect of human experience and identity, yet it has often been suppressed or morally regulated in church settings, particularly for women. Indecent theology, as articulated by Althaus-Reid (2000:8), foregrounds the sexual experiences of marginalised populations, employing economic and political analyses to critique systematic theology's treatment or neglect of sexuality. This approach resonates with the lived realities of many women in contexts such as the Pretoria Circuit, where sexual agency is often constrained by patriarchal norms embedded in both religious and cultural structures.

Beattie (2003:54) further emphasises that indecent theology centres sexuality and poverty within theological reflection, insisting that the exclusion of these aspects renders theology incomplete and abstracted from lived human realities. I contend that integrating women's experiences of sexuality into theological discourse is essential not only for justice but also for authenticity. Theology divorced from embodied realities, particularly those of women, risks perpetuating oppression and moral frameworks that are disconnected from the everyday challenges and desires of congregants.

Althaus-Reid (2000:9) challenges us to consider why theology, especially that which emerges from the experiences of marginalised communities, remains sexually neutral. I argue that this neutrality has historically functioned as a tool of control, often masking patriarchal imperatives under the guise of divine neutrality. Engaging with the sexual desires and experiences of women is not indulgent or irrelevant; rather, it provides vital insight into how God's presence and guidance are experienced in the fullness of human life. Women's experiences of sexuality, agency, and relationality offer profound theological knowledge, revealing dimensions of God's love, justice, and creativity that abstract moral frameworks often overlook.

Central to this engagement is the recognition that theology is inherently embodied and relational. Althaus-Reid (2000:10) asserts that every theology is inherently a sexual theology, whether acknowledged or not, because it reflects social codifications, power relations, and the lived realities of human beings. This observation is particularly salient for women whose

experiences have been historically silenced in ELCSA and similar ecclesial contexts. By acknowledging that theology is fundamentally informed by human embodiment and sexual experience, we validate women's knowledge as a critical site for ethical reflection, doctrinal interpretation, and spiritual formation.

Beattie (2007:61) argues that sexual theologies prioritise lived experience over abstract ideals, rooting theology in the realities of human behaviour and relationships. For women in the Pretoria Circuit, this approach is revolutionary: it affirms that their experiences of desire, intimacy, coercion, or relational complexity are not peripheral but central to understanding God, morality, and community. Sexuality becomes not a domain of shame or moral failure but a lens through which broader truths about human flourishing, divine justice, and relational ethics are revealed.

Davis (2008) emphasises that centring women's voices in theology is essential for developing inclusive, responsive, and just religious praxis. I strongly agree that women's narratives especially those concerning sexuality, serve as critical guides for reimagining church ethics, leadership, and pedagogy. Through active engagement with these experiences, ELCSA can begin to dismantle longstanding patriarchal norms, and instead promote moral guidance rooted in empathy, justice, and relational accountability. Kirk (2004) argues that by embracing women's sexual narratives, theological discourse becomes more dynamic and responsive. I further argue that such inclusion also has a prophetic function: it challenges existing power structures, confronts systemic oppression, and envisions a church in which women are full participants in ethical, spiritual, and doctrinal deliberation. Sexuality, in this sense, is not merely personal or private; it is a theological category through which liberation, dignity, and justice can be enacted.

Incorporation of women lived experiences is essential not only for theological authenticity but also for cultivating a church culture that is inclusive, compassionate, and ethically just. By centring these experiences, the church can move from a model of moral policing to one of empowerment, relational accountability, and liberation, affirming that women's bodies, desires, and experiences are sacred, morally significant, and central to the ongoing project of theological reflection.

Indecent theology is a provocative theological approach that challenges traditional Christian sexual ethics by confronting structures of sexual, economic, and social oppression. As articulated by Marcella Althaus-Reid (2000:11), it calls theologians and faith communities to

engage in a praxis-oriented theology that takes seriously the lived sexual experiences of people, particularly those who have historically been marginalised. Rather than avoiding or suppressing discussions of sexuality, indecent theology embraces the complexities of human sexual life and integrates these experiences into theological reflection. In the context of the Pretoria Circuit, this approach encourages the recognition and inclusion of women's sexual narratives as legitimate sources of theological insight.

Scholars such as Farley (2006) and Johnson (2002) emphasise that incorporating sexuality into moral and theological discourse enriches the understanding of the sacred by acknowledging the embodied nature of human existence. Recognising sexuality as part of spiritual life affirms the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit, and allows theology to engage more authentically with the realities of human experience. By validating women's sexual stories, theology becomes more inclusive and compassionate, reflecting the struggles and lived realities of marginalised communities.

Within the broader framework of liberation theology, scholars like Gutiérrez (1995) argue that engaging with "indecent" or "filthy" theology challenges conventional notions of purity and redirects theological reflection toward the material conditions and lived experiences of oppressed people. Similarly, Foucault (2001:67) highlights how traditional theological frameworks have often regulated and pathologized certain expressions of sexuality, reinforcing heteronormative norms and silencing alternative identities. Contemporary theologians therefore argue that recognising sexuality as a complex dimension of human identity can deepen understandings of divine love, community, and justice.

In the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), indecent theology provides a critical lens through which to examine the church's silence on LGBTQ+ inclusion and its strict sexual norms, particularly those regulating women's bodies. ELCSA's emphasis on abstinence before marriage, heterosexual marriage as the only legitimate sexual context, and motherhood as women's primary vocation often marginalises single, divorced, child-free, or sexually active women, while excluding LGBTQ+ individuals altogether. Indecent theology challenges these patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks by exposing their limitations and calling for a more inclusive and liberative Christian ethic. By recognising the diverse embodied experiences of believers as sites of theological meaning, this approach opens possibilities for developing a more just, compassionate, and contextually relevant understanding of sexuality within the Southern African church context.

3.1.3.5 How these theories be used to challenge purity norms in male dominated spaces

Indecent theology and body theology can provide important theological resources for challenging rigid purity norms within catechism classes and youth programmes, particularly in contexts where these spaces are predominantly led by male instructors. In many church settings, teachings about sexuality often emphasise abstinence, modesty, and moral discipline without adequately addressing the complexity of young people's embodied experiences. While these teachings are frequently rooted in the desire to uphold Christian values, they may unintentionally reinforce shame around the body, silence conversations about sexuality, and perpetuate gendered expectations that place greater moral responsibility on girls and young women. Drawing on insights from body theology and indecent theology can help reshape these teachings in ways that affirm dignity, embodiment, and mutual responsibility.

Body theology provides a constructive framework for affirming the human body as part of God's good creation. Within catechism and youth programmes, this perspective can encourage a shift away from viewing the body primarily as a potential site of sin toward recognising it as a sacred aspect of human life. Male facilitators can introduce biblical reflections that affirm embodiment, such as the creation narrative in Genesis, which declares creation including the human body, very good, or the doctrine of the Incarnation, where God becomes present in the human body through Christ. By emphasising that the body is created and valued by God, catechism teaching can help young people develop a healthier theological understanding of sexuality that is rooted in respect, care, and responsibility rather than fear or shame

Body theology can also encourage catechism instructors to discuss mutuality and respect in relationships rather than focusing exclusively on sexual prohibition. For example, discussions about sexuality can highlight values such as consent, mutual dignity, emotional responsibility, and relational accountability. When these values are framed as expressions of Christian love and justice, they challenge purity discourses that often place unequal moral burdens on women while neglecting the ethical responsibility of men and boys.

Indecent theology, often associated with theologians such as Marcella Althaus-Reid, goes further by critically interrogating the cultural and theological assumptions that regulate sexuality and maintain silence around sexual realities. Within youth programmes, indecent theology can help expose how certain moral teachings have historically been shaped by patriarchal assumptions about women's bodies, sexuality, and moral purity. By encouraging critical reflection, catechism educators can invite young people to ask questions such as: Who

benefits from strict purity expectations? Why are women's bodies often more heavily policed than men's? How do cultural norms shape our interpretations of Christian sexual ethics?

In practical terms, catechism classes led by men can incorporate participatory teaching methods that create space for young people especially girls, to express their perspectives. Facilitated discussions, anonymous question boxes, and small group reflections can allow youth to raise concerns about relationships, bodily changes, peer pressure, and sexual expectations without fear of judgement. This approach acknowledges that young people are not merely passive recipients of doctrine but active participants in theological reflection about their lives.

Another important strategy is to integrate women's voices and experiences into catechetical teaching. Even if the programme is led primarily by men, inviting female theologians, women clergy, counsellors, or respected women in the congregation to participate in sessions can broaden perspectives on sexuality and embodiment. Hearing women speak about dignity, bodily autonomy, and faith can challenge male-dominated narratives and offer young people more balanced theological guidance.

In addition, catechism instructors can incorporate contextual storytelling and lived experiences that resonate with African Christian realities. Conversations about sexuality can address issues such as gender inequality, sexual violence, cultural expectations of virginity, and the pressures placed on young women in many communities. By engaging these realities honestly, indecent theology helps the church move beyond idealised moral frameworks and toward pastoral responses that prioritise justice, compassion, and human flourishing.

Finally, using these theological approaches can encourage male facilitators themselves to engage in critical self-reflection about masculinity and power within church teaching. Reflecting on how male authority has historically shaped sexual ethics can help leaders adopt more humble, listening-oriented approaches when addressing sensitive topics. Such reflection aligns with broader Lutheran commitments to repentance, transformation, and continual theological reform.

Through these approaches, body theology and indecent theology can help catechism classes and youth programmes move beyond restrictive purity discourses toward a more holistic Christian ethic of sexuality, one that affirms the body, recognises the complexity of lived experiences, and promotes relationships grounded in dignity, mutual respect, and justice.

3.2 Methodology

This section provides a comprehensive overview of the research design and methodology employed in this study. According to Creswell (2014:43), methodology is "a framework that guides the researcher to collect, analyse, and interpret data systematically". Similarly, Myers (2013:67) defines research methodology as "the strategy of inquiry which moves from the underlying assumptions to research design and data collection". It encompasses the selection of specific methods for data collection and analysis that align closely with the research questions and objectives. In this study, the methodology was carefully designed to explore how Christian ethics, as interpreted and practiced within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), shapes women's sexuality, and how feminist theological perspectives can offer an inclusive and liberating re-reading of these ethical frameworks.

Given the dual focus on doctrinal interpretations and women lived experiences, a qualitative exploratory design was adopted. This approach is particularly suited to capturing the depth and complexity of women's narratives, providing nuanced insights into the ways Christian ethics have influenced, restricted, or shaped their sexuality. The exploratory nature of the study allows for an open-ended investigation into the intersections of theology, ethics, and gendered experience, enabling critical engagement with both ecclesiastical texts and personal testimonies.

The methodological choices are further justified by the use of body theology and indecent theology as a theoretical lenses, which informs the research by highlighting power dynamics, gendered norms, and possibilities for ethical reform within the church. These lenses ensures that the study does not merely describe women's experiences but critically interrogates the structures and practices that have marginalised their sexual agency.

To ensure the trustworthiness, ethical integrity, and reflexivity of the study, a number of strategies were employed. Trustworthiness was addressed through careful data collection, triangulation of sources, and thorough documentation of analytical procedures. Ethical compliance included the design and implementation of informed consent forms, confidentiality protocols, and sensitivity to the personal and potentially vulnerable nature of participants' narratives. Reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging the researcher's positionality and potential biases throughout the research process.

3.2.1 Researcher Positionality / Reflexivity

This study is informed by a feminist theological methodology that recognises the importance of the researcher's social, ecclesial, and gendered location in the production of knowledge. As the author of this study and a female clergy member within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), my positionality inevitably shapes the way the research questions are framed, the data are interpreted, and the theological reflections are developed. Feminist theology rejects the assumption of a detached or neutral researcher and instead emphasises reflexivity, transparency, and accountability regarding the researcher's standpoint.

My location as a woman and clergy within ELCSA places me both inside the institutional structures being examined and in solidarity with the women whose experiences form the focus of this study. This insider perspective provides valuable contextual insight into the theological traditions, pastoral practices, and cultural expectations that shape women's sexuality within the church. At the same time, feminist theological methodology requires a critical awareness of how such proximity may influence interpretation. Acknowledging this positionality allows the study to remain attentive to potential biases while recognising that lived experience can also serve as a legitimate source of theological reflection.

In line with feminist theological approaches, the research prioritises women's voices and embodied experiences as important sources for theological inquiry. Rather than imposing predetermined conclusions, the analysis is grounded in the narratives and perspectives of participants, allowing their experiences to challenge, illuminate, and expand existing Christian ethical frameworks. This approach reflects a key commitment within feminist theology: that theology must engage the lived realities of those whose voices have historically been marginalised within ecclesial discourse.

Furthermore, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process in order to minimise subjective interpretation. The study engages established feminist theological frameworks, including body theology and African feminist theological perspectives, to guide analysis and situate the findings within broader scholarly conversations. By critically reflecting on my own location while grounding interpretation in participants' testimonies and theological scholarship, the research seeks to balance insider knowledge with methodological rigor.

Acknowledging positionality in this way does not weaken the research but strengthens its credibility. Within feminist theological methodology, transparency about the researcher's standpoint is considered an essential component of ethical and responsible scholarship. It allows the study to remain attentive to issues of power, gender, and ecclesial authority while striving for a careful and balanced interpretation of women's experiences within ELCSA.

3.2.2 Structure of the methodology section

This methodology section is organised into three sub-sections:

- Research Methodology and Design: This section presents the research approach and method, detailing the qualitative techniques used for data collection and analysis, and explaining how they align with the study's objectives.
- Ethical Considerations: This section outlines the ethical issues encountered during the research and the strategies employed to address them, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the safeguarding of participants' rights.
- Methodological Limitations: The final section discusses the limitations inherent in the research design and methodology, including issues of generalisability, researcher bias, and scope, while reflecting on how these limitations were mitigated.

The study examines how Christian ethics, as interpreted and practiced within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), shapes women's sexuality, and how feminist theological perspectives can offer a more inclusive and liberating re-reading. For this reason, the methodological framework had to accommodate both critical engagement with theological texts and an in-depth exploration of women lived experiences. By combining qualitative exploratory methods with Body and indecent theological frameworks this study provides both a critical analysis of Christian ethical teachings in ELCSA and an in-depth understanding of women lived experiences, thereby contributing meaningful insights to the field of feminist theological ethics and sexual ethics within the church context

3.2.3 Research Design and Approach

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the meanings and experiences of individuals (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Since the primary focus of this study is on women's experiences of sexuality in the context of Christian ethics, it is important to privilege the subjective voices and context of women`s realities rather than rely on abstract universal claims.

The study is further shaped by a feminist theological perspective, which critiques patriarchal structures within religion and highlights women lived experiences as legitimate sources of theological knowledge (Dube, 2000:43). This approach not only ensures that the research does not simply describe women's stories but critically interrogates the systems that have marginalised their sexuality. For this reason, a qualitative exploratory design forms the backbone of this study. Creswell (2013) defines a qualitative research design as a research process for understanding a social or human problem by exploring meaning individuals ascribe to. It is a theoretical lens through which to investigate the meanings that individuals attribute to specific social-human situations.

This approach is inherently empirical, focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of participants to elicit meaning, opinions, and the underlying causes that shape their realities. According to Swinton and Mowat (2007:11), qualitative methods allow researchers to explore the distinct ways in which individuals and communities inhabit their environments. Unlike quantitative research that relies on numerical measurement and statistical generalisation, qualitative research is concerned with meaning, context, and lived experiences. This is especially important in theological and ethical inquiry, where abstract doctrines are embodied in the realities of women`s lives.

For this study, an exploratory design was justified because there is limited existing scholarship focusing specifically on the intersection of feminist theology, Christian ethics, and women's sexuality within ELCSA. The purpose of the study is not to confirm pre-existing hypotheses but rather to uncover patterns, narratives, and insights that emerge from both textual traditions and participants lived experiences of women in ELCSA. This design is also critical because it intentionally challenges dominant patriarchal readings of Christian ethics.

Flick (2011:136) highlights that "the fundamental goal of qualitative research is to approach the world from the perspective of those being studied, thereby comprehending, characterizing, and occasionally explaining social phenomena through an analysis of individual or group experiences, as well as through analytical interactions and communication". This approach was particularly suited for this study due to its descriptive nature, which enables the exploration of complex social processes and the lived realities of individuals. As interpretive research, the qualitative methodology assists in understanding and describing the sexual experiences of women in Pretoria Circuit, providing a platform for these women to articulate their realities and the meanings they assign to their sexual engagements. Babbie and Mouton (2001:44) state

that “this nuanced understanding is poised to make a profound contribution to the overarching research objectives, in particular objectives of this study”.

By employing feminist theological analysis, the study treats women’s voices not as marginal, but as central to theological meaning-making. The study adopted an interpretive approach, grounded in feminist hermeneutics and theological ethics. Interpretive methodologies assume that reality is socially and discursively constructed, meaning that sexuality is not merely biological but also shaped by religious, cultural, and ethical narratives.

3.2.4 Feminist Theological Lens

A feminist theological lens critiques patriarchal structures embedded in Christian traditions and proposes alternative readings that affirm gender justice. This lens is vital for re-examining how Christian ethics have historically been used to regulate women’s bodies and sexualities. Through feminist hermeneutics, theological texts are read with suspicion toward androcentric bias and openness toward liberative possibilities.

Historically, patriarchal frameworks have constricted, interpreted, and assigned meaning to women's sexuality without adequately considering their lived experiences (Foucault, 1978). This oversight underscores the importance of conducting research that centres women’s voices and experiences, particularly within religious contexts where their perspectives have often been marginalised. However, it is essential to recognise that qualitative research methodology is not without its flaws or shortcomings. One of the primary concerns associated with qualitative research is the potential for bias. Strategies implemented to mitigate bias include a vigilant and focused approach to identify sources of bias, ensuring that the completed research adheres to the highest qualitative standards (Connaway & Powell, 2010:61).

The study undertook a feminist examination of Christian sexual ethics as a phenomenon, utilising unstructured questionnaires to gather data to answer the study`s key research questions. Peterson-Iyer (2022:33) posits that qualitative research asserts that reality is not a fixed or singular phenomenon, as suggested by positivist quantitative methods. Instead, there exist multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are fluid and evolve over time. According to Lim, (2025:199) Qualitative research seeks to delve into the meanings of social phenomena as experienced by the individuals themselves, which is particularly pertinent in this research focused on the sexuality of women in the Pretoria Circuit. Consequently, many feminist researchers advocate for qualitative approaches, as these methodologies embrace interpretivism, subjectivity, and femininity, and are often considered less mainstream. In

contrast, Graham and Rawlings (1980:60) point out that critics of quantitative methods argue that such approaches can perpetuate patriarchal norms, thereby side-lining women's voices and experiences as research subjects.

According to Jayaratne (1983:293), “feminist research has prioritized qualitative and oral history methodologies for data collection, particularly because women's voices have historically been marginalized within academic research”. For this reason, feminist qualitative method is the most suitable approach to address the research question posed. It was selected for its ability to facilitate in-depth conversations that uncover broader meanings from the experiences and perspectives of women leaders and because it emphasizes the importance of women’s voices and aims to challenge traditional power dynamics in research (Reinharz, 1993).

Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011:16) argue that feminist qualitative methods prioritise reflexivity, empowerment, and the co-construction of knowledge, making them particularly suitable for exploring women’s leadership experiences. By employing this method, the study allows participants to articulate their insights freely, thereby providing a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. The research questions specifically address the 'what,' 'how,' and 'why' of women's embodied experiences within the context of their faith and sexuality.

Another reason for this study to adopt a feminist approach is due to the historical and ongoing marginalisation of women in African societies, which extends beyond gender to include social, economic, and political dimensions. Many women find themselves without a voice or are silenced in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. Oduyoye (2001:56) articulates this reality, asserting that "in Africa, gender became a theological issue when the Circle asserted that the gender parameter in African culture and religions has crucial effects on women's lives and on how Africans view womanhood". This underscores the necessity of a feminist qualitative approach that seeks to amplify women's voices, allowing for a deeper understanding of their experiences and the ways in which these experiences intersect with broader societal and religious structures.

3.2.4.1 Sample and Sampling

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) is a denomination with historical roots in missionary Christianity, deeply influenced by Western ethical frameworks. Women form the majority of ELCSA membership yet remain underrepresented in theological discourse on sexuality. Gerson and Horowitz (2002:231) highlight that qualitative research

inherently involves direct engagement with the world, whether through the lens of everyday life or through interactions with specific groups. Participants in qualitative research can articulate their understanding of social reality based on their own experiences and perspectives.

Chiromo (2009:77) offers a definition of a sample as "a proportion of the population, a slice of it, or a subset of it". This definition underscores the idea that the sample is not a representation of the entire population but rather a selected group that provides insights into the broader context. Zhou (2015:28) further elaborates on the concept of participants, defining them as individuals chosen to engage in a specific research project. This selection process is not arbitrary; it requires a strategic approach that emphasises the significance of the respondents in relation to the research questions being posed. For this reason, the study adopts purposive sampling which includes twenty women from ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit, aged between 25 and 55 years old. The selection of this specific age group was intentional, as it reflects a demographic that is actively engaged in various life stages, including career development, family planning, and community involvement. This age bracket (between 25 and 35) is generally considered to be the period when individuals are most likely to experience significant life events, such as marriage or childbirth. Women in this age range are often navigating the complexities of relationships, which can include considerations around marriage, parenting, and spiritual growth within the context of the church As per Fraenkel and Warren (2000:76), the utilisation of purposive sampling is common in qualitative studies. My judgement relied on to select individuals who are believed to be most capable of providing high-quality data.

I acknowledge that my simple is small and might not fully capture the diversity of experiences of women within ELCSA however, that might not necessary be a weakness because the goal of sample size in qualitative research is the depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisation. In this study, a smaller sample was valuable because it allowed me to engage more deeply with participants' experiences. This depth produced rich qualitative data that helped me to uncover meanings, tensions, and interpretations that might be overlooked in larger surveys. It also enabled me to explore how Christian ethics, cultural expectations, and gender norms operate within specific contexts of ELCSA congregational life. This is particularly important when examining sensitive topics such as sexuality, where nuanced personal stories are crucial. Lastly, this small sample allowed me to centre participants' narratives and treat them as authoritative sources of theological reflection, rather than reducing them to numerical data.

According to Mack et al. (2005:7), researchers need to develop a strategy for identifying and enrolling significant respondents from the area of study. This strategy should outline how relevant participants were selected and the locations for conducting interviews. Such a plan is crucial for ensuring that the sample aligns with the objectives of the research and that the data collected are both relevant and insightful. Moyo (2014:12) emphasises that sampling is a technique that enables researchers to purposefully select participants based on attributes or characteristics that are pertinent to the primary research goals. This targeted approach enhances the quality of the data collected and ensures that the findings are robust and meaningful.

In phenomenological studies, it is imperative that participants express their daily experiences and possess first-hand knowledge of the phenomena under investigation. This requirement was a barrier and placed a great burden on the data gathering for this research. Creswell (2007:104) argues that “the diversity of individual characteristics can complicate the identification of common themes and core experiences shared among participants”. I had to navigate this complexity while striving to uncover meaningful insights that resonate across the varied experiences of women in this study.

The concept of representativeness in qualitative research is not about achieving statistical generalisability but rather ensuring that the participants selected for the study are reflective, articulate, and willing to share their experiences and insights. In qualitative studies, the selection of participants can significantly influence the overall quality and richness of the data obtained.

To ensure a diverse representation of experiences, the sample in the study includes five women from the Prayer Women’s League (PWL), five from the Prayer Women’s Fellowship (PWF), five from the Young Adults League (YAL), and the remaining five from women in the church who are not affiliated with any specific league. This approach aligns with Mbiti's (1971:14) assertion that such respondents serve as "moving libraries", possessing a wealth of historical and experiential knowledge regarding the dynamics of women's sexuality within the Pretoria Circuit. In the context of this study, the sample of participants was drawn from a group of twenty (20) women aged 25-55, all of whom are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (ELCSA) within the Central Dioceses, Pretoria circuit. This circuit is situated in Gauteng Province, primarily within the Tshwane district. The sample is strategically composed of individuals from various zones within Pretoria circuit: Five participants from

Mamelodi Zone, Five from Atteridgeville Zone, Five from Tembisa Zone and the last Five from Central Zone.

Bernard (2002:214) posits that “the determination of sample size in qualitative research is often guided by the principle of theoretical saturation”. This concept refers to the point at which the data collection process no longer yields new insights or information relevant to the research questions.

Literature on qualitative research frequently uses terms such as "purposeful", "selective" and "theoretical" sampling. While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they possess distinct meanings that are important to understand. According to Ahmad, M., Wilkins (2025:203), "purposeful sampling" refers to the ability to exercise power in selecting participants, highlighting the researcher's agency in choosing subjects who can provide valuable insights. On the other hand, "selective sampling" suggests a more general process of picking out specific items or individuals, which may not carry the same connotation of deliberate intent as purposeful sampling. The term "theoretical sampling", as defined in various academic contexts, pertains to a sampling strategy that is informed by the researcher's theoretical framework rather than practical considerations (Charmaz, 2014). This distinction underscores the importance of aligning sampling methods with the underlying theoretical basis of the research.

Purposive sampling was utilised to select participants who have relevant experiences and insights related to the transformative policies and their sexual engagements. Patton (2015:10) states that “non-probability sampling method is advantageous as it allows for the inclusion of individuals who can provide rich, in-depth information pertinent to the research questions”. Creswell (2014:39) adds that, in this method, participants are selected intentionally, comprising cases, or data sources that are most relevant to the specific research questions or objectives. The reason for choosing this age group is that women in this age group align with the church's teachings and the expected behavioural norms within the community. In many congregations, including those within ELCSA, it is common for women within the specified age range to participate in church activities that are aimed at strengthening their spiritual lives and familial responsibilities. Even for those who are not married, it is anticipated that many would be attending penitential classes or similar programmes after having children, as part of their spiritual and moral obligations to align with church teachings.

Purposive sampling allows for an in-depth exploration of the participants lived experiences, providing rich qualitative data that can inform both theory and practice. Although the smaller sample sizes typical of phenomenological research can present limitations in terms of generalisability, they also permit a more profound analysis of everyone's experiences and perceptions. Smith et al. (2009:50) argue that "the insights garnered from these smaller samples can often be extrapolated to other studies, demonstrating the broader applicability of the findings". However, Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016:11) highlight the limitation of this method by pointing out that since participants are selected based on specific criteria and not randomly, the findings cannot be confidently generalised to the broader population. Noting its limitation, purposive sampling was best suited for this study because the goal was to gain in-depth understanding by focusing on particular characteristics, experiences, or insights that are pertinent to the study. The selection criteria were carefully defined to ensure that the sample reflects a diverse range of experiences of women in ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit, taking into consideration factors such as age, socio-economic status, education level, and personal background.

After choosing purposeful sampling, a crucial phase in qualitative research is the development of a purposeful sampling plan. Creswell and Poth (2018:72) argue that this plan is designed to intentionally select a group of individuals rather than rely on random probability sampling, which is more common in quantitative research. Employing purposeful sampling ensured that the study's participants were not only relevant but also capable of providing rich, detailed insights that align with the study`s objectives.

3.2.4.1.2 Research Participants

Kokko and Harjula, (2023:91) argues that the significance of individual experience in the social sciences has been widely recognized, emphasizing the importance of understanding social phenomena from the perspectives of those directly affected, especially marginalized or oppressed groups. This approach not only aligns with the interpretive and qualitative traditions within social science research but also with the objective of this study, which aims to prioritise subjective experiences as a means to gain deeper insights into social realities.

Minkler and Wallerstein (2008:22) add that "the emphasis on individual and collective narratives is central to participatory research paradigms, which seek to empower marginalized populations by involving them actively in the research process". Such perspectives are crucial for capturing the lived realities that quantitative methods may overlook, thereby enabling a

more comprehensive understanding of social issues. This approach enriches this research and also provides insight into the lived reality of individuals in the research region. Consideration of their perspectives provides a more nuanced understanding and deeper meaning of their situations. The theoretical frameworks section of this chapter emphasises the importance of incorporating people lived experiences when studying theology. This emphasis is critical for a holistic understanding of how theological concepts are interpreted and enacted in daily life, particularly in contexts where individuals face systemic barriers.

The value of personal narratives and experiential knowledge is highlighted by Settler and Engh (2018:321), who argue that the body has taken on a significant role in both social theory and contemporary media culture due to its representational power and symbolic value. In this context, the body is not merely a biological entity but a crucial site of social meaning, identity, and agency. This understanding prompts us to interrogate the position of women's sexuality within various cultural and social frameworks, as their experiences often reflect broader societal norms and power dynamics. The inclusion of lived experiences highlights the importance of reflexivity in research.

Given (2008:293) highlights the importance for researchers to be aware of their own positionality and how it influences their interpretations and interactions with participants. This reflexive approach encourages a more ethical and responsible engagement with subjects, particularly in studies involving marginalized populations. By acknowledging the power dynamics at play, I can strive to create a more equitable space for voices that are often silenced or overlooked. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, allows for a richer exploration of these themes. Through direct engagement with participants, the research gathered diverse narratives that reflect the complexities of individual experiences. This approach empowers participants to share their stories and allows a deeper understanding of the social phenomenon under the study. The plurality of voices captured in this study helped to reveal the multifaceted nature of reality, challenging monolithic narratives and highlighting the diversity of experiences within a given context.

Ultimately, the importance of individual experience in the social sciences cannot be overstated. It serves as a vital tool for understanding the complexities of human behaviour, social structures, and cultural narratives. Denzin and Lincoln (2018:52) argue that "by centering the lived experiences of individuals, particularly those who are often marginalized, researchers can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive discourse within their fields". This approach not

only enhances academic scholarship but also has the potential to inform policy and practice, enabling positive sexuality and greater understanding across diverse Christian communities. Thus, the exploration of women's bodies, informed by individual experiences, stands as a crucial area of inquiry that warrants ongoing attention and engagement. This careful consideration of participant selection enhanced the legitimacy and reliability of the study's findings. The next section discusses the data collection tool.

3.2.4.3 Data Collection Tools

In this study, data collection refers to the systematic process of gathering information required to address the research questions concerning how Christian ethics within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) shapes women's sexuality and how feminist theology can offer liberating alternatives. Given that the study adopts a qualitative and exploratory research design, the data collection process prioritised obtaining rich, detailed, and contextualised accounts of both women's lived experiences and the ethical teachings of the Church.

To achieve this, the study relied on semi-structured questionnaires administered to women within the ELCSA Pretoria Circuit. The semi-structured questionnaires allowed participants to express their personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of Christian ethical teachings regarding sexuality. This method was particularly appropriate for the study because it enabled participants to articulate their perspectives in their own words, thereby providing nuanced insights into how church doctrines and moral expectations influence their sexual identities, choices, and negotiations in everyday life.

Using semi-structured questionnaires ensured a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Christian ethics and women's sexuality within ELCSA, while also providing a foundation for exploring how feminist theological perspectives can challenge patriarchal assumptions and contribute to more inclusive and liberating ethical frameworks. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009:44) point out that once participants are identified, a particular data collection tool is applied. Patton (2015:61) states that to facilitate the systematic gathering, organisation, and interpretation of textual data, qualitative research employs a variety of methodologies, including questionnaire.

This study used semi-structured questionnaires. According to Gillham (2018:92), a semi-structured questionnaire is a data collection tool that combines both open-ended and closed-ended questions, allowing respondents to provide specific information while also offering the

flexibility to elaborate on their answers. This format facilitates a balance between standardisation and depth, enabling researchers to explore particular topics in detail while maintaining some consistency across responses. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019:20) add that this method strikes a balance between providing a framework for the discussion while allowing flexibility for participants to express their thoughts and feelings in their own words. Bryman (2016:33) points out that the semi-structured format encourages participants to share their narratives, facilitating a deeper understanding of the meanings they attach to their experiences.

3.2.4.4 Semi-Structured Questionnaire

A guide for the semi-structured questionnaire was developed to guide the collection of data and ensure that participants share their stories in depth while covering core themes such as:

- Understanding of Christian ethics
- Teachings on sexual morality including the concept of sex before marriage.
- Women's experiences of sexual control, exclusion, or empowerment within the church.

This method allowed participants to articulate their personal perspectives and provide insight into how ELCSA's teachings affect their sexuality. Semi structured questionnaire was designed to gather information. In designing the questionnaire, careful consideration was given to the formulation of questions to ensure that they were open-ended and invited detailed responses (Dillman et al., 2014). This approach encouraged participants to share their thoughts and feelings in their own words, which would then yield rich qualitative data. Questionnaires were structured to allow for the exploration of various themes related to power dynamics and social inequalities. For instance, questions addressed participants' personal experiences with discrimination, their views on societal norms, and their perceptions of resistance strategies employed by individuals and groups facing oppression.

Other data collection tool like focus group or interviews could have been used, but because of my positionality as clergy in ELCSA, a tool was preferred that would help avoid physical contact with the participants. Similarly, a desktop study could have been adopted, however, no ELCSA documents could be found that supports my argument for this thesis. Questionnaires were chosen as they allowed indirect engagement with participants, while allowing the

researcher to pose questions that encouraged them to share their stories and perspectives in their own words.

3.2.5 Methodological Limitations

While this study provides important insights into how Christian ethics within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) shapes women's sexuality, certain methodological limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study utilised a relatively small sample size, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives of women across the broader ELCSA context. Women within the church come from different cultural, social, and congregational backgrounds, and these variations may influence how sexuality is understood and negotiated. However, the small sample was consistent with the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, which prioritises depth of understanding over statistical generalisation. The smaller number of participants enabled a closer engagement with their responses and allowed the research to highlight nuanced experiences and interpretations related to sexuality, faith, and Christian ethics.

Second, the study relied solely on questionnaires as the method of data collection, without methodological triangulation through interviews, focus groups, or participant observation. While questionnaires provided a structured way of collecting data and allowed participants to respond at their own pace, this approach limited opportunities for deeper probing or clarification of responses. Methods such as in-depth interviews might have allowed for more detailed exploration of participants' experiences, particularly given the sensitive and complex nature of sexuality within religious contexts.

Despite these limitations, the use of questionnaires also presented certain advantages. The format offered participants a degree of privacy and anonymity, which may have encouraged more open reflection on personal and potentially sensitive issues related to sexuality and religious beliefs. Furthermore, the responses still generated valuable insights into the tensions between church teachings, cultural expectations, and women's lived experiences.

These limitations therefore do not invalidate the findings but rather indicate the scope of the study and highlight areas for future research. Subsequent studies could expand the sample size and incorporate multiple qualitative methods to gain a broader and more comprehensive understanding of women's sexuality within ELCSA.

3.2.6 Potential resistance to feminist-informed theological perspectives

In implementing initiatives that promote open dialogue and sexuality education within the church, it is important to acknowledge that feminist-informed theological perspectives may encounter resistance, particularly among congregants who hold more conservative interpretations of Christian doctrine and tradition. Within church contexts such as ELCSA, where biblical authority and longstanding moral teachings carry significant weight, some members may perceive feminist theology as challenging established beliefs about gender roles, sexuality, and family structures. Recognising this potential resistance is therefore an important step in ensuring that efforts toward theological renewal are constructive rather than divisive.

One way to address such resistance is through intentional dialogue with conservative stakeholders, including clergy, church elders, and influential community leaders. Rather than framing feminist perspectives as oppositional to Christian tradition, these conversations can emphasise shared concerns about justice, human dignity, and pastoral care. Facilitated discussions, theological forums, and leadership workshops can create opportunities for mutual engagement where concerns are expressed openly and examined through scripture, theology, and lived experience. This dialogical approach encourages collaboration and reduces the perception that feminist perspectives are imposed externally on the church.

Another constructive approach is the use of biblical narratives that highlight women's agency and leadership. Scripture contains numerous examples of women who exercised authority, courage, and moral insight within their communities. Figures such as Mary Magdalene, who was entrusted with proclaiming the resurrection, or the Samaritan woman in John 4, who became a witness to her community, demonstrate that women have played vital roles in the biblical story. By drawing attention to these narratives, theologians and church leaders can show that recognising women's voices and experiences is not a departure from scripture but rather a deeper engagement with its inclusive dimensions.

Engaging cultural lived experiences and community narratives is another important strategy. In many African contexts, women's daily experiences of family life, caregiving, economic participation, and community leadership provide valuable insights into ethical decision-making and relational responsibility. Creating opportunities for women to share their stories within church settings through testimonies, workshops, or facilitated conversations helps ground theological reflection in real-life contexts. These narratives can reveal how cultural

expectations, religious teachings, and social realities intersect, making visible the need for ethical frameworks that affirm women's dignity and wellbeing.

It is also helpful to demonstrate the alignment between feminist ethics and key Lutheran theological principles, particularly those relating to justice, grace, and human dignity. Lutheran theology emphasises the liberating power of grace and the belief that all people are created in the image of God. Feminist theological insights can be presented as extending these principles by challenging structures that marginalise women and by advocating for relationships characterised by mutual respect and equality. When framed within the language of Lutheran theology such as vocation, justice, and the priesthood of all believers, feminist perspectives may be received less as ideological challenges and more as faithful expressions of the church's commitment to justice and pastoral care.

Ultimately, acknowledging theological resistance while fostering respectful engagement can help ensure that conversations about sexuality, gender, and ethics unfold in ways that strengthen rather than fragment the faith community. By combining dialogue, scriptural reflection, cultural narratives, and theological continuity, the church can gradually cultivate a more inclusive and compassionate ethical framework that honours both tradition and the lived realities of its members

3.2.7 Data Production

After collecting data from the questionnaires, data was organised into themes that would provide information that would assist to answer research questions. While organising the data collected through the questionnaires, the researcher paid close attention to the themes that highlighted participants lived realities. That process involved looking for recurring motifs, contradictions, and unique insights that would help illuminate the broader context of Christian ethics in relation to women's sexuality. Smith (2022:64) notes that the goal is to present these findings in a manner that respects and honours the voices of the participants while also contributing to the academic discourse surrounding religion, gender, and sexuality.

3.2.8 Data Analysis

After data collection was completed through unstructured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, the next phase involved systematic data analysis using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2006:79) describe, is a qualitative method that enables the researcher to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns or themes within

the data, allowing for a rich understanding of participants' experiences and meanings. In this study, thematic analysis provided a structured yet flexible approach to explore how Christian ethics influences women's sexuality within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA).

The process began with familiarisation with the data, a phase in which all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and questionnaire responses were carefully read multiple times. During this stage, the researcher engaged deeply with the data, taking notes on initial impressions, recurring ideas, and the specific language used by participants. This immersion allowed for a nuanced understanding of how women experience sexual regulation, moral expectation, and agency within the Lutheran context.

Once familiarised, the next step involved generating initial codes. Sections of the data that contained meaningful insights were systematically labelled. Both semantic codes, capturing explicit statements, and latent codes, highlighting underlying meanings, were created. Examples included codes such as "sexual regulation within marriage," "experiences of moral judgement," "desire for sexual autonomy," and "conflict between faith and personal choice." This stage enabled the researcher to break the data into analytically relevant segments, ensuring that each meaningful unit could contribute to broader thematic understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2006:84).

Following coding, the study proceeded to search for themes. Related codes were grouped into broader categories that captured recurring patterns across the dataset. For instance, codes relating to moral and institutional control over women's bodies were combined into the theme "Patriarchal Regulation of Female Sexuality", while codes relating to personal strategies for negotiating faith and sexual desires were grouped under "Negotiating Sexual Agency in a Lutheran Context". A thematic map was created at this stage to visualise relationships among themes and ensure a coherent analytical structure.

The subsequent phase involved reviewing the themes. Each theme was carefully evaluated to determine whether it accurately represented the coded data and the dataset as a whole. This process involved refining, merging, or discarding themes that lacked coherence or sufficient supporting evidence. For example, initial sub-themes such as "fear of social stigma" and "spiritual guilt" were merged under the broader theme "Moral and Social Policing of Women's Sexuality" to enhance clarity and analytical depth.

Once the themes were finalised, they were defined and named. Each theme was described in detail to capture its essence and significance. “Patriarchal Regulation of Female Sexuality” highlighted the ways institutional and doctrinal frameworks constrained women’s sexual behaviour, while “Negotiating Sexual Agency in a Lutheran Context” captured the strategies women employed to assert autonomy while navigating church expectations. The theme “Embodied Experience and Spiritual Identity” reflected the intersection between bodily experience, ethical teaching, and faith identity. Each theme was further illustrated with direct quotations from participants to preserve their voices and lived experiences.

The final stage involved integrating these themes into the report, situating findings within relevant theoretical frameworks, including body theology, indecent theology, African feminist theology, and contemporary Lutheran gender justice principles. This approach allowed the study to connect participants’ experiences to broader debates regarding Christian ethics, women’s sexual agency, and structural inequalities within the church (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87).

Importantly, this analysis was conducted with attention to researcher reflexivity and positionality. As a researcher situated within the Southern African Lutheran context, I was conscious of my own social, cultural, and theological perspectives and how these might shape the interpretation of participants’ narratives. Reflexivity required continuous self-examination of potential biases, assumptions, and emotional responses to sensitive discussions of sexuality and church authority. Engaging in reflexive practice helped ensure that participants’ voices remained central and that analytical conclusions reflected their lived experiences rather than preconceptions. Moreover, a feminist-informed lens encouraged critical engagement with power dynamics, highlighting how patriarchal and doctrinal structures influence women’s sexual autonomy and enabling the research to foreground ethical and liberative insights.

Through this iterative process of coding, theming, and reflexive interpretation, thematic analysis provided a rigorous and transparent framework for making sense of complex, context-specific experiences while remaining attentive to ethical responsibilities and the transformative potential of feminist-informed theological inquiry.

The following are themes identified from the data gathered:

- Sexual Identity
- Discrimination of women
- A body that has been excluded

- Liberation
- Positive sexuality
- Sex before marriage

The themes identified in this study underscore the necessity of re-examining and re-constructing the theological frameworks that have shaped women's sexuality within the ELCSA. By fostering a space where women's voices are heard and valued, the church can move towards a more inclusive and affirming environment that celebrates the fullness of women's identities.

3.2.9 Synthesis of Findings

From the discussions above, the following findings were identified according to the themes:

3.2.9.1 Sexual Identity and Positive Sexuality

The women in this study demonstrated a keen awareness of their sexual selves, articulating a desire for sexuality to be recognised as an integral dimension of both human dignity and Christian identity. Positive sexuality emerged as a central aspiration, characterised by mutual respect, consent, personal joy, and fulfilment. Yet, despite this awareness, cultural and doctrinal constraints persistently shaped and limited the full expression of sexual identity. Notably, the valorisation of chastity, virginity, and sexuality confined within marriage continued to restrict women’s autonomy and the broader acknowledgment of their sexual subjectivity.

3.2.9.2 Discrimination and Exclusion

Participants reported experiences of systemic discrimination within ELCSA, including punitive practices such as penitential classes, restricted access to leadership roles, and unequal moral scrutiny compared with men. Biological realities such as menstruation, pregnancy, widowhood, and divorce were often framed as markers of impurity or moral failure, resulting in marginalisation. These experiences reflect a broader institutional failure to integrate women’s embodied realities into theological reflection or pastoral care, leaving many women to negotiate their faith within a framework that marginalises their lived experiences.

3.2.9.3 Cultural and Religious Control of Sexuality

Women’s sexuality was further constrained by the intersecting pressures of cultural norms, family expectations, and religious teachings, all of which reinforced patriarchal oversight of

their bodies. Marriage was framed as the sole legitimate space for sexual expression, while virginity and purity were closely tied to family honour and social respectability. Premarital sex was widely regarded as sinful, yet women navigated these moral prescriptions with nuanced understanding, sometimes engaging in silent resistance or reinterpretation of these norms.

3.2.9.4 Liberation and Resistance

Despite these structural and cultural constraints, women actively sought autonomy over their bodies, advocated for expressions of positive sexuality, and challenged restrictive ethical norms. Feminist theological perspectives, particularly body theology and indecent theology, offered conceptual tools to understand these acts of resistance as both spiritual and social forms of liberation. Women's efforts reflected a conscious engagement with theology that affirmed their bodily agency and reclaimed spaces for sexual self-determination.

3.2.9.5 Social Silence on Sexuality

A pervasive silence around sexuality within church contexts further complicated these dynamics. This silence impeded open dialogue, sexual education, and pastoral engagement, perpetuating misinformation, internalised shame, and exclusion. Participants' experiences underscore the urgent need for inclusive communication and education that recognises and affirms women's bodily and sexual agency, creating spaces where sexuality is discussed as a natural, dignified, and spiritually significant aspect of life.

3.2.10 Integrating Findings

The study highlighted tensions between tradition and liberation, embodiment and exclusion, institutional authority and individual experience, and cultural norms versus feminist ethics. These tensions reveal the gap between doctrinal prescriptions and women's lived realities, suggesting an urgent need for ethical and theological reform within ELCSA.

Taken together, these findings highlight the tensions between official church teachings and women's embodied realities. ELCSA's moral framework, emphasising abstinence, marriage, and heteronormativity, operates within both religious and cultural systems that regulate women's bodies and sexuality. Yet, women actively resist, reinterpret, and navigate these norms, revealing creative strategies of agency, liberation, and affirmation. The intersection of body theology and indecent theology provides a critical lens for understanding these dynamics: body theology affirms women's embodied experiences as sacred and central to moral

reflection, while indecent theology destabilises restrictive norms, opening space for queer, fluid, and transgressive sexualities.

The findings collected in all these eight themes collectively demonstrate how patriarchal ethics can restrict, silence, and stigmatise women, while also highlighting the transformative potential of feminist theological engagement. They establish the foundation for reimagining Christian ethics in ways that are inclusive, liberative, and responsive to the lived realities of women.

The analysis reveals a complex and often contradictory set of experiences. On the one hand, themes of sexual identity, discrimination, and exclusion expose the ways in which ELCSA's Christian ethics marginalise women and regulate their bodies. On the other hand, themes of liberation, positive sexuality, and sex before marriage demonstrate women's resilience, creativity, and capacity to resist oppressive frameworks by reclaiming their sexuality as sacred and empowering.

Taken together, the data suggests that while ELCSA continues to uphold restrictive and patriarchal interpretations of Christian ethics, women are actively negotiating these norms in ways that challenge, resist, and reframe theological understandings of sexuality. This chapter therefore provides an essential foundation for the interpretative discussion in chapter five, where these findings will be critically examined through the lenses of body theology and indecent theology, alongside feminist theological discourse.

Foucault (1978:130) argues that in historic Western tradition, Christian teachings have historically promoted marriage as the only morally acceptable context for sexual relations, viewing it as a sacred covenant designed for procreation and mutual support. Brinkmann (2013:53) adds that in many other cultures, marriage has been regarded as the social institution that legitimises sexual activity, reinforcing social order and moral standards. Notably, this perspective has persisted through centuries, shaping societal norms and legal frameworks that link sexuality explicitly with committed partnerships. Overall, the association between sexual morality and lifelong partnership has been a recurring theme across various historical contexts. Responses from the interviews indicated that this perspective still exists in ELCSA. This is evident in responses from the participants.

3.2.11 Critical Data Analysis

This study utilised critical data analysis as complementary data approach to explore the complex interplay of power dynamics and social inequalities. Dibekulu, (2020:11) defines

critical data analysis as a process of thoroughly evaluating data, questioning its assumptions and using evidence to draw reliable and informed conclusions. Integrating this method in this study, the researcher aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how oppression is enacted and resisted within various contexts. The insights gained from this data were valuable for advancing discussions around social justice and equity, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. The study's deliberate choice of methodologies also reflected my commitment to rigor, reflexivity, and ethical engagement, ensuring that this study not only addresses pressing social issues but also respects and uplifts the voices of those most affected by these issues.

As Smith (2020:21) points out, "the first point in critical data analysis is to represent a movement or position within transdisciplinary discourse studies". By applying critical data analysis, this study provided a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand. This approach focuses on the reproduction of power and abuses, such as sexism, racism, as well as other forms of social inequality. Smith (2020) further points out that critical data analysis also examines the resistance to such dominance, making it a significant area of inquiry in understanding how language and discourse shape social realities and power dynamics (Smith, 2020:21). Boyd (2019:53) adds that "critical data analysis enables researchers to deconstruct narratives and scrutinize the underlying structures that sustain inequality, fostering a deeper understanding of systemic biases and power dynamics".

By critically examining data sources, methodologies, and interpretations, scholars can uncover hidden assumptions and challenge dominant discourses that often reinforce social disparities (Crenshaw, 1991). Davis (2016:19) argues that "this approach promotes more equitable and informed policymaking and advocacy efforts". By analysing texts, speeches, and other forms of communication, researchers can uncover the subtle ways in which power relations are established and maintained in society. This method not only highlights the manifestations of oppression but also illuminates the strategies employed by marginalised groups to resist and challenge dominant discourses.

Furthermore, using critical data analysis is strategic as it addresses the multifaceted nature of social issues (Smith & Johnson, 2020). By utilising this method of data analysis, the study was able to cross-examine the findings, thereby revealing patterns and connections that might not have been apparent through a single method of data collection. This integrative approach

enabled the researcher to present a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter, facilitating a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in power dynamics and social inequalities.

In addition to enhancing the depth of the analysis, employing critical data analysis aligns with the principles of reflexivity in qualitative research. Reflexivity involves ongoing self-examination and awareness of the researcher's own biases, assumptions, and positions within the research process (Berger, 2015). By acknowledging the potential influence of their own perspectives, researchers can strive for greater objectivity and rigour in their analysis. Engaging in reflexivity also allows researchers to critically assess how their findings contribute to broader discourses surrounding power and inequality. By incorporating African Christian ethics, this study can explore how factors such as race, gender, class, and sexuality interact to produce unique experiences of power and resistance.

In addition, member checking was incorporated into the analysis process. Lincoln and Guba (1985:41) describe member checking as a qualitative research technique used during data collection and analysis where researchers return to participants to verify the accuracy, credibility, and resonance of the data or interpretations derived from their responses. This was done with the primary goal of ensuring that the researcher's understanding aligns with participants' perspectives, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings. Birt et al. (2016:99) further add that this process helps to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study by ensuring that the data accurately reflects participants' perspectives, thereby reinforcing the validity of the findings.

3.2.12 Thematic Analysis

As noted above, after coding was completed, important themes were selected for study. Several scholars contributed to the definition of thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006:10) define thematic analysis as "a process for identifying, grouping, and recording content from interview transcripts into significant themes shared by participants". This method allows researchers to delve into the data, uncovering patterns that reveal the underlying experiences and perspectives of subjects. According to Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis serves as a qualitative analysis technique that examines classifications and presents themes related to the data obtained. This structured approach is essential in qualitative research, as it enables the researcher to distil complex narratives into coherent themes that can be easily interpreted and understood.

Rubin and Rubin (2012:83) further clarify that in thematic analysis, themes are summary assertions, casual explanations, or conclusions that explain why something happened, what

something means, or how the interviewee feels about the issue. This aspect of thematic analysis is particularly valuable in understanding the nuanced perspectives of participants, as it provides a framework for making sense of their experiences and emotions. Thematic analysis helps this study summarise women's narratives, explain what influences their sexual activity, and provide insight into how they feel about moral issues related to sexual conduct. By focusing on these themes, the research not only highlights individual experiences, but also contributes to a broader understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which these women navigate their sexualities.

While it's crucial to recognise that thematic analysis is not the only method for analysing qualitative research data, other approaches such as content analysis, discourse analysis, and comparison analysis also exist (Dawson, 2002). Each method has its strengths and weaknesses, but this study chose thematic analysis because of its inherent flexibility in analysing data. This flexibility is particularly useful for research aimed at identifying the lived experiences of women in the ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit. Thematic analysis allows researchers to adapt their approach to the specific needs and contexts of their study, making it a versatile choice for qualitative inquiries.

Furthermore, thematic analysis was chosen due to its ability to detect and identify components or variables that influence any issues raised by participants. Creswell (2009:79) states that “thematic analysis provides a robust framework for interpreting qualitative data, enabling researchers to draw meaningful connections between different themes and the participants' narratives”. As a result, the interpretations of participants in this study are crucial in providing the best acceptable explanations for behaviours, activities, and thoughts. By focusing on the themes that emerge from the data, it is possible to construct a rich tapestry of insights that reflect the complexities of women's experiences in the context of sexual conduct.

Using thematic analysis as the primary data analysis technique, it was possible to critically engage with participant responses, allowing significant themes to emerge and providing a platform for deeper reflection on their shared narratives. Braun and Clarke (2006:11) state that “thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research that enables researchers to systematically organize and interpret complex data sets”. It promotes an iterative process of reflection and interpretation, which is crucial for capturing the meanings behind participants' experiences. Boyatzis (1998:83) adds that this ongoing engagement with the data allows researchers to refine themes and deepen their understanding, ensuring that the analysis

accurately reflects participants' perspectives. Such an approach enhances the richness and validity of qualitative findings by enabling continuous interaction with the data and promoting insightful interpretation.

3.2.13 Ethical Considerations

Beauchamp and Childress (2013:82) highlight that throughout the data collection process, ethical considerations are paramount. They state that in research, ethical considerations are essential to protect participants from harm and maintain public trust in scientific findings.

Ethical clearance was sought through the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) Ethics Committee, and approval was granted on February 3, 2025 (HSSREC/00008033/2024). Resnik (2015:4) points out that this approval is an essential step in ensuring that research adheres to ethical standards and respects the rights and welfare of participants. Following this approval, the recruitment process was begun by reaching out to women within the Pretoria Circuit who fell within the specified age range pertinent to the study. I approached these women to gauge their interest in participating in my research. It was crucial to present the study's objectives and methodology clearly to them, allowing them to make an informed decision about their involvement. Some women declined to participate, citing various personal reasons, while others expressed their willingness to be part of this academic inquiry.

For those who consented, informed consent forms were provided via email, which were drafted in English. This choice of language was intentional, as all the prospective participants were proficient in English, ensuring clear communication and understanding of the document's contents. The informed consent form (ICF) outlined the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, potential risks, and benefits, as well as the participants' rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. After the participants reviewed and signed the consent forms, the questionnaire designed to gather data relevant to the study’s research objectives was delivered.

The ethical approval process, the recruitment of participants, and the distribution of questionnaires were all conducted systematically and ethically. The engagement of the women from the Pretoria Circuit not only enriched the research but also highlighted the importance of community involvement in academic studies.

3.2.14 Limitations of the Study

The study encountered the following:

- Because of my position as clergy in Pretoria Circuit, some participants felt a bit hesitant discussing their sexual orientation with someone who is part of the clergy. The fear of being judged, misunderstood, or stigmatised may have inhibited their willingness to share their true feelings and experiences. Nonetheless, this concern did not hinder the overall study, because the study used a data collection tool that did not necessitate physical contact with participants. Participants completed the questionnaire in my absence, allowing for greater privacy and the potential for more honest responses. The anonymity of the questionnaire format also helped to alleviate some of the apprehensions that participants might face when disclosing sensitive information.
- The second limitation was a health crises as a result of the outbreak of Swine Flu in April 2024. This obstacle provided an opportunity for me to develop innovative approaches to data collection and community engagement. This is why questionnaires became essential for this study as they provided an opportunity of gathering data without physical contact.
- The third limitation was due to the fact that the research was perceived by other pastors and the leadership from ELCSA, Central Diocese to lack value. The perception that the research lacks value may stem from a broader reluctance to address issues of sexuality within religious spaces, which can lead to a culture of silence and marginalization. Consequently, I had to navigate these complexities carefully as it was essential to build trust and establish rapport with potential participants, particularly women in the community who may feel vulnerable discussing their sexual orientation.
- The fourth limitation was acquiring the gatekeeper's letter. This process took longer than anticipated as I had to convince the leadership of the church that this study will make a significant contribution in the life of the church. This delay caused a significant setback in the collection of data, and consequently the completion of this study
- Lastly, gaining collaboration from church leadership was a significant obstacle. Initially, I sought to engage church leaders to gain their support and insights, which could have enriched the study and increased its credibility within the church community. However, many leaders expressed scepticism about the relevance of the research, believing it would not serve the church in any meaningful way. This resistance from leadership was disheartening, as their support could foster an environment

conducive to open dialogue and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations within the church.

3.3 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter discussed theories and methodologies that guided this study. Through these frameworks and methodologies, the research contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding women's bodies, agency, and the intersectionality of faith and identity, ultimately enabling a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in religious spaces.

This chapter aimed at answering the sub-question, “Which theological constructs of Christian ethics shape the sexuality of women in ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit”? This chapter identified body theology and indecent theology and motivated why they are suitable for this study. This exploration of the theologies began with a commitment to centring the experiences of women and acknowledging the complexities of their lives, with this study ultimately leading to richer and more meaningful theological discourse that takes experiences of women into consideration as informed by the two theories applied in this study. The chapter also demonstrated how the theologies assisted the study in identifying gaps in existing knowledge and situating this study within the broader scholarly context.

Following the discussion of the theoretical framework, the chapter presented the methodology used in meeting the objectives of this study. This included discussion on the sample of the population and the sampling processes, data gathering and analysis, ethical considerations, research design, and limitations for the study. The section further discussed the methodological processes of organising the data collected into thematic areas in preparation for analysis.

The research design was presented, with the questionnaire technique used as a tool to gather data. The chapter presented the ethical considerations for gaining access to research participants. The next chapter presents data collected and analyses the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR - DATA PRESENTATION

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the study's research methodology and theoretical framework. The two theoretical frameworks of body theology and indecent theology were presented and analysed. The methodology used in meeting the objectives of this study was presented, including the sample of the population and the sampling processes, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, research design, and limitations for the study. This chapter presents the data through themes, and analyses the data by demonstrating patterns, tensions, and contradictions.

This chapter presents the data gathered in response to research sub-question three: What insights can be drawn from the embodied experiences of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit, regarding their understanding of Christian Ethics? Data were collected using questionnaires, as outlined in the methodology chapter. The chapter has three distinct sections; presentation of the data collected, analysis of the data and identification of themes. The data presented in this chapter illustrate various developments and occurrences throughout the data collection phase, including adjustments made to the research methodology because of the impact of swine flu.

The analysis is structured around eight central themes that emerged: sexual identity; discrimination of women; a body excluded; liberation; positive sexuality; sex before marriage; sex and culture; and societal silence on sexuality. These themes capture both the challenges and possibilities reflected in women's experiences, offering an understanding of how Christian ethics are embodied and contested in ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit. Each theme is explored in detail, drawing attention to participants lived experiences as both critical reflections on, and alternative resources for, theological ethics. By organising the analysis thematically, this chapter seeks to highlight women lived experiences as theological resources, which will inform the broader discussion in chapter five.

4.2. Limitations to Data Production

In producing data for this study, the following challenges were encountered.

• The primary challenge was the recruitment of women. This process proved to be more complex than initially anticipated due to various factors, including cultural norms and existing church dynamics. For instance, many of the potential participants expressed hesitance in engaging with research that might expose their views on sensitive topics such as sexuality and discrimination within the church environment. This reluctance made it difficult to reach the desired sample size, necessitating a more mindful approach to recruitment strategies, such as leveraging existing networks within the church and ensuring that potential participants felt comfortable and safe in sharing their experiences.

• Another significant challenge was the response rate during the data collection process. Although all participants were proficient in English, there were instances where certain questions were not fully understood. This misunderstanding led to incomplete or unclear responses, which could potentially skew the data analysis. To address this issue, a concerted effort was made to clarify questions and provide additional context where necessary. This not only helped in obtaining more coherent responses but also enabled a more open dialogue between myself as the researcher and the participants, allowing them to express their thoughts more freely.

• Anonymity was another critical concern throughout the research process. Despite assurances of confidentiality, several participants expressed anxiety about how their responses might be perceived or used against them, especially within the context of a church community that often holds conservative views regarding sexuality and gender roles. This concern underlined the importance of creating a safe space for participants to share their experiences without fear of judgment or repercussion. To mitigate these concerns, Participants were assured of the commitment to anonymity and the study implemented measures to ensure that individual responses could not be traced back to any participant.

4.3. Data Presentation

The data was systematically organised and presented in a tabular format that delineates the profiles of the participants, categorised according to their respective leagues. According to Smith and Johnson (2020:17) “this structured approach assists in facilitating an easy understanding of the demographics and characteristics of the respondents, providing a clear framework for analysing their perspectives”. The participants were grouped into distinct categories based on their affiliations: The Prayer Women's League (PWL), the Prayer Women's Fellowship (PWF), the Young Adults League (YAL), and women from the church who do not

identify with any league. This classification was essential, as it allowed for an exploration of how league affiliation may influence perceptions and responses regarding sexuality and related topics.

In this data presentation section, four categories of responses were identified, each reflecting different facets of the participants' views. The first category encompasses the responses from women affiliated with the Prayer Women's League (PWL). This group provided insights that were often rooted in their spiritual beliefs and communal practices, highlighting how their league's teachings shape their understanding of sexuality and ethics. The second category includes responses from women in the Prayer Women's Fellowship (PWF), whose perspectives may differ due to the distinct focus of their fellowship on community support and personal development. Their input is valuable in understanding how Christian fellowship dynamics influence perceptions of sexuality. The third category represents the voices of women in the Young Adults League (YAL), who may approach the topic with a more contemporary lens because of their age group (between 25-40 years), influenced by broader societal conversations about sexuality and ethics. This demographic is particularly important as they often grapple with the intersection of traditional beliefs and modern viewpoints, reflecting a generational shift in understanding sexuality. The fourth and last category is responses from women in the church who do not belong to any league, providing a contrasting perspective, and offering insights into the views of those who do not have a platform to air their views and concerns.

After the above-mentioned process, the participants' understanding of sexuality and the underlying knowledge that informs their beliefs is explored. Lastly, results from the above investigation are outlines that reveal cultural, social, and religious elements that shape perspectives of women in ELCSA on sexuality and Christian ethics, providing a rich tapestry of insights into the complexities of the topic in this research.

The data are presented in the following order:

- Presentation of participant's profile
- Data coding
- Presentation of themes

4.3.1 Participants' Profile

In line with ethical principles, pseudonyms are used for the participants and codes are assigned in the table presentation.

Table 1

Name	Age	Marital Status	Affiliation
1. PTP 1	35	Single	YAL
2. PTP 2	47	Married	PWL
3. PTP 3	42	Married	YAL
4. PTP 4	32	Single	YAL
5. PTP 5	50	Single	PWL
6. PTP 6	41	Single	PWF
7. PTP 7	36	Married	YAL
8. PTP 8	54	Married	PWF
9. PTP 9	48	Married	PWL
10. PTP 10	45	Single	PWF
11. PTP 11	51	Single	Non-affiliate
12. PTP 12	33	Single	YAL
13. PTP 13	26	Single	Non-affiliate
14. PTP 14	44	Single	PWL
15. PTP 15	29	Single	Non-affiliate
16. PTP 16	49	Married	PWF
17. PTP 17	40	Single	PWL
18. PTP 18	33	Single	PWF
19. PTP 19	27	Single	Non-affiliate
20. PTP 20	50	Married	Non-affiliate

4.3.2 Coding

Coding formed a crucial step in the analytical process, enabling the transformation of raw data into meaningful categories that reflected the lived realities of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:53), "coding involves systematically identifying and labelling patterns across qualitative data in order to capture both manifest and latent meanings. In this study, open coding was

employed to organise participants' responses into thematic clusters, which were then refined into broader categories for interpretation. The process allowed for the identification of both similarities and divergences across participants' perspectives, reflecting the complexity of women's experiences of sexuality within the church.

The initial codes emerged from participants' responses to the survey questions, followed by categorisation into thematic areas that correspond with the research objectives. Below is a detailed presentation of the major codes and patterns identified:

- Except for two responders, everybody displayed knowledge and awareness of what sexuality is.
- Nineteen individuals never discussed sexuality with their pastor, whereas only one remembered having a chat with her pastor regarding sexuality.
- Nineteen women agreed that women should have the right to make choices about their bodies, with only one undecided.
- Regarding positive sexuality, the definitions of positive sexuality given by fifteen women indicated their comprehension of the idea and what it means to them. The remaining five had no clear idea of what positive sexuality is or what it includes.
- Of the women polled, eighteen were unaware of Lutheran ethics. Only two mentioned knowing what Lutheran ethics is. However, they did not say what it is.
- Participants agreed that it is unfair that only women attend penitential classes, while men who impregnated them are excluded. Interestingly, some participants claimed that penitential class itself is unfair irrespective of who is attending the classes.
- The majority of participants had little understanding of sexual ethics or what it included. Only roughly seven of the participants understood what sexual ethics was and provided suggestions for how sexual ethics should appear if women were to have a say in ethical rules. Thirteen either did not grasp the question or were unfamiliar with sexual ethics.
- Nineteen individuals agreed that divorced women should be able to engage in sexual behaviour. Only one thought they should not. Only eighteen people agreed that widows should participate in sexual behaviour, while two disapproved.
- Seventeen individuals felt that having sex before marriage is a sin, whereas three disagreed.
- All participants shared their perspectives on women's sexual rights within the church. There are similarities but each one has their own view.

4.3.2.1 Categories

The information above is arranged into the following categories:

- **Awareness of Sexuality**

The responses reveal a nuanced landscape in which women in the Pretoria Circuit are generally aware of sexuality but interpret it through varied lenses shaped by personal experience, cultural background, and religious teachings. While only two participants expressed uncertainty, this does not indicate a uniform understanding. Sexuality encompasses physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions, and the respondents' divergent definitions suggest that formal church teachings may not fully address this complexity. Women navigate a tension between lived experiences and sexual and moral expectations imposed by ELCSA, and this tension shapes how they construct their sexual identities.

However, awareness alone is insufficient if it does not translate into agency or informed choice. Knowledge of sexuality is necessary but must be coupled with the ability to make autonomous decisions that reflect personal values and desires. Feminist theology emphasises that bodily and sexual experiences are legitimate sources of moral and theological insight (Rakoczy, 2005:41). By centring women's experiences, the church can move beyond abstract moralising toward practical ethics that acknowledge the lived realities of its congregants.

Moreover, the differences in understanding suggest that sexuality education within the church is inconsistent or inadequate. Some women may have been socialised to view sexual activity solely in terms of sin, punishment, or moral failure, while others may conceptualise it in relational, emotional, or reproductive terms. This variance highlights the need for pastoral and educational interventions that recognise sexuality as multifaceted, affirming, and integral to women's holistic wellbeing. It also raises questions about how cultural and theological norms interact to shape women's perceptions, and whether these frameworks enable or constrain honest self-expression.

The awareness of sexuality among women in the Pretoria Circuit points to both potential and limitation. It signals readiness for deeper engagement with sexual ethics while revealing gaps in guidance, education, and theological reflection. From a feminist perspective, empowering women requires not only knowledge but also validation of their lived experiences, inclusion in ethical discourse, and recognition of their sexual agency within the church.

- **Conversations on Sexuality with Pastors**

The near-total absence of dialogue between women and pastors on sexual matters underscores a profound pastoral gap within ELCSA.

Nineteen of twenty respondents indicated that they had never discussed sexuality with a pastor, reflecting either clerical avoidance or a lack of trust in the church as a safe space for these conversations.

This silence perpetuates the marginalisation of women's experiences and contributes to an ethical framework in which sexual behaviour is policed rather than understood.

This gap represents both a failure of pastoral care and a reflection of patriarchal structures that render women's sexual experiences invisible. The lack of engagement prevents women from receiving guidance that is compassionate, contextually relevant, and grounded in their lived realities. Feminist theological perspectives insist that ethical discourse should be informed by the voices of those most affected, in this case, women navigating sexuality within a church context (Dube, 2001:14). By excluding women from these discussions, pastors inadvertently reinforce the moral surveillance that constrains women's agency.

The silence also speaks to broader social dynamics. Women may feel shame or fear judgment, internalising patriarchal norms that equate sexual knowledge or curiosity with immorality. Other dynamics beyond institutional reluctance include the fact that most pastors are male and women talking to male clergy about sexuality can be a challenge. Conversely, pastors may perceive sexuality as a sensitive, taboo, or inappropriate topic, reflecting an institutional reluctance to address women's embodied experiences openly. This mutual silence reinforces structural inequities and limits opportunities for pastoral guidance that could affirm women's agency, foster ethical reasoning, and promote healthy sexual development.

Encouraging dialogue requires not only pastoral initiative but also cultural and theological shifts within the church. Feminist theology provides a framework for reimagining clergy/congregant relationships, as it advocates for participatory, listening-based approaches where women's experiences are respected as sources of wisdom and ethical insight. In this way, discussions on sexuality can become transformative rather than punitive, empowering women to make informed decisions about their bodies, relationships, and spiritual life.

• Autonomy and Bodily Choice

The near-universal affirmation of bodily autonomy among participants highlights a critical site of tension between women lived experiences and ELCSA's patriarchal sexual ethics. Nineteen participants strongly agreed that women should have the right to make decisions regarding their bodies, indicating a clear understanding of the importance of agency in sexual, reproductive, and relational contexts. Only one participant was undecided, suggesting that the principle of autonomy resonates broadly among women in the Pretoria Circuit.

This consensus can be argued as reflecting an intuitive recognition of rights that have historically been denied or restricted by church teachings. ELCSA's emphasis on abstinence, chastity, and female sexual purity often conflicts with women's desires for self-determination, creating ethical and spiritual dissonance. Feminist theology asserts that women's embodied experiences are valid moral and theological sources (Rakoczy, 2005:44). Therefore, any ethical framework that neglects bodily autonomy fails to account for the full humanity of women and perpetuates structural inequalities.

The tension between autonomy and restrictive church norms manifests in various domains: decisions regarding contraception, abortion, sexual partnerships, and consent are often guided or constrained by theological interpretations rather than individual reflection or choice. This dynamic reinforces a gendered hierarchy in which women are held accountable for sexual morality while men's agency is less regulated. Addressing this imbalance requires both educational initiatives and theological reform that recognise women as moral agents capable of discerning right and wrong within their personal, cultural, and spiritual contexts.

Bodily autonomy is not merely a legal or practical concern; it is deeply ethical and spiritual. Women's ability to make informed decisions about their sexuality affirms their dignity, enhances relational integrity, and aligns with a theology that values love, respect, and justice. By integrating feminist perspectives into ELCSA's sexual ethics, the church can move toward frameworks that respect autonomy, promote equity, and affirm the interconnectedness of body, spirit, and community.

- **Positive Sexuality**

Fifteen participants were able to articulate positive sexuality in terms of mutual consent, respect, and personal fulfilment, while five struggled or expressed uncertainty. This variation reveals both the potential and the challenges of cultivating a sexuality framework that affirms women's experiences. Positive sexuality emphasises ethical, relational, and emotionally

fulfilling sexual expression, contrasting sharply with traditional ELCSA teachings that often frame sexuality primarily as a site of sin, danger, or moral failure.

I contend that the concept of positive sexuality provides a transformative lens for feminist engagement with church ethics. It affirms that sexual experience can be moral, relational, and spiritually meaningful when grounded in consent, agency, and mutuality. The uncertainty among some participants highlights the lack of comprehensive sexual education and church-based guidance that normalises sexual well-being rather than framing it as a moral transgression.

Feminist theology insists that affirming sexuality requires integrating women lived experiences into ethical discourse. Women's narratives about pleasure, desire, and relational satisfaction are not secondary but central to moral reflection. By creating space for such narratives within ELCSA, the church can challenge dominant patriarchal frameworks, promote healthy sexual development, and foster a culture in which sexuality is approached with honesty, respect, and care.

Furthermore, positive sexuality challenges the binary between moral and immoral behaviour by emphasising relational ethics, consent, and personal responsibility. Integrating this framework into church teaching can empower women, reduce shame, and create a more inclusive understanding of sexual ethics. It also opens avenues for dialogue between congregants and clergy, bridging gaps in knowledge and trust

4.3.2.2 Summary of Coding Outcomes

Overall, the coding process revealed key insights into women's understandings of sexuality, ethics, and church practices. Recurring codes such as autonomy, silence, unfairness, and partial awareness reflect both the restrictive influence of patriarchal ethics and women's creative resistance. These codes provided the foundation for the thematic analysis that followed, which further grouped the data into broader themes such as sexual identity, discrimination, a body excluded, liberation, positive sexuality, sex before marriage, sex and culture, and societal silence on sexuality.

Thematic analysis was instrumental in guiding this research project. This method helped to uncover the multifaceted dimensions of women's narratives related to sexual activity and moral considerations.

From data presented from the questionnaires is summarised into the following categories:

- Sexual Identity (Awareness, Positive Sexuality, Rights)
- Discrimination & Exclusion (Penitential Classes, Knowledge Gaps, Pastoral Silence)
- Liberation & Resistance (Autonomy, Divorce/Widowhood, Women's Rights)
- Cultural/Religious Tension (Sex Before Marriage, Ethics Misunderstandings)
- Silence on Sexuality (Conversations with Pastors, Ethics Knowledge Gaps)

From the abovementioned categories, the following eight themes emerged:

- Sexual identity
- Discrimination of women
- A Body Excluded
- Liberation
- Positive sexuality
- Sex before marriage
- Sex and culture
- Societal silence on sexuality

4.4.1 Sexual Identity

Based on some of the insightful comments and experiences shared by the participants, it became apparent that women in the Pretoria Circuit are not isolated individuals but rather integral members of a larger community whose understanding of sexuality is profoundly affected by a confluence of factors. These include their worldview, the process of socialisation, cultural norms and values, and, of course, their religious beliefs.

Participant 10

"Women should be free to make their own decisions about their bodies, and no man should prescribe how women should behave. And women must understand that their bodies are God's sanctuary."

Participant 2

"Christian women are expected to behave well. According to the Bible, Christian women should respect their bodies and believe that a woman's body belongs to a man, as stated by Paul."

When asked about sex before marriage, Participant 5 stated that it is a sin for women to have sex before marriage.

Participant 13

"The Bible teaches about sexual immorality. It does not actually say that sex before marriage is a sin, however, is it an act of sexual immorality because according to the Bible only husband and wives should have sex."

Participant 8

"Yes, having sex before marriage is a sin. The Bible says so. Once one engages in sex, it becomes not possible to manage the surroundings. Some lives become screwed up after engaging in sex before marriage because of insufficient knowledge".

Participant 19

"Sex before marriage is a sin, according to the Bible." "Sex is a privilege granted to married people."

4.4.1.1 Categories of Participants' Responses

- **Sex before marriage seen as sinful within a Biblical framework by most participants**

The majority of participants in this study expressed a strong perception that sex before marriage is sinful, reflecting a deeply entrenched biblical framework that guides moral reasoning and behavioural expectations. Participant 2 (P2) framed sex before marriage as explicitly contrary to Christian norms, emphasising the moral responsibility of women to align their behaviour with scriptural teachings. The participant emphasised the notion of female bodily autonomy being circumscribed by patriarchal interpretations of Paul's writings, which suggest that women are, in some sense, accountable to men in moral and sexual matters. This interpretation reinforces the broader church narrative that sexuality is to be exercised within clearly defined marital boundaries, positioning premarital sex as a transgression not only against God but also against social and familial expectations.

Participants (P2) and (P8) extended this perspective by connecting sexual behaviour to broader life consequences. They framed premarital sex as morally and practically hazardous, asserting that engaging in sexual activity outside marriage can compromise one's future prospects and social standing. P8 links this moral stance to her understanding of education and knowledge,

suggesting that awareness of biblical principles can mitigate the perceived risk of moral failure. In their view (P2 and P8), sexuality is not merely a personal or private matter but is intricately tied to communal expectations and moral accountability, particularly for women.

Participant 19 (P19) reiterated the belief that premarital sex constitutes a sin while highlighting the notion of sexual privilege within marriage. According to this view, sex is not an ordinary physical act, but a sacred and regulated practice designated exclusively for the marital context. By framing sexual activity as a privilege, the participant reinforces the ethical boundary that marriage demarcates the socially and theologically acceptable context for sexual expression. This perspective aligns with conservative Lutheran doctrine that seeks to structure moral life around compliance with biblical instruction, emphasising virtue and restraint over personal choice or bodily autonomy.

The dominant pattern here suggests that the participants' perspectives are deeply influenced by a theological framework that moralises sexual behaviour, particularly for women. The repeated emphasis on sinfulness indicates a cultural embedding of conservative sexual ethics that extends beyond individual morality to the regulation of women's behaviour in broader social contexts. The framing of premarital sex as a violation of divine order, communal expectation, and moral propriety demonstrates how religious teachings become internalised as both prescriptive and evaluative norms.

This framing also highlights the intersection of religion, morality, and gender. Female sexuality, in particular, appears highly surveyed and morally policed within these narratives, suggesting that theological interpretations are closely intertwined with patriarchal norms. It reflects a moral economy in which sin, sexual conduct, and gendered responsibility converge, reinforcing boundaries around acceptable behaviour. Notably, the participants' reliance on biblical authority as the primary justification underscores the extent to which scripture functions as both ethical guide and regulatory instrument, shaping beliefs, social judgment.

- **Scripture as the basis for judgment**

Almost all participants, except Participant 13 (P13), anchored their perspectives in scriptural authority, revealing the centrality of the Bible as a normative source for moral judgment in matters of sexuality. The reliance on scripture demonstrates a hermeneutic framework in which moral legitimacy is derived from textual interpretation rather than personal reasoning or sociocultural negotiation. For most respondents, scripture functions as an unambiguous repository of divine rules that prescribe sexual conduct, and premarital sex is categorised within

this framework as sin. This reliance suggests a theological continuity with historical interpretations of Christian sexual ethics, where moral instruction is derived from literal or contextual readings of biblical texts.

The predominance of scriptural justification indicates that participants' moral reasoning is interlaced with religious literacy. Most participants frequently referenced passages attributed to Pauline epistles, which discuss sexual purity and marital boundaries, illustrating a particular doctrinal orientation in which the Bible serves as the definitive ethical reference. This demonstrates a strong internalisation of denominational teachings, reflecting both personal belief and communal reinforcement of orthodox norms.

Yet, the use of scripture is not purely uniform. P13's divergence highlights the interpretive flexibility inherent in textual engagement. This participant emphasised that the Bible does not explicitly condemn premarital sex, though it frames sexual activity outside marriage as immoral. Such a stance demonstrates that interpretive variation exists within the same theological corpus, pointing to nuanced hermeneutical practices and potentially divergent educational or denominational exposures. The plurality of scriptural interpretation also suggests that moral judgments about sexuality are not merely dictated by texts but mediated through personal understanding, pastoral guidance, and the broader cultural context.

Scripture's role as a basis for judgment underscores the authority of the Bible in structuring both ethical conduct and social behaviour. By framing sexual activity within divine law, respondents position themselves within a moral discourse that extends beyond individual preference, signalling compliance with communal and theological expectations. Moreover, this reliance reinforces an ethical hierarchy in which scripture-derived norms are perceived as non-negotiable, creating a moral landscape in which deviation, particularly by women, is interpreted as both a spiritual and social transgression.

The analytical implication is that scriptural authority functions as both a normative and regulatory tool. It informs internalised moral reasoning, validates social policing of sexual conduct, and mediates the intersection of theology and gendered expectations. Variations, such as that expressed by P13, reveal the potential for interpretive agency and point to spaces where theological education or pastoral engagement may mediate rigid normative frameworks.

- **Gendered expectations and control**

A recurring theme in participant responses is the gendered dimension of sexual morality, which is particularly pronounced in how female behaviour and bodily autonomy are conceptualised.

P2 emphasised that women are expected to behave in ways that respect both their bodies and the moral dictates of scripture, reflecting a patriarchal lens in which women's sexuality is framed as inherently relational and accountable to men. The participant cited Paul's assertion that a woman's body belongs to her husband, signalling a theological basis for regulating female behaviour and constructing sexual ethics through the lens of male authority. This framing situates women's bodies as morally charged sites whose regulation is both spiritually and socially necessary, reflecting a broader pattern of gendered surveillance within religious communities.

P8 extended this perspective by linking sexual behaviour to social consequences, suggesting that premarital sex affects one's trajectory and the environment around them. Implicitly, this reinforces a risk management logic whereby women's sexuality must be monitored to prevent negative moral and social outcomes. Such perspectives demonstrate the intersection of gender norms and moral expectations, in which women are held to stricter ethical scrutiny than men. The participant's framing signals not merely a spiritual concern but also a socially sanctioned mechanism of control, wherein women's behaviour is subject to both divine evaluation and communal judgment.

The gendered expectations articulated in these narratives highlight the patriarchal scaffolding of moral authority within the church. Women's bodies and sexual behaviour become emblematic of moral virtue, while deviation carries consequences that extend beyond personal guilt to social censure. These norms are reinforced through teaching, ritual, and communal monitoring, demonstrating how religious ethics operate simultaneously as a moral compass and a regulatory instrument.

The analytical implication is significant: gendered control is embedded within theological instruction, affecting women's sexual autonomy and shaping broader social behaviour. By linking female sexuality to moral accountability and social outcomes, these interpretations reinforce hierarchical structures of power that position women as responsible for maintaining communal moral order. Understanding these gendered dynamics is essential for exploring the intersection of religious doctrine, ethical formation, and the lived experiences of women in church communities.

4.4.2 Discrimination of Women

Female sexuality is framed as problematic and something to regulate within church spaces. Narratives describe female bodies as sources of disturbance and subject to scrutiny and control. This policing extends beyond the church into broader socio-cultural settings.

Throughout the various comments received in the questionnaires, narratives emerged that depict women's bodies as a source of disturbance within the church. These narratives were consistent with the lived experiences of women in the church, painting a troubling picture of how female identity is often framed. However, these narratives are not only in the church, they are even in socio-cultural settings.

Women's bodies are frequently constructed within socio-cultural and religious discourses as problematic or morally risky, leading to expectations that women should conceal, discipline, or regulate their bodies. Within many Christian contexts, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), these expectations are often reinforced through teachings on modesty, purity, and moral responsibility. Consequently, women are encouraged to cover their bodies as a way of preventing temptation or maintaining moral order. Feminist theological perspectives critique these narratives by arguing that they place disproportionate responsibility on women for regulating sexuality and preserving communal morality. Such discourses not only reinforce patriarchal control over women's bodies but also contribute to the negative construction of female embodiment within church and society. From a feminist theological standpoint, these narratives call for critical re-examination in order to affirm women's bodies as dignified, agentic, and integral to their full humanity, rather than as sites of moral suspicion or control.

Regulation of women's bodies and sexual discrimination by religious institutions is a recurring theme rooted in the desire to enforce moral standards, often emphasising chastity, modesty, and subservience as virtues aligned with church doctrines. Fear of repercussions often leads to internalised shame among women, compelling them to suppress their sexual identities further.

The church's efforts to address issues of female sexuality within its spaces continue to fall short. The narratives reveal a persistent societal and institutional failure to recognise and uplift women's experiences. From the narratives, I submit that female sexuality remains a challenging subject rife with tension, and until the church can genuinely engage with and support women's rights to express their sexuality without fear of repercussion, true acceptance will remain an elusive goal.

It is only through a comprehensive re-evaluation of cultural and religious norms can we hope to create a space where women's bodies are no longer viewed as sources of disturbance, but rather as integral parts of a diverse and inclusive community.

Describe, in a few lines, the idea behind the following participant excerpts – these focus on pregnancy outside marriage.

Participant 17

"Unmarried pregnant women and girls are forced to attend penitential classes because they are thought to have sinned. They are barred from participating in church events and receiving Holy Communion as a measure of grace. How else will they get penance if they are barred from the means of grace? Not all women make the mistake of having children out of wedlock; some consider these children as a God-given blessing. 'If God has blessed me with a child, why should a pastor force me to confess and admit that I am sinful'?"

Participant 6

"If a man sleeps around with different women, that's fine, but if I get pregnant and I'm not married, I get kicked out of the church. I know a man who sleeps around with the majority of the women in the church, including the pastor's wife, but nothing is done about it. However, as soon as the pastor learned that my friend and I were pregnant, we were removed from the Youth League."

Participant 13

"I was chased out and told to return for penitential class after the child had been born. I miscarried before the second trimester. I never returned to church because what would I confess if I had not had a child out of wedlock?"

4.4.2.1 Categories

Participants' responses are mapped into the following categories:

Category 1: Discrimination and policing

The findings indicate that female sexuality within the church remains a highly contested and policed subject, creating a climate where women's bodies are often regarded as problems to be

managed rather than autonomous expressions of selfhood. Participants consistently noted that discussions around female sexuality are constrained, both overtly and subtly, through institutional and social pressures. Phrases such as "female sexuality remains a tough subject to negotiate" capture the tension women face when attempting to navigate their sexual identities in a religious setting that privileges control over understanding.

Women must balance personal desires, theological teachings, and community expectations, often leading to internal conflict and self-surveillance.

This policing is not limited to verbal instruction but is embedded within broader moral and social frameworks. Women are expected to conform to behaviours deemed appropriate by church authorities and elders, with deviations interpreted as moral failings that can impact communal standing and spiritual credibility. By framing women's bodies as problematic, the church reinforces a perception that female sexuality is inherently dangerous, disruptive, or in need of regulation. This discourse situates the female body as a site of moral concern, intensifying the pressure to adhere to religious norms and creating a landscape of constant ethical evaluation.

The effects of such policing extend beyond immediate social consequences; they shape women's self-conception and limit opportunities for honest engagement with sexual health and identity. Participants highlighted that the scrutiny is often gendered, targeting women more intensively than men, and intersecting with cultural norms that valorise male sexual freedom while restricting female agency. These practices reflect a convergence of religious moralism and patriarchal power structures, in which surveillance, judgment, and control are normalised as tools for maintaining both spiritual and social order.

The implication is that discrimination and policing within the church function as mechanisms of social control, regulating behaviour through moralising, surveillance, and the reinforcement of gender hierarchies. Understanding this dynamic is essential for any analysis seeking to examine the intersection of theology, gender, and sexuality, as it highlights how institutional norms can perpetuate inequities under the guise of spiritual guidance.

Category 2: Body regulation

Closely tied to policing, body regulation operates as a visible, performative form of control over women's sexuality. Participants noted that women are encouraged or at times mandated to cover their heads, shoulders, and legs, symbolically marking modesty as a marker of piety.

Such practices reinforce the belief that women's bodies must be visually managed to prevent moral transgression or temptation, linking external appearance directly to spiritual and social judgment.

This regulation is both normative and disciplinary. On one hand, it sets expectations for appropriate conduct, signalling women's compliance with church teachings; on the other, it enforces shame for non-conformity. The expectation to dress modestly communicates that women's sexuality is public property, subject to scrutiny, and that failure to regulate one's body is morally significant. This regulation thus becomes a means of controlling women's autonomy, suggesting that sexual propriety is not merely a personal concern, but a communal responsibility enforced through visual cues and social pressure.

Body regulation also intersects with cultural notions of respectability and honour, situating women's morality in a public and performative domain. Participants highlighted that clothing practices are not neutral but convey adherence to gendered norms and spiritual values. The regulation of physical appearance, therefore, becomes a mechanism through which broader ethical and theological teachings materialised in everyday life, illustrating how doctrinal norms are embodied in gendered practices.

The analytical implication is that body regulation functions as both a symbol and a tool of patriarchal governance. It communicates societal and religious values about female sexuality while embedding control within seemingly benign cultural and religious practices. Such regulation underscores the broader theme that women's bodies, rather than their moral agency, are the primary sites of ethical attention within church communities.

Category 3: Punitive responses and double standards

Participants described experiences where women were forced to attend penitential classes, were barred from church events, and were denied participation in Holy Communion. These measures highlight an institutionalised response that moralises and punishes deviation, while signalling to the broader community the consequences of transgressing sexual norms.

Crucially, participants noted a stark gendered double standard. Men who engage in sexual activity outside marriage often face little or no institutional sanction, while women bear the brunt of both public shaming and formal punishment. Statements such as, "If a man sleeps around… but if I get pregnant… I get kicked out," illustrate how sexual morality is unequally

enforced and embedded within patriarchal ethics that valorise male freedom while constraining female agency.

These punitive responses serve not only as deterrents but also as mechanisms for reproducing gender hierarchies and moral compliance. The church, through these measures, positions women as morally responsible for maintaining sexual propriety, reinforcing the notion that female sexuality is both public and accountable. This punitive framework fosters fear and discourages honest engagement with sexual health, further entrenching stigma and inequality.

The analytical implication is that punitive responses reproduce structural inequities by institutionalising gendered moral expectations. The enforcement of sexual norms through punishment underscores the need for critical evaluation of how religious practices intersect with gendered social control.

Category 4: Shaming and internalised stigma

Internalised shame emerges as a significant consequence of discrimination, policing, and punitive responses. Participants described how women internalise moralistic messages, leading them to suppress sexual identities and desires. This internalised stigma functions as a form of psychological policing, ensuring compliance even in the absence of direct external enforcement. Women who experience repeated moral censure may come to view their sexuality as inherently wrong or dangerous, reinforcing cycles of self-regulation and concealment. Internalised shame limits opportunities for sexual education, expression, and healthy negotiation of consent and pleasure, creating a deep tension between personal identity and community expectations.

Shaming practices also intersect with the public enforcement of morality. When women observe others being punished or publicly admonished for sexual transgressions, the internalisation of fear and guilt is amplified. This creates a culture in which moral compliance is self-perpetuating, and women's sexual agency is constrained by psychological as well as institutional pressures. Analytically, internalised stigma highlights the intimate and often invisible ways in which patriarchal moral frameworks affect women. It underscores the importance of addressing not only institutional practices but also the psychological dimensions of sexual regulation within religious communities.

Category 5: Structural critique

Participants acknowledged that the church's efforts to regulate or educate about sexuality often fall short, reflecting systemic limitations. The punitive, moralistic, and gendered frameworks in place fail to support women in understanding and navigating their sexual identities in ways that are empowering and affirming. The church's structural approach often emphasises control over dialogue, obedience over understanding, and punishment over pastoral care.

For this reason, this study calls for re-evaluation of a theoretical lens for critiquing these structures. The re-evaluation should include attention to human capabilities and the intrinsic dignity of all persons, emphasising the importance of creating institutional environments that facilitate agency rather than impose restrictive norms . Applying this critique to the church context suggests a need to move beyond punitive and moralising approaches toward practices that centre lived experiences, rights, and voices of women.

Analytically, structural critique illuminates how institutional inertia and patriarchal interpretations of theology limit women's sexual autonomy. It underscores the necessity of systemic reform, including theological reflection, pastoral training, and policy adjustments, to create spaces in which women can negotiate sexuality without fear, shame, or social exclusion.

Category 6: Inclusion and rights

The study highlights participants advocating for inclusive approaches that support women's sexual rights. These responses emphasise the need for women to express sexuality safely and without fear of moralistic repercussion. Inclusion in this context entails both recognition of sexual autonomy and the dismantling of structural barriers that punish or stigmatise female sexual agency.

Supporting women's sexual rights involves rethinking theology, pedagogy, and institutional practices in ways that prioritise dignity, consent, and informed choice. It requires a shift from seeing sexuality as a moral liability to recognising it as a natural and legitimate aspect of human life. Participants indicated that affirming rights not only promotes individual well-being but also strengthens community integrity by reducing shame, conflict, and moral hypocrisy.

Analytically, inclusion and rights-oriented approaches provide a framework for reimagining church ethics in line with gender equity and human dignity. They offer pathways for reconciling religious belief with modern understandings of sexual autonomy, challenging the restrictive moral norms that have historically constrained women's lives within religious settings.

4.4.2.2 Subthemes

- **Subtheme 1: Body Regulation as Virtue Signalling in the Church**

The emphasis on chastity, modesty, and subservience within ELCSA functions as a form of virtue signalling that communicates moral righteousness to the congregation. Women are often taught that their spiritual worth and moral standing are visible through the regulation of their bodies through what they wear, how they comport themselves, and how strictly they adhere to prescribed standards of sexual behaviour. Chastity, particularly before marriage, is framed as a measure of purity and moral discipline, positioning women's bodies as public markers of virtue. This form of regulation has been reinforced through liturgical teaching, sermons, and catechism, creating a pervasive expectation that women's worth is inseparable from their ability to embody church-approved ideals of modesty and obedience.

It can be argued that his moral framing constitutes a form of social control that restricts women's agency. While ostensibly promoting spiritual development, these teachings often reduce women to symbols of virtue rather than recognising them as fully autonomous moral agents. Feminist theologians such as Ruether (1993:102) and Dube (2000:74) emphasise that morality must be informed by women lived experiences and should not be imposed solely through top-down doctrinal authority. Virtue signalling through body regulation perpetuates a hierarchy in which male clergy and congregants determine acceptable standards of behaviour, leaving women to internalise guilt, shame, and self-surveillance when they deviate from these norms.

Moreover, the connection between virtue and bodily regulation often disregards the complex realities of women's lives, including economic pressures, educational access, and relational contexts. By framing morality in terms of visible adherence to chastity or modesty, the church ignores the relational and ethical dimensions of sexuality that extend beyond outward appearances. This approach can alienate women, particularly those who fail to conform, reinforcing social exclusion and limiting participation in spiritual and community life. A feminist-informed re-evaluation of virtue should decouple morality from rigid bodily control and instead emphasise relational ethics, agency, and respect for individual choices, acknowledging that spirituality is not contingent upon external conformity but upon ethical engagement and communal participation.

- **Subtheme 2: Moral Policing of Appearance by Religious Bodies**

Moral policing of women's appearance in religious spaces often manifests through detailed prescriptions regarding clothing, hair, and bodily exposure. Women are expected to cover their

heads, shoulders, and legs during specific events such as funerals, confirmations, and community gatherings. While some of these regulations are culturally informed, they are reinforced through religious authority, giving them a moral weight that transcends personal preference. The policing of appearance serves as a symbolic mechanism through which the church asserts control over women's bodies, subtly communicating that women's value and moral integrity are measurable by conformity to visual standards.

This practice reflects a convergence of religious and cultural patriarchy. While culture shapes expectations regarding modesty, the church institutionalises and enforces them, creating a dual layer of surveillance that leaves women with little space for self-expression. Feminist theology critiques such practices for treating women's bodies as vessels for public morality rather than as autonomous sites of spiritual and ethical reflection. By enforcing appearance standards, religious authorities reinforce a binary where women's physicality becomes morally charged, while men's appearance is rarely subject to comparable scrutiny.

Furthermore, moral policing limits women's freedom to engage fully in spiritual and communal life. Anxiety over dress codes, fear of judgment, and the internalisation of external moral expectations can lead to self-censorship, emotional stress, and reduced participation. In this light, a progressive theological framework should advocate for inclusivity and dignity, recognising that spiritual engagement and ethical conduct are not determined by outward appearance but by intentionality, relational accountability, and moral reflection. Moving toward this vision requires both structural change in the enforcement of appearance norms and pedagogical reform that promotes body-positive and agency-affirming interpretations of religious doctrine.

- **Subtheme 3: Harsh Penalties for Unmarried Pregnancies**

Punitive responses to unmarried pregnancies are one of the most visible forms of gendered discipline within ELCSA. Women who conceive outside of marriage often face censure, are forced to attend penitential classes, barred from Holy Communion, and excluded from participation in church events. These practices reflect a moral framework that disproportionately targets women, placing the burden of responsibility on the mother while frequently absolving men involved. This gendered double standard perpetuates shame and social isolation, reinforcing structural inequalities and limiting women's ability to participate fully in their spiritual communities.

These punitive measures represent a misalignment between moral oversight and pastoral care. The church's role should centre on guidance, support, and reconciliation, yet these disciplinary mechanisms emphasise punishment and public shaming. Such punitive frameworks fail to address the underlying social and relational dynamics that contribute to premarital pregnancies and instead reinforce patriarchal control over women's bodies.

Moreover, these penalties have broader psychosocial effects, contributing to trauma, diminished self-worth, and estrangement from spiritual life. Women internalise the church's censure, often associating pregnancy with sinfulness rather than recognising it as a natural and complex human experience. In the researchers' view, a more compassionate and just approach would involve supportive counselling, educational initiatives, and shared accountability that includes both male and female partners. Incorporating women's voices into the development of church sexual ethics is essential to create policies that prioritise healing and agency over shame and exclusion.

- **Subtheme 4: Gendered Inconsistency and Hypocrisy**

One of the most striking features of ELCSA's sexual ethics is the inconsistent treatment of men's and women's behaviour. Men who engage in multiple sexual relationships are rarely disciplined, while women face severe consequences for comparable behaviour. This hypocrisy reinforces a gendered moral hierarchy in which male sexuality is normalised and privileged, while female sexuality is tightly regulated and stigmatised. Such inconsistencies communicate that moral and ethical standards are contingent upon gender rather than ethical principle, perpetuating systemic inequality.

This gendered inconsistency is not merely a theological oversight but a structural feature of patriarchal religious institutions. It perpetuates a culture in which women bear the social and moral costs of sexual activity, while men are granted freedom and immunity from accountability. By centring women's experiences and including them in decision-making processes, the church can address the moral double standards that have long undermined women's dignity and agency.

The inconsistency also impacts congregational dynamics, as women observe the unequal treatment and internalise messages about their limited moral and social authority. In my view, addressing this inequity requires not only revising disciplinary policies but also developing a theological culture that values fairness, accountability, and mutual respect. Ethical teachings

should be applied equitably, with consequences determined by actions rather than gender, reflecting the inclusive and justice-oriented principles of Christian ethics.

- **Subtheme 5: Institutional Failure to Recognise Women's Experiences**

The church's engagement with female sexuality has often been insufficient, failing to integrate women lived experiences into ethical and pastoral frameworks. Policies, catechisms, and pastoral guidance frequently reflect male-centred assumptions, overlooking the diverse realities of women's bodies, desires, and relational contexts. This institutional failure limits the church's ability to provide meaningful moral guidance, leaving women to navigate complex issues of sexuality, reproduction, and relationships without adequate support.

This failure stems from a historical privileging of male theological voices and experiences in the construction of Christian ethics. By neglecting women's perspectives, the church risks perpetuating harm, reinforcing patriarchal norms, and eroding trust within congregations.

Addressing this failure requires systematic inclusion of women in theological reflection, ethical decision-making, and pastoral education. Practical steps may include participatory ethics workshops, consultative councils, and the incorporation of narrative theology that values women's testimonies and lived experiences. By centring women's voices, the church can create ethical frameworks that are responsive, equitable, and relevant to contemporary realities, enabling a culture of care rather than control.

- **Subtheme 6: Need for Re-evaluation of Norms**

The entrenched norms regulating women's sexuality in ELCSA require comprehensive re-evaluation, as they perpetuate gender inequality, shame, and moral surveillance. Cultural and religious norms must be critically examined to create spaces where women's bodies are not viewed as sources of moral disturbance but as integral components of a diverse and inclusive community. Such critique necessitates questioning both explicit church teachings and the subtle ways in which culture, tradition, and theology intersect to control female bodies.

Such re-evaluation involves both theological and structural reform. Theologically, the church must reinterpret Scripture and ethical guidance to affirm women's dignity, agency, and sexual autonomy. Structurally, governance, leadership, and pastoral care must include women in decision-making processes, ensuring that policies reflect lived realities rather than patriarchal assumptions. I suggest that Feminist theology provides a better roadmap for this process, advocating for ethical frameworks rooted in justice, compassion, and inclusivity.

Re-evaluating norms also requires confronting the cultural underpinnings of gendered expectations. Many church regulations on modesty, chastity, and reproductive behaviour are reinforced by broader societal patriarchy. Without addressing these intersections, reform will be superficial. By integrating feminist perspectives, promoting critical awareness, and validating women's experiences, the church can move toward practices that respect bodily autonomy, foster equality, and encourage healthy sexual ethics that reflect the fullness of human experience.

4.4.2.3 Synthesis of Findings

Participant voices provide concrete examples of exclusion and punishment, like being removed from church organisations or being forced to go for confession and penitence. Fear of repercussions leads to internalised shame among women. This results in women suppressing or hiding their sexuality and experiences to avoid sanction. This study calls for rethinking cultural and religious norms to make space for women's sexuality without fear of repercussions. It calls for genuine inclusion and rights-based approach. True acceptance requires acknowledging and supporting women's rights to express sexuality. Without reform, acceptance remains elusive.

4.4.3 A Body Excluded

The debate between monism and dualism has indeed played a central role in religious and philosophical discourse for centuries, shaping various theological and moral frameworks. This debate over whether to unite or separate the body and spirit has not only unified and divided many people within religious communities but has also shaped the moral landscapes that govern their practices and beliefs. The exclusion of bodies is particularly salient in discussions about sexuality, where women's bodies are frequently objectified or subjected to stringent moral codes that limit their autonomy and expression.

When asked about the inclusion or exclusion of women in sexual activities, participants provided a range of responses that reflect the complex interplay between cultural expectations, religious beliefs, and personal experiences. Some participants expressed views that aligned with traditional dualistic perspectives, articulating a belief that women should be more restrained in their sexual expressions due to notions of modesty, virtue, or spiritual purity. Others, however, advocated for a more monistic view, arguing for the integration of body and spirit as essential to understanding the fullness of human experience. They suggested that

recognising the body as a sacred vessel could empower women to embrace their sexuality in a way that honours both their physical and spiritual selves.

The ongoing debate between monism and dualism continues to shape religious discussions, particularly concerning the moral and spiritual status of the body. In navigating these complex issues, it is essential to recognise the diverse perspectives within religious communities and to advocate for inclusive practices that honour the dignity and agency of all individuals, especially women. By embracing a more integrated understanding of body and spirit, environments can be created where all members of the community can engage fully in their spiritual journeys without fear of exclusion or judgment. This shift not only enhances individual experiences of faith but also enriches the collective understanding of what it means to be human in relation to the divine. In considering the responses of participants regarding the inclusion of women in sexual activities, it is necessary to remain open to evolving interpretations of body and spirit that reflect the richness of human experience and the complexity of spiritual life. The participant excerpts that follow provide insight into how women interpret their bodily experiences and sexuality within the moral and theological discourses of the church.

Participant 4 - 32 year old, Single woman who is a member of YAL

“Divorced women should be excluded from sexual engagements, but widows should be included.”

Participant 1 – 35 year old , single woman who is a member of YAL

"Unmarried women should have control over their bodies and should not be barred from church activities if they have children outside of marriage. Divorced ladies and widows should not have sex since they are unmarried."

Participant 20 – 50 year old, married woman who does not affiliate in any of the leagues

"All unmarried women, including the divorced and widowed, should not have sex because they do not have spouses. It is a sin to have sex when you are not married."

Participant 11 - 51 year old, single woman who does not affiliate in any of the leagues

"Sex is for married people, not unmarried women. It will undoubtedly save a lot of misery if done after marriage, but it also helps couples better understand each other. Unfortunately, human nature always makes people curious about what is out there. So, if you are only

experiencing this once you are in marriage, it might lead to infidelity and ultimately, a divorce …"

Participant 18 - 33 year old, single woman who is a member of PWF

"Divorced women and widows should be allowed to have sex. The negative state of the question can make the answer to be ambiguous. My answer is yes; they should be allowed."

4.4.3.1 Participants' Response

Participant 4: Differentiation between divorced women and widows

Participant 4 32-year-old, single woman who is a member of YAL presents a nuanced stance that differentiates moral expectations based on social status, distinguishing between divorced women and widows regarding sexual engagement. This perspective suggests that the church's regulation of sexuality is not applied uniformly but is shaped by assumptions about social stability, family dynamics, and moral risk. By advocating for the exclusion of sexual activity for divorced women while permitting it for widows, P4 implicitly recognises the perceived differences in moral and social legitimacy attached to each status. Divorced women may be seen as having disrupted social or marital bonds, which could be construed as morally or socially destabilising if they engage in sexual activity outside new marital arrangements. In contrast, widows are often culturally and religiously viewed as having lost their marital partner through no fault of their own, and therefore, their sexual autonomy may be considered morally permissible and socially acceptable.

This distinction highlights the intersection of morality, social expectation, and gendered perception. The moral evaluation of sexual behaviour is contingent not merely on the act itself but on the perceived social "threat" it poses. P4's reasoning reflects a careful negotiation between doctrinal teaching and recognition of lived circumstances, suggesting that the ethical frameworks governing female sexuality are not entirely rigid but are informed by contextual factors such as marital status and perceived risk to family integrity. It also points to a broader theme in Lutheran ethical discourse, where social cohesion and family stability are interwoven with moral reasoning.

Analytically, this stance demonstrates the potential for conditional reasoning within the church's moral discourse: sexuality is not always an absolute category of sin but may be mediated by social context, relational history, and perceived consequences. P4's approach underscores the importance of examining the differential moral weight assigned to various

forms of unmarried status, revealing how theology and social norms intersect to shape gendered expectations of sexual behaviour.

Participant 1: Bodily autonomy with selective abstinence

Participant 1 35 year old, single woman who is a member of YAL articulates a position that emphasises bodily autonomy for unmarried women, including those who have children outside of marriage, advocating against restricting their participation in church activities. This reflects an acknowledgment of women's agency and social inclusion, suggesting that moral judgment should not extend into the domain of communal participation or spiritual engagement. At the same time, P1 maintains that divorced women and widows should refrain from sexual activity, highlighting a distinction between social rights and sexual conduct.

This position reflects a balancing act between autonomy and doctrinal compliance. P1 separates the ethical evaluation of sexual activity from broader social and spiritual participation, implying that abstinence can coexist with inclusion. This approach challenges the often-punitive practices of exclusion and moral policing, proposing that women can be recognised as full participants in church life even while adhering to specific sexual prescriptions. It underscores a compartmentalisation within ethical reasoning, where participation in religious rituals and moral behaviour is governed by different principles, allowing for partial autonomy within a framework of prescriptive norms.

Furthermore, this stance suggests a recognition of diverse lived realities. By supporting the inclusion of unmarried mothers in church life, P1 acknowledges that women navigate complex social and familial situations that do not always align with idealised doctrinal standards. At the same time, the continued emphasis on sexual abstinence for divorced women and widows reflects ongoing adherence to traditional norms regarding sexual propriety. Analytically, P1 illustrates the tension between moral absolutism and contextual ethics, demonstrating how some members negotiate between inclusivity and adherence to scriptural or denominational teaching.

Participant 20: Stricter universal prohibition

Participant 20, 50 year old, married woman who does not affiliate to any league articulates a strict and absolute position, asserting that all unmarried women, including divorced women and widows, should abstain from sexual activity. In this framework, sex outside marriage is unequivocally framed as sin, leaving no room for conditional or context-based reasoning. This

reflects a literalist interpretation of scripture and a strong commitment to normative sexual ethics within the church.

P20's stance can be understood as an attempt to maintain moral clarity and uniformity, emphasising an unambiguous standard of conduct applicable to all unmarried women. It reflects the church's traditional emphasis on sexual restraint and positions marriage as the sole morally legitimate context for sexual activity. This approach also minimises moral ambiguity by establishing clear boundaries, which, while strict, provides a coherent ethical framework within which believers can navigate sexual conduct.

Analytically, P20 represents the conservative end of the spectrum, illustrating the influence of doctrinal literalism in shaping moral reasoning. While it offers clarity, it also risks excluding considerations of individual circumstance, such as widowhood or personal autonomy. This position demonstrates how absolute norms can reinforce social and gender hierarchies by restricting female sexuality while often exempting male sexual behaviour from comparable scrutiny. P20's framework underscores the tension between religiously anchored moral universals and the complexities of lived experience among unmarried women.

Participant 11: Principle-based approach

Participant 11, 51 year old, single women who is not affiliated to any league adopts a principle-based approach, emphasizing that sex is intended for married people while also recognising potential consequences of strict abstinence. P11 highlights that engaging in sexual activity outside marriage may lead to dissatisfaction, infidelity, or even divorce, indicating an awareness that rigid suppression of sexual desire can have unintended social and emotional consequences. This perspective demonstrates a tension between prescriptive moral reasoning and the realities of human curiosity and sexual impulse.

By acknowledging the potential challenges of enforcing abstinence, P11 introduces a pragmatic dimension to moral evaluation, reflecting an understanding that ethical prescriptions must account for human behaviour and social dynamics. This participant's approach also suggests that moral guidance should be tempered with pastoral sensitivity and recognition of the complexities of personal desire. Analytically, P11 represents a middle ground between strict prohibition and permissive reasoning, highlighting the practical and psychological considerations that influence sexual ethics within religious communities.

Participant 18: Permissive stance emphasising autonomy

Participant 18 33year old single woman who is a member of PWF articulates a more permissive stance, arguing that divorced women and widows should be allowed to engage in sexual activity. This perspective foregrounds personal autonomy and challenges blanket prohibitions, suggesting that sexual ethics should be flexible and responsive to individual circumstances. P18 also noted that responses may be influenced by how questions are framed, reflecting an awareness that social desirability, question wording, and contextual interpretation can shape moral reasoning.

By emphasising autonomy, P18 critiques normative frameworks that rigidly restrict female sexuality based on marital status. This approach aligns with feminist theological perspectives that prioritise agency, bodily integrity, and equitable moral evaluation. Analytically, P18 represents a counter-narrative within the sample, challenging traditional moral hierarchies and advocating for a more individualised and context-sensitive approach to sexual ethics. The approach underscores the potential for interpretive diversity and the capacity of some participants to resist or reinterpret dominant normative frameworks within the church.

4.4.3.2 Common Themes and Tensions

This section presents an interpretive analysis of the responses provided by participants, identifying the key themes and tensions that emerge from their perspectives on women's sexuality. By examining the similarities and differences in the participants' views, the analysis highlights how women's sexual agency is negotiated within the intersection of personal autonomy, social expectations, and Christian ethical teachings. The section therefore moves beyond merely reporting participant responses and instead interprets how these responses reflect broader moral frameworks, socio-cultural assumptions, and theological influences within the church context. A central theme emerging from the responses is the tension between autonomy and control. Several participants wrestle with the question of whether unmarried women should have the freedom to make decisions about their own bodies and sexual lives. Participants 1 and 20, for instance, both engage the issue of autonomy, although they approach it from different perspectives. While one response gestures toward the recognition of personal agency, the other reflects a more restrictive view shaped by communal and religious expectations. This tension illustrates the broader conflict between individual bodily autonomy and moral norms that seek to regulate sexuality within the religious community. Another significant theme concerns status distinctions among unmarried women, particularly the

difference between divorced women and widows. Participant 4 explicitly distinguishes between these categories, suggesting that different ethical expectations may apply depending on a woman's marital history. In contrast, Participants 20 and 11 appear to treat all unmarried women in the same way, applying similar moral standards regardless of their circumstances. This variation reveals how social labels such as divorce and widowhood are often used within moral discourse to justify different ethical expectations and degrees of social acceptance. The issue of sexual ethics in relation to marriage also emerges as a recurring point of discussion. Some participants, particularly Participants 11 and 20, emphasise a traditional moral framework in which sexual activity is considered legitimate only within the context of marriage. Such responses reflect longstanding Christian ethical teachings that associate sexual expression with marital commitment. However, other responses challenge this strict framework by drawing attention to the realities of human sexuality and the importance of recognising consent, personal autonomy, and the potential harms that may arise when moral norms are applied in rigid or punitive ways. Closely related to this is the theme of moral consequences and potential harm. Participant 11 explicitly links sexual activity outside of marriage to negative outcomes such as infidelity, divorce, and personal misery. Other participants do not state these consequences as directly but nevertheless imply that sexual behaviour outside prescribed norms may lead to social exclusion or moral judgment. These responses illustrate how moral reasoning around sexuality is often framed in terms of protecting individuals and communities from perceived harm. An additional point raised in the responses concerns the role of framing and ambiguity in moral discussions. Participant 18 highlights how the way a question is framed can influence the type of responses it generates. This observation underscores the importance of language and context in shaping moral judgments and reminds the researcher that ethical positions are often constructed within particular discursive frameworks. The responses also raise concerns about the risk of objectifying women's bodies. Certain positions, particularly those that emphasise strict prohibitions on sexual activity outside of marriage, may inadvertently frame women's bodies as instruments for maintaining family stability or protecting communal moral values. Such perspectives can reduce women to their sexual roles rather than recognising them as individuals with dignity, rights, and agency. In contrast, several perspectives within the responses point toward the importance of autonomy and consent in discussions of sexuality. These positions align more closely with contemporary ethical frameworks that prioritise bodily integrity, personal agency, and mutual consent. From this perspective, blanket prohibitions on sexual activity outside marriage may fail to account for the complex realities of people's lives and may undermine women's ability to exercise

meaningful autonomy. The analysis also highlights issues of consistency and justice in the application of sexual ethics. Universal moral rules, such as the insistence that sexual activity must only occur within marriage, may be difficult to sustain in practice and may place disproportionate burdens on women. Women often navigate complex social realities that involve issues of consent, coercion, and unequal power relations. A more nuanced ethical approach would therefore consider factors such as safety, well-being, and relational dynamics rather than relying solely on rigid moral prescriptions. Finally, the diversity of responses demonstrates the importance of recognising pluralism within religious communities. The range of views expressed by participants indicates that there is no single, uniform perspective on women's sexuality within the faith community. Instead, multiple interpretations coexist, reflecting different understandings of morality, theology, and social life. Any ethical reflection or policy formulation within the church context should therefore acknowledge this diversity and avoid assuming that one perspective fully represents the entire community.

4.4.4 Liberation

When asked if women were free to express their opinions on what sexual ethics should entail, Participant 3 articulated a vital perspective, stating that "for boys and girls to be socialised as equals" involves a call for gender parity from an early age. This insight underscores the importance of early education and socialisation in creating a foundation for equality, not just in the church but across all aspects of life.

Participant 12

Sexual Ethics should include men and women to be treated the same – include this participant's excerpt.

Participant 16

Rewriting sexual ethics means that *"men should be part of the Penitential class and that women's sexual choices should be respected and not questioned".*

Participant 7

Feels that women in the church are still not liberated. *"Yes, women are afraid to express themselves fully because they fear being cut from the church, labelling, disrespect and not being recognised for the potential they have and the value they can add to the church leadership structures."*

Participant 10

"*Even though women are a majority in the church, when you enter the church gates men take over control and women have to take over the submissive role."*

Participant 20

"Christian women`s sexuality is policed by everyone, society, men and women even pastors in our church. Women are expected to live according to pre-set standards."

4.4.4.1 Participants' Responses Arranged in Sub-themes

This subsection presents participants' responses organised according to key sub-themes that emerged from the data. Grouping the responses in this way allows for a clearer understanding of the patterns, similarities, and differences in how participants interpret issues related to women's sexuality and Christian ethical teachings. The thematic arrangement also helps to highlight the specific areas of tension, negotiation, and meaning-making reflected in participants' perspectives within the church context.

- **Gender equality and fair treatment in sexual ethics**

Participants highlighted the need for gender equality in sexual ethics, emphasising that men and women should be subject to the same moral standards and social accountability. P12 explicitly argued for equal treatment, stating that "men and women to be treated the same," suggesting that current church practices unfairly target women for behaviours that men may engage in without consequence. This reflects a growing awareness among congregants that sexual ethics in ELCSA are deeply gendered, often privileging male sexual freedom while constraining female autonomy.

P16 reinforced this perspective by advocating that "rewriting sexual ethics means that men should be part of the Penitential class and that women's sexual choices should be respected and not questioned". This highlights the intersection of institutional accountability and personal autonomy, suggesting that moral responsibility should not be disproportionately assigned based on gender. Including men in penitential processes would not only challenge entrenched double standards but also promote fairness and transparency in moral oversight, signalling that sexual ethics are a communal responsibility rather than a tool for controlling women.

Analytically, these perspectives reveal that gendered disparities in sexual policing are not only morally problematic but also socially and psychologically harmful. They underscore the importance of addressing structural inequities in religious institutions and challenge patriarchal interpretations of scripture that prioritise female regulation over mutual accountability. Gender equality in sexual ethics, therefore, emerges as both a corrective measure and a broader ethical imperative for creating an inclusive and just religious environment.

- **Patriarchal power and control within the church**

Participants also described the pervasive patriarchal power structuring church life, particularly in regulating female sexuality. P10 noted that "when you enter the church gates men take over control and women have to take over the submissive role," reflecting an entrenched hierarchy in which male authority dominates spiritual, social, and organisational dimensions of church life. This observation highlights how gendered power is symbolically and practically enacted, shaping not only governance but also moral and ethical norms.

P20 emphasized that "women's sexuality is policed by everyone, society, men and women even pastors in our church", illustrating the layered enforcement of patriarchal norms. Female behaviour is scrutinised by a network of actors, including male authority figures, female peers, and broader societal expectations. This policing functions both as a mechanism of social control and as an internalised system of moral regulation, wherein women are complicit in enforcing norms that constrain their own autonomy.

From an analytical standpoint, patriarchal power in the church reinforces hierarchical gender norms that limit female agency. Moral authority is concentrated in male figures, creating systemic inequalities that manifest both in behavioural expectations and in leadership opportunities. Understanding this dynamic is critical for analysing how structural and interpersonal power relations intersect to shape women's experiences, particularly regarding sexuality, participation, and self-expression.

- **Women's liberation, voice, and leadership in the church**

The lack of female voice and leadership within ELCSA emerged as a significant theme. P7 observed that "women in the church are still not liberated, fear being cut from the church, labelling, disrespect and not being recognised for the potential they have and the value they can add to the church leadership structures". This highlights the structural barriers that prevent women from exercising agency and participating fully in decision-making.

Participants underscored that the suppression of voice extends beyond formal leadership roles; it permeates social interactions, teaching, and moral policing. Women's ideas, insights, and contributions are often undervalued, limiting their capacity to influence ethical discourse, including sexual ethics. Analytically, this theme reveals that liberation is not only a matter of rights or participation but also recognition and validation of women's epistemic and moral authority within the religious community. Achieving gender equity in leadership is therefore linked to broader efforts to challenge patriarchal control and reframe moral discourse in ways that empower women.

- **External and societal policing of female sexuality**

P20 emphasised that "Christian women's sexuality is policed by everyone, society, men and women even pastors", highlighting the multiple layers of scrutiny women face. This policing is not confined to the church but extends into broader social, cultural, and familial networks, suggesting that religious and societal norms mutually reinforce restrictions on female sexual agency.

Such external policing amplifies internalised pressure, compelling women to regulate their own behaviour and suppress desires to avoid judgment or sanction. Analytically, this demonstrates that female sexuality is governed not only by institutional rules but also by socially mediated moral surveillance, illustrating how communal and cultural forces converge to constrain autonomy.

- **Rewriting sexual ethics and inclusion of men in reform**

Participants advocated for inclusive approaches to sexual ethics reform. P16 stated, "Rewriting sexual ethics means that men should be part of the Penitential class", emphasising that moral responsibility must be evenly distributed. By involving men, the church could address gendered double standards, reinforce accountability, and reduce the disproportionate burden placed on women. This approach aligns with feminist and egalitarian theological perspectives, suggesting that reform must be structural as well as cultural. Including men in reform initiatives also challenges the patriarchal assumption that women are solely responsible for upholding sexual morality, offering a pathway toward equitable participation in both moral reflection and institutional governance.

- **Tension between majority female presence and continued submissive gender norms**

Despite women forming the majority of church members, patriarchal norms continue to enforce male dominance. P10 noted, “Even though women are a majority in the church, when you enter the church gates men take over control”, highlighting a paradox in which numerical strength does not translate into power, autonomy, or influence.

This tension underscores the entrenchment of symbolic and institutional hierarchies that privilege male authority regardless of demographic realities. Analytically, it illustrates that power in religious settings is not merely proportional to numbers but embedded in historical, theological, and cultural systems that sustain gendered norms. Recognising this tension is essential for understanding why reform efforts must target both institutional structures and normative behaviours to create meaningful change.

4.4.4.2 Synthesising findings

Traditionally, Lutheran churches have testified to the gospel in ways that are shaped by confessional and exegetical understandings rather than by cultural habit alone. In many contexts, longstanding doctrinal positions have been transmitted through catechesis and the Lutheran practice of the Office of the Ministry, rather than through unexamined tradition.

Within this framework, some communities have adopted a complementarian perspective, which views men and women as having distinct yet complementary roles, particularly in relation to leadership within the church, while others have embraced broader interpretations of vocation and ministry. A Lutheran sensibility highlights that all believers share in baptismal vocation, yet different offices and gifts may be discerned for ordered ministry. This has led to a spectrum of practices: some Lutheran denominations maintain traditional arrangements regarding who may serve in certain leadership roles, while others open ordained ministry and leadership to women, guided by careful scriptural interpretation, confessional exposition, and discernment within the church.

In the South African context, ELCSA has moved in a more liberating direction, including women in leadership and ordaining women into ministry. Notably, ELCSA consecrated its first female bishop in the Northern Diocese on 23 May 2021, signalling a shift toward greater gender inclusion. Ongoing dialogues within ELCSA, grounded in the Lutheran emphasis on law and gospel, vocation, and the priesthood of all believers, will continue to shape its policies and practices regarding gender inclusion.

4.4.5 Positive Sexuality

The theme of positive sexuality emerges as an important counter-narrative to traditional discourses that primarily frame women's sexuality in terms of restriction, control, or moral risk. Within this thematic area, sexuality is understood as a natural and integral aspect of human life that encompasses dignity, mutuality, consent, and well-being. Rather than viewing women's bodies as sites of moral suspicion, this perspective recognises sexuality as part of holistic human flourishing and relational expression. The discussion that follows highlights participants' reflections that move toward affirming sexuality in ways that acknowledge women's agency, bodily integrity, and the importance of respectful and ethical relationships.

Positive sexuality, in my opinion, comprises anything that promotes people's sexual well-being. This involves unrestricted sexual expression and unconditional acceptance of those who identify as a different gender. It should be a basic human right that everyone should enjoy; however, the church, as the "custodians of morality", has assumed the power to decide who has and does not have the right to free sexual expression. Keenen (2010:66) states that "Christianity is largely concerned with propagating moral teaching based on physical and biological issues concerning sexuality.

Positive sexuality represents a multifaceted concept that promotes sexual well-being through unrestricted expression, unconditional acceptance, and education. It is essential to recognise the role of societal structures, such as the church, in shaping perceptions of sexuality, and to challenge the limitations they impose on individual freedoms. By advocating for a culture that celebrates diversity and inclusivity, I will contribute towards a future where sexual well-being is recognised as a fundamental human right and a privilege for all individuals regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Soble (2014:30) argues that "embracing positive sexuality not only benefits individuals but also contributes to a healthier, more compassionate society overall".

Participant 5

"It means being honest with oneself".

Participant 11

"I believe women should have a right to choose who they have sexual relations with even though it is against most religions and not just Christianity. I believe in pro-choice when it

comes to birth control. I think women should be allowed to do what they feel is right for them.……."

Participant 2

"The freedom to be who they are and the contentment to be in their own skins with the realisation and acknowledgment that we were created to be different."

Participant 20

"Confidence and comfortability to express yourself anywhere including at church without being judged or being made to feel like a sinner."

Religion as custodians of morality has done a great work is informing morality and maintaining control. In the same breath, it has intentionally or unintentionally managed to alienate women from their sexuality. This study does not minimise moral advocacy by the church, however it does advocate for positive sexuality. In this case, positive sexuality is an approach that emphasises healthy, respectful, and pleasurable experiences related to sexuality. It involves understanding and accepting one's own sexuality, promoting open communication, and cultivating a positive attitude towards sexual feelings, desires, and behaviours. This perspective encourages individuals to explore and express their sexuality in ways that are consensual, safe, and aligned with their values, ultimately supporting overall well-being and healthy relationships.

Is positive sexuality really positive or best for members of ELCSA? In the study`s perspective, positive sexuality as a lens is good, and considered a healthy aspect of human life. It involves having a respectful, accepting, and open attitude toward one's own sexuality and the sexuality of others. Embracing positive sexuality can lead to better self-esteem, healthier relationships, improved emotional well-being, and a more comprehensive understanding of personal and shared boundaries. Promoting positive sexuality also encourages communication, consent, and safety, which are essential for overall physical and mental health.

4.4.5.1 Participants' Responses Analysed

This section provides an analytical interpretation of the participants' responses in relation to the key themes identified in the study. Rather than simply presenting the responses, the discussion critically engages with the participants' perspectives to explore the underlying meanings, assumptions, and tensions reflected in their views. Through this analysis, the section

highlights how participants negotiate issues of sexuality, morality, and gender within the broader framework of Christian ethical teachings and socio-cultural influences.

- **Participant 5: Self-awareness and authenticity as foundational to positive sexuality**

Participant 5 50 year old single woman who is a member of PWL emphasises the importance of "being honest with oneself" as a foundation for positive sexual experience, reflecting an understanding of sexuality that goes beyond moral prescriptions to include personal authenticity and introspection. This perspective aligns with psychological and feminist frameworks that recognise self-awareness as central to sexual well-being. By focusing on honesty with oneself, P5 foregrounds the internal dimension of sexuality, highlighting the interplay between identity, desire, and moral or social pressures.

This stance suggests that positive sexual experiences are contingent on acknowledging and understanding one's own needs, desires, and boundaries. In religious contexts such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), where female sexuality is highly regulated, P5's emphasis on self-awareness represents a subtle form of resistance against external moral policing. It encourages women to develop a relationship with their own sexuality that is not wholly mediated by patriarchal or institutional norms.

Analytically, P5's approach underscores the potential for internal moral frameworks to coexist with or even challenge external prescriptions. It suggests that encouraging self-awareness can empower women to negotiate sexual ethics in ways that are both personally fulfilling and socially responsible. In practical terms, this implies that educational and pastoral interventions focused on self-reflection, emotional literacy, and personal agency could strengthen women's capacity for positive sexual expression, while mitigating the effects of stigma and shame.

- **Participant 11: Autonomy, consent and reproductive rights**

Participant 11 51 year old, single and not affiliated to any league articulates a position grounded in autonomy and reproductive choice: "I believe women should have a right to choose who they have sexual relations with; pro-choice when it comes to birth control; women should be allowed to do what they feel is right for them." This perspective highlights three interconnected principles: sexual agency, consent, and reproductive rights. By affirming a woman's right to determine sexual partnerships and make informed choices about contraception, P11 challenges patriarchal and institutional restrictions that often limit female autonomy within both the church and society at large.

This stance situates sexual ethics within the broader discourse of human rights and bodily integrity, suggesting that ethical sexual behaviour should not be dictated solely by external norms but negotiated through informed personal decision-making. In the ELCSA context, where premarital sex, contraception, and reproductive choices are often heavily moralised, P11's perspective represents a critical departure from normative conservatism. It affirms that ethical engagement with sexuality can and should be rooted in consent, knowledge, and respect for individual autonomy.

Analytically, P11's stance underscores the importance of integrating feminist and rights-based perspectives into theological discourse on sexuality. It demonstrates that ethical frameworks can support agency without abandoning moral reflection, allowing women to navigate sexual relationships in ways that are both personally affirming and socially responsible. This perspective has practical implications for pastoral care, sexual education, and policy, highlighting the need for frameworks that respect women's choices while providing guidance grounded in ethical reasoning.

- **Participant 2: Acceptance of diversity and self-acceptance**

Participant 2 emphasises that sexual well-being is rooted in "the freedom to be who they are and the contentment to be in their own skin created to be different". This perspective foregrounds self-acceptance and the recognition of diversity as central to positive sexuality. P2's statement challenges normative pressures that seek to standardise behaviour, appearance, or sexual expression, highlighting the importance of embracing individuality and difference.

By framing sexual ethics in terms of self-acceptance, P2 introduces a relational and psychological dimension to the discussion. Contentment in one's own body and identity enables women to navigate social and religious expectations without succumbing entirely to shame or guilt. This approach also aligns with broader feminist and humanistic frameworks, which emphasise the intrinsic value of diverse sexual identities and experiences.

Analytically, P2's stance suggests that ethical sexual frameworks should integrate psychological and social dimensions, recognising that moral prescriptions alone are insufficient for developing well-being. Encouraging self-acceptance and respect for diversity can counteract internalised stigma, reduce shame, and empower women to engage in sexuality in ways that are authentic and affirming. This perspective has direct implications for pastoral care, sexual education, and community discourse, highlighting the importance of creating environments that celebrate, rather than suppress, individuality and personal growth.

- **Participant 20: Confidence and non-judgmental expression**

Participant 20 emphasises the importance of environments that enable "confidence and comfortability to express yourself anywhere including at church without being judged or being made to feel like a sinner". This perspective highlights how external judgment, particularly within religious settings, can inhibit positive sexual expression and contribute to internalised shame. P20 emphasises that sexual well-being is not only an internal process but also relational, contingent on the presence of supportive, non-judgmental spaces.

This stance points to the broader social and institutional factors that shape sexuality. Churches and religious communities, as sites of moral authority, play a critical role in either enabling or constraining sexual expression. P20's perspective aligns with feminist theology, which critiques environments that perpetuate judgment, stigma, and patriarchal surveillance. By creating spaces of acceptance and nonjudgment, institutions can support women in cultivating confidence, agency, and a positive relationship with their sexuality.

Analytically, this highlights the intersection of environment, morality, and well-being. Sexual ethics are not only about personal behaviour but also about the social and relational context in which sexuality is lived. Non-judgmental spaces enable reflection, agency, and authentic expression, countering the effects of external policing and internalised shame. This has implications for reforming religious education, pastoral counselling, and community discourse, emphasising the need for inclusivity, acceptance, and support in facilitating healthy sexual identities.

4.4.5.2 Synthesising Findings

The tensions between personal freedom, and communal or religious norms require respectful dialogue between different stakeholders and policy that protects human rights while honouring diverse beliefs. A comprehensive sex education, inclusive policies, community engagement, and ethical media representation will also be beneficial to relieve the tension.

4.4.6 Sex before Marriage

Seventeen participants in the study indicated that it is not acceptable for single, divorced and widowed women to have sexual engagements. This raised the challenge to understand why women, who earlier in the study advocated for positive sexuality, suddenly felt the need to restrict other women's access to sexual pleasure because of their marital status.

Participant 14 -44 year old, single woman who is a member of PWL

Yes, sex before marriage is a sin because the Bible said so.

Participant 7 -36 year old, married woman who is a member of YAL

Sex before marriage is very wrong. It makes people not to get married because they already had sex.

Participant 16 -49 year old married woman who is a member of PWF

Growing up, my parents taught me to get married first before I can have sex otherwise, I will be a laughingstock in the church and community.

Participant 13 -26 year old, single woman who is not affiliated to any league

My friend was suspended from the Youth League and had to stop going to school because she got pregnant in her teens. The humiliation she endured from our peers made me vow to never have sex until I am married so that I can avoid the humiliation.

Participant 3- 42 year old, married woman who is a member of YAL

My father was very strict; he promised to chase me out of his house if I ever get pregnant before I'm married.

4.4.6.1 Sub-themes

This section analyses participants' responses by examining the underlying influences that shape their views on sexuality, particularly regarding sexual activity before marriage. By organising the responses into sub-themes, the analysis highlights how religious teachings, cultural expectations, and institutional practices collectively influence women's perceptions and experiences of sexuality. The discussion demonstrates that participants' views are not formed in isolation but are shaped by a complex interaction of biblical interpretation, family socialisation, community norms, and church disciplinary structures. These factors often reinforce moral expectations that regulate women's sexual behaviour and contribute to the internalisation of particular ethical frameworks.

One prominent theme emerging from the responses is the role of religious and biblical authority in shaping moral perspectives. For some participants, moral judgments about sexuality are grounded primarily in religious teachings and scriptural interpretation. For example, Participant 20 states, "Yes, sex before marriage is a sin because the Bible said so," reflecting a belief that moral authority ultimately derives from biblical instruction. Within this framework,

religious teachings function as the definitive guide for acceptable sexual conduct, and moral reasoning becomes closely aligned with obedience to perceived divine commands.

Closely related to this is the theme of doctrinal influence, particularly within Lutheran and broader Christian ethical traditions that emphasise chastity before marriage as a marker of moral purity. These teachings often become deeply internalised, shaping how women interpret and regulate their own sexuality. As a result, women may reproduce the same moral frameworks that restrict them, even in contexts where they express support for autonomy or sexual agency. This dynamic illustrates how religious doctrine can reinforce patriarchal values by framing sexual restraint as a moral and spiritual obligation.

Another significant influence is cultural norms and socialisation, particularly the role of family expectations in shaping attitudes toward sexuality. Participant 16 notes that "My parents taught me to get married first otherwise I will be a laughingstock," indicating how sexual behaviour is closely linked to family honour and social reputation. In such contexts, sex before marriage is perceived not only as a moral violation but also as an act that brings shame upon the family. Similarly, Participant 3 describes a situation of strict paternal control, stating that her father threatened to expel her from the household if she became pregnant before marriage. These responses illustrate how patriarchal authority within the family can enforce compliance through fear, reinforcing expectations of sexual restraint.

The theme of fear of social stigma and humiliation also emerges strongly in the participants' responses. Community judgment plays a significant role in shaping behaviour, as individuals seek to avoid ridicule or social exclusion. Participant 16's reference to becoming a "laughingstock in the church and community" highlights the powerful role of communal perceptions in regulating sexuality. In many cases, virginity becomes closely associated with family honour and social respectability. Instances of peer humiliation further reinforce this dynamic, as illustrated by Participant 11's account of a friend who was suspended and publicly embarrassed after becoming pregnant. In such contexts, the fear of gossip, exclusion, and loss of dignity can become a stronger deterrent than personal beliefs or desires.

Participants' responses also reveal the influence of institutional and disciplinary structures within the church. For example, Participant 11 recounts that a friend was suspended from the Youth League after experiencing a teenage pregnancy. Such institutional sanctions demonstrate how religious organisations can enforce moral expectations through disciplinary measures.

These actions not only reinforce existing moral frameworks but can also disrupt young women's educational and social opportunities, particularly when pregnancy leads to exclusion from school or church activities. Importantly, these structures often appear to penalise women more visibly and severely, while the role and accountability of male partners remain less emphasised.

Finally, the analysis points to the theme of internalised fear and control. The combined influence of religious teachings, family expectations, and community norms encourages many women to monitor and regulate their own behaviour. This process of self-policing extends beyond individual behaviour, as women may also reinforce these expectations among their peers. Consequently, a notable contradiction emerges in the participants' responses: while some perspectives support ideas of autonomy and positive sexuality, these are often expressed alongside strong endorsement of restrictive norms such as abstinence before marriage. This tension reflects the complex ways in which women navigate competing moral expectations within religious and cultural environments that simultaneously promote personal dignity and impose strict sexual regulation.

Firstly, I posit that the concept of sex before marriage is not in the Bible. I have not yet encountered a biblical text that say that sex before marriage is a sin, nor a biblical text that endorse or promote sex before marriage. Instead, some biblical passages emphasise the importance of sexual purity and chastity before marriage.

The topic of sex before marriage can be opened to different interpretations based on their context. Some hold a strict view that sex should only occur within marriage, while others may have more permissive interpretations based on their cultural or contextual factors. People within religious spaces generally consider sex before marriage as contrary to biblical teachings on sexual purity. Socially, I argue that sex before marriage can lead to emotional complications, such as attachment issues, regret, or feeling emotionally unprepared. Conversely, others find that consensual sex can foster intimacy and emotional connection. Healthwise, engaging in sex before marriage can carry health risks, such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unintended pregnancies if proper precautions are not taken. Using protection and regular health check-ups are important regardless of marital status. Even though people in religious spaces promote purity, it is inappropriate to demonise sex before marriage. It should depend on individual beliefs, values, and circumstances. It is important for people to have choices and be

allowed to make informed, consensual choices that align with their personal values and ensure safety and mutual respect for their sexual partners.

4.4.7 Societal Silence on Sexuality

There is a disturbing silence on issues of sexuality within social and religious spaces. Topics regarding sex and sexuality are regarded as taboo. In their responses, 19 participants highlighted that they never discussed sexuality with their pastor, whereas only one remembered having a chat with her pastor regarding sexuality. This is a vivid picture of the sensitivity of this subject. The following are considered to be contributory factors:

- **Fear of Social Repercussions**

One of the primary reasons for the societal silence on sexuality is the fear of social repercussions. Individuals who openly discuss or engage in sexual behaviours deemed inappropriate by societal standards may face stigmatisation, ostracization, or judgment. This fear of negative judgment discourages open conversations about sex, leading to a culture of silence and repression.

- **Lack of Comprehensive Sex Education**

In many societies, there is a lack of comprehensive sex education that addresses not only the biological aspects of sex but also the emotional, psychological, and relational dimensions. This gap in education leaves individuals ill-prepared to navigate sexual relationships and discussions, perpetuating ignorance and reinforcing societal taboos.

- **Gendered Expectations and Double Standards**

Societal norms often impose gendered expectations regarding sexuality, with women being expected to maintain chastity and modesty, while men may be encouraged to pursue sexual experiences. These double standards create an environment where women's sexual desires and experiences are marginalised, leading to their silence and the perpetuation of unequal power dynamics.

4.4.7.1 Silence on Sexuality in ELCSA

There are no conversations regarding sex and sexuality within ELCSA. Indeed, the topic of sex and sexuality can be sensitive, uncomfortable, and complex within many religious

communities. Many churches have historically emphasised conservative views on sexuality, often rooted in traditional interpretations of religious texts. This has sometimes led to a reluctance to openly discuss sex to avoid discomfort or controversy. Most churches, including ELCSA, often prioritise spiritual growth, salvation, and moral teachings, which can sometimes overshadow conversations about sexuality, especially if those topics are viewed as secondary or potentially distracting from spiritual aims. But perhaps the reluctance to engage in this conversation stems from a broader issue, in that most pastors and church leaders are not fully equipped to handle discussions about sex and sexuality sensitively and effectively, leading to avoidance or superficial treatment of the subject.

Despite these challenges, there is growing recognition within ELCSA of the importance of having honest, compassionate conversations about sex and sexuality. This shift is driven by an understanding that addressing these topics openly can contribute significantly to the overall well-being of church members, particularly youth and vulnerable populations who may otherwise feel isolated or misunderstood. Many leaders are beginning to see that sexuality is an integral aspect of human identity and health, and that addressing it from a faith-based perspective can promote healthier attitudes and practices. For example, discussions about sexual health, relationships, consent, and identity are increasingly seen as necessary components of holistic ministry, aimed at supporting members' emotional, physical, and spiritual health.

4.4.7.2 Possible Ways of Addressing Silence on Sexuality

This subsection explores possible strategies for addressing the silence surrounding sexuality within the church and community contexts. It highlights participants' suggestions and reflections on how discussions about sexuality can be made more open, informed, and affirming, particularly for women. By identifying approaches that challenge stigma, encourage dialogue, and promote education, this section considers practical and theological pathways for creating a more supportive environment in which women's sexual agency, bodily integrity, and ethical understanding can be recognised and respected.

- Creating safe spaces within the church environment is a crucial step toward creating these conversations. Such spaces allow individuals to ask questions, share concerns, and seek guidance without fear of judgment or condemnation. This can be achieved through dedicated workshops, small group discussions, or counselling sessions that are framed within the context of faith, love, and respect. Equipping pastors and church

leaders with proper training on sexuality education and pastoral care related to these issues is also essential. This training can help leaders approach sensitive topics with compassion, accuracy, and cultural sensitivity, thereby reducing the likelihood of miscommunication or reinforcing shame and guilt.

- Educational initiatives within ELCSA can include providing resources such as brochures, seminars, or online content that address common questions about sexuality, relationships, and health from a biblical perspective. Such resources can help demystify misconceptions, promote healthy behaviours, and affirm positive aspects of human sexuality. Moreover, integrating discussions about sexuality into existing youth programmes, marriage preparation classes, or health ministries can normalise these conversations and demonstrate that the church acknowledges and cares about the full spectrum of human experience.
- Encouraging open dialogue also involves challenging long-standing taboos and cultural stigmas associated with sexuality. It requires a delicate balance, upholding biblical principles while creating an environment of acceptance and understanding. For example, affirming the dignity of individuals regardless of their sexual orientation or identity can be part of a broader effort to promote inclusivity and compassion within the church community. This does not necessarily mean compromising doctrinal beliefs but recognising that members may have diverse experiences and questions that deserve respectful acknowledgment.
- Furthermore, addressing sexuality within ELCSA can have positive ripple effects, such as reducing shame and guilt associated with natural human desires, preventing abuse, and encouraging healthy relationships based on mutual respect and consent. It can also serve to equip members with knowledge to make informed decisions that align with their faith and personal integrity. As society continues to evolve and conversations around sexuality become more prevalent in the public sphere, the church's role in providing guidance rooted in love and truth becomes even more critical.

While ELCSA has traditionally been cautious or silent about discussions of sex and sexuality, there is an evident shift towards embracing these conversations as integral to holistic ministry. Recognising the importance of creating safe, informed, and compassionate dialogues can help church members navigate the complexities of sexuality with faith, dignity, and respect. Moving forward, investing in education, training, and open communication is vital in transforming the

church's approach to one that supports both spiritual growth and personal health, ultimately creating a more inclusive and understanding faith community.

4.4.8 Sex and Culture

Religious doctrines play a significant role in shaping cultural attitudes toward sex. In many religious traditions, including Christianity and Islam, sex is often viewed as sacred and is confined to the institution of marriage. These religious teachings promote the idea that sexual relations should occur within the bounds of marriage to maintain moral integrity and societal order. Consequently, discussions about sex outside these parameters are often considered taboo and are discouraged.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), women's sexuality is shaped by a web of cultural elements that interact with theology, tradition, and social norms. These elements often reinforce patriarchal control but also reveal areas of resistance. From the participants' responses, the following were identified as cultural elements that shapes their sexuality:

- **Virginity and Purity Expectations**

Virginity and purity remain central moral markers for women within many communities, particularly in the South Eastern Diocese (SED) of KwaZulu-Natal. The notion of virginity as a marker of honour reflects both familial and societal expectations, where a woman's worth is tightly bound to her ability to remain "pure" until marriage. This linkage between virginity and morality is not merely a personal matter; it carries profound social implications. Families often perceive a woman's sexual behaviour as reflecting their collective honour and reputation, thus placing significant pressure on young women to conform to strict moral codes.

Cultural rituals play a significant role in reinforcing these expectations. Practices such as virginity testing, still prevalent in some KwaZulu-Natal communities, serve as tangible, performative mechanisms of control over female bodies. These rituals, often framed as rites of passage, publicly assess women's adherence to cultural norms surrounding chastity, thereby institutionalising surveillance and moral regulation. While proponents may present such practices as celebratory or educational, they implicitly emphasise women's accountability for upholding family and community honour. Such rituals also reinforce patriarchal structures,

defining female worth primarily through sexual behaviour rather than personal character, intellectual development, or spiritual maturity.

Church teachings often mirror these cultural standards, with ELCSA emphasising purity as both a moral and spiritual value. Sexual abstinence until marriage is framed not only as obedience to scripture but also as an indicator of godliness and moral integrity. This convergence of cultural and religious expectations intensifies the moral pressure on women, as failure to comply is interpreted as both sinful and socially dishonourable. By equating purity with morality, the church reinforces a narrative in which women's sexual choices are not private matters but public markers of virtue, thereby limiting autonomy and internalising surveillance.

Analytically, the intersection of cultural rituals and church reinforcement demonstrates how social and religious norms mutually reinforce control over female sexuality. Virginity becomes a currency of moral evaluation, shaping how women are perceived, valued, and treated within their communities. The emphasis on purity underscores the gendered nature of sexual regulation, revealing how women's bodies and sexual decisions are subjected to disproportionate scrutiny, often in ways that maintain patriarchal hierarchies. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for critiquing institutional and cultural practices that constrain women's autonomy while framing morality as inseparable from sexual conformity.

- **Marriage as the Fulfilment of Womanhood**

Marriage is positioned as the ultimate marker of a woman's success and fulfilment within both cultural and religious discourses. Central to these expectations is the idea that a woman's life trajectory is incomplete without a marital union, and that personal worth, social acceptance, and moral credibility are intimately linked to marital status. Cultural norms emphasise compliance, urging women to aspire to marriage as the pinnacle of societal and familial validation.

Sexuality is similarly confined within this framework. Women are expected to express sexual desire and intimacy exclusively as wives and mothers, aligning personal desire with socially sanctioned roles. Sexual activity outside marriage is framed as deviant, morally suspect, and damaging to personal and family honour. Such normative prescriptions restrict women's ability to explore and express their sexual identities autonomously, linking morality and social acceptability directly to marital status.

The stigma associated with singleness, divorce, or widowhood further reinforces marital centrality. Women who remain unmarried, experience divorce, or lose their spouse are often

subject to suspicion, gossip, and social exclusion. Claims of sexual agency by such women are frequently met with scrutiny, as cultural and church norms assume that sexuality is only legitimate within marital bounds. This moral and social policing marginalises women whose experiences fall outside normative marital timelines, creating barriers to social integration and spiritual participation. The effect is a rigid moral hierarchy in which women's lives are evaluated according to marital compliance rather than holistic ethical or spiritual engagement.

Analytically, these findings reveal how marriage functions as a regulatory tool over female sexuality and social identity. It highlights the intersection of cultural, religious, and gendered expectations that confine women's sexual agency to socially sanctioned roles. By framing marriage as the fulfilment of womanhood, the church and community reinforce structural inequality, limiting women's autonomy and reproducing patriarchal power. Understanding this dynamic is critical for reimagining ethical frameworks that respect individual agency while challenging socially enforced hierarchies of sexual and moral worth.

- **Community Surveillance and Reputation**

Community surveillance exerts a powerful influence on women's sexual behaviour, rooted in fear of shame, gossip, and social exclusion. In tightly knit communities, sexual conduct is not merely a private matter but a public concern, as deviations from normative behaviour threaten both individual and family reputation. Women are acutely aware that sexual transgressions, even those that are minor or private, can become fodder for communal scrutiny and ridicule, generating social anxiety and reinforcing internalised norms of propriety.

Disciplinary mechanisms formalise this surveillance. Pregnancy outside marriage often triggers public humiliation, suspension from church groups, and labelling as immoral or sinful. Such responses serve both punitive and didactic functions, signalling acceptable behaviour to the broader community while reinforcing the moral authority of church and social institutions. These practices illustrate how social and religious mechanisms converge to enforce conformity, shaping behaviour through a combination of fear, shame, and moral instruction.

Peer policing further intensifies this dynamic. Women themselves frequently participate in monitoring and enforcing sexual norms, shaming peers who deviate from expected standards. This internalised surveillance functions as a self-replicating system, where women actively contribute to the policing of each other's bodies and choices. It reinforces the notion that female sexuality is inherently communal property rather than personal autonomy, perpetuating cycles of guilt, stigma, and moral control.

Analytically, community surveillance underscores how social networks and cultural practices operate alongside institutional and religious enforcement to regulate female sexuality. Fear of shame and social consequences constrains sexual expression, limiting women's agency and reinforcing patriarchal power structures. Recognising the role of peer and communal policing is critical for understanding the pervasive influence of moral norms and for designing interventions that foster autonomy, resilience, and equitable ethical frameworks.

Women's sexuality in ELCSA is shaped by cultural elements of virginity ideals, marriage centrality, patriarchal gender roles, community surveillance, family socialisation, and cultural-religious fusion. These factors collectively sustain a culture of silence, restriction, and stigma around female sexuality. At the same time, some women are beginning to challenge these norms by advocating for positive sexuality, autonomy, and fairness within and beyond the church.

4.5 Feminist analysis of Christian ethics within ELCSA

A feminist reading of Christian ethics within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) illuminates the ways in which patriarchal theology and deeply ingrained cultural norms shape women's experiences of faith, body, and sexuality. In this context, women's voices are often muted, their perspectives sidelined in moral and theological discussions, leaving them excluded from the very ethical conversations that define communal life. Simultaneously, their bodies are subjected to heightened scrutiny and regulation, disciplined more rigorously than those of men under the guise of moral and spiritual responsibility. Women's sexuality, in particular, is narrowly construed, frequently cast in terms of sin, shame, or moral transgression, rather than recognized as a site of agency, joy, or personal integrity. These intersecting dynamics not only constrain women's participation in ethical discourse but also reinforce social and religious hierarchies that privilege male authority. By situating women's lived experiences at the center of analysis, a feminist critique exposes the subtle and overt ways in which Christian ethical frameworks, as practiced within ELCSA, perpetuate gendered inequities, limit self-expression, and undermine the holistic dignity of women as moral and spiritual agents

At the same time, feminist theology highlights women's resistance, their calls for autonomy, fairness, dignity, and positive sexuality. Thus, feminist ethics becomes both a diagnostic tool (exposing oppression) and a liberating vision (reimagining sexuality in just and life-giving ways).

4.6 Positive theological interpretation of themes

The themes do not only reflect challenges and negative results. The following are positive theological interpretations of themes:

The theme of sexual identity revealed that many women are increasingly aware of their bodies and sexual selves as integral to their humanity and faith. While traditional Christian teachings often frame sexuality primarily within the boundaries of marriage and procreation, some participants expressed a growing desire to understand sexuality as part of their God-given identity. This suggests emerging spaces where women begin to reclaim their sexual identity not as sinful or shameful but as part of their created dignity.

Closely connected to this was the theme of discrimination against women, where participants highlighted how patriarchal interpretations of scripture and church practices often regulate women's bodies more strictly than those of men. Women described experiences in which expectations of purity, chastity, and modesty were imposed primarily on them, reinforcing gendered moral standards. Such experiences illustrate how institutional and cultural structures can marginalise women's voices and limit their participation in conversations about sexuality.

The theme of the body as excluded further revealed how women's bodies are frequently treated as sites of control within religious discourse. Discussions about sexuality are often avoided in church settings, leaving women without safe spaces to explore questions related to their bodies, desire, and relationships. This exclusion contributes to the persistence of silence and stigma surrounding sexuality.

At the same time, the data also pointed toward moments of liberation and empowerment. Some participants indicated that engaging with theological reflection, pastoral counselling, or women's fellowship groups provided opportunities to question restrictive teachings and to reinterpret faith in ways that affirm women's dignity. These spaces allowed women to support one another and to reflect critically on how Christian faith might embrace more holistic understandings of sexuality.

The idea of positive sexuality also emerged as an important aspiration among participants. Positive sexuality was associated with values such as mutual respect, consent, emotional intimacy, and personal fulfilment within relationships. Rather than viewing sexuality solely through the lens of sin or prohibition, some women expressed a desire for church teachings that recognise sexuality as a meaningful and life-giving aspect of human existence.

The theme of sex before marriage revealed significant tensions between church doctrine and lived realities. While many participants affirmed the traditional teaching that premarital sex is sinful, their responses also indicated that lived experiences are often more complex. Some participants acknowledged the need for pastoral guidance that addresses these realities with compassion rather than judgment.

Similarly, the theme of sex and culture highlighted how cultural norms intersect with Christian teachings to shape women's sexuality. Expectations related to virginity, respectability, and family honour often reinforce church teachings, making it difficult for women to openly discuss or challenge these norms. Yet within these cultural frameworks, some women demonstrated agency by negotiating their identities and choices in ways that balance cultural belonging with personal autonomy.

Finally, the theme of societal silence on sexuality underscored the broader context in which these dynamics occur. Both church and society often treat sexuality as a taboo subject, particularly for women. However, the participants' willingness to engage with the questionnaire itself can be seen as a subtle act of resistance against this silence.

Importantly, alongside experiences of restriction and marginalisation, the data also revealed instances of empowerment, mutual support, and positive theological reinterpretation. In some cases, women re-read biblical teachings in ways that emphasise love, justice, and human dignity rather than control and prohibition. Others found strength in communal spaces where they could discuss their experiences openly. These moments suggest that within ELCSA there are emerging possibilities for transformative theological engagement that affirms women's embodied experiences and promotes more inclusive approaches to sexuality.

4.7 Synthesis of findings

This chapter began by presenting the information acquired during the data collection procedure, which was crucial for understanding the nuances of the participants' experiences and perspectives. Beginning with a review of how the data was generated, the chapter also highlighted limitations encountered during this process. These limitations not only influenced the quality of the data collected but also provided valuable insights into the broader context of the study.

Once the challenges of data collection were navigated, the data was analysed. The chapter presented the data by first outlining each participant's profile, which provided a contextual

backdrop for understanding their responses. This profiling was essential, as it allowed identification of patterns and differences in experiences based on factors such as age, socio-economic status, and length of church affiliation. Following this initial overview, the coding process was carried out, based on participants' comments, which led to the identification of significant themes that emerged from their narratives.

Through a comprehensive thematic analysis, several key themes were identified. The thematic analysis not only serves to categorise the data but also enriches the overall understanding of the participants' perspectives, paving the way for meaningful discussions on these critical issues.

The findings presented in this chapter provide a vivid picture of how women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit, experience and interpret Christian ethics regarding sexuality. Eight key themes emerged, sexual identity, discrimination of women, a body excluded, liberation, positive sexuality, and sex before marriage, sex and culture, and social silence on sexuality. Together, these themes reveal the tensions between official church teachings and women's embodied realities, highlighting both the restrictive nature of patriarchal ethics and the creative ways women resist and reframe their experiences.

What is particularly striking in the data is the persistent gap between doctrine and practice. While ELCSA continues to promote abstinence, chastity, and heteronormative family structures as the foundation of Christian sexual ethics, women's narratives demonstrate that these ideals are often unattainable, exclusionary, or damaging. At the same time, women's stories point toward new possibilities for ethical reflection, ones that affirm the sacredness of the body, validate positive expressions of sexuality, and promote inclusive understandings of morality.

The next chapter conducts a thorough analysis of the major themes identified in the data analysis process and proposes a theory that can be used to promote positive sexuality for women in ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit.

CHAPTER FIVE – ANALYSIS OF THE MAJOR THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM THE STUDY

5. Introduction

The findings presented in the previous chapter provide a vivid picture of how women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit, experience and interpret Christian ethics regarding sexuality. Eight themes emerged. Together, these themes reveal the tensions between official church teachings and women's embodied realities, highlighting both the restrictive nature of Christian ethics and the creative ways women resist and reframe their experiences.

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The task of chapter five is therefore to theoretically interpret these findings through the chosen frameworks of body theology and indecent theology. By bringing the lived experiences of women into dialogue with these theological lenses, the discussion will examine how Christian ethics within ELCSA has constructed, constrained, and excluded women's sexuality, while also exploring alternative possibilities for liberation and transformation. For this reason, chapter five is more than the presentation of data; it is a critical engagement that situates the voices of women at the centre of theological reflection, thereby contributing to the development of an inclusive feminist re-reading of Christian ethics in the South African Lutheran context.

5.1 Categorisation of Themes:

The following section presents a systematic categorisation of the key themes that emerged from the analysis, highlighting the intersections of theology, culture, and gender.

5.1.1 The first category is Women's sexual self-understanding

The theme of sexual identity foregrounds women's positionality as Christians who simultaneously exist as sexual beings. Within the ELCSA context, women navigate a continuous tension between their spiritual commitments and their embodied realities. Sexuality

is often treated as something separate from, or even opposed to, spirituality, producing an internal struggle in reconciling faith and sexual self-understanding. This duality is reinforced by teachings that valorise chastity and purity while neglecting the affirmation of women's bodies and desires.

Elements shaping sexual identity include upbringing, where parental values frequently stress sexual restraint to avoid shame in the family or community. Biblical interpretations, often filtered through patriarchal readings, further frame sexuality as something dangerous or sinful outside of marriage. Societal expectations reinforce these ideas by policing women's sexuality more strictly than men's, linking women's moral worth to sexual purity. Thus, sexual identity in the Pretoria Circuit is not just personal but socially and religiously constructed.

From a feminist theological perspective, addressing sexual identity requires challenging the entrenched dualistic separation of body and spirit. Feminist scholars argue for an integrated understanding of human beings in which sexuality is embraced as part of God's creation, not something opposed to spiritual life (Koggel, Harbin, & Llewellyn, 2022). Affirming women's holistic identity means validating their embodied experiences, desires, and sexual agency as integral to their faith journey. This approach destabilises patriarchal control and repositions sexuality as a locus of empowerment rather than shame

5.1.2 Positive Sexuality

The theme of positive sexuality moves the discourse beyond control, shame, and prohibition, toward envisioning sexuality as inherently good. Women in the study articulated the need for sexuality to be expressed in ways that affirm dignity, mutuality, and flourishing. This reframing challenges the pervasive association of sexuality with sin and instead positions it as a gift of God meant to enrich human relationships.

Positive sexuality highlights the possibility of sexual relationships characterised by pleasure, respect, and mutual consent, thereby expanding the ethical lens beyond rules of prohibition to include values of justice and equality. It acknowledges that sexuality can be a site of joy and self-fulfilment, not merely reproduction or moral testing.

Feminist theology strongly resonates with this vision, advocating that positive sexuality is central to liberation theology, as it resists patriarchal systems that have historically controlled and silenced women's sexualities. By centring women's joy, agency, and embodied experiences, feminist interventions affirm that women's sexuality does not need to be tolerated

in silence but can be celebrated as life-giving and sacred. This perspective reframes the church's ethical discourse, inviting it to see sexuality not as a moral problem but as a dimension of human flourishing deserving of respect, education, and affirmation.

These two themes illustrate the shift from suppression to affirmation: sexual identity acknowledges the struggles women face under patriarchal ethics, while positive sexuality points toward a constructive feminist re-imagining that reclaims women's bodies and desires as holy and life-giving

5.1.3 Exclusion and Discrimination in the Church

- **Discrimination of Women**

Women in the ELCSA context consistently identified discrimination as a central barrier in their faith and sexual lives. This discrimination is experienced not only in overt practices but also in the subtle structures of church life that reinforce patriarchal authority. A key example is the restriction of decision-making power within the church. Leadership roles, doctrinal interpretations, and ethical frameworks are predominantly shaped by men, leaving women on the margins of theological discourse and ecclesial governance. This lack of representation translates into women being "spoken for" rather than "speaking with authority" on matters of faith and sexuality. Consequently, their lived realities remain absent in official teachings.

Discrimination is also evident in the unequal moral expectations imposed on men and women. Women are more harshly judged for issues relating to sexuality, such as pregnancy outside of marriage or divorce, while men often escape comparable scrutiny. Practices like penitential classes for women only illustrate how the church holds women disproportionately accountable for sexual transgressions. These double standards perpetuate a climate of shame, silence, and exclusion that undermines women's dignity and autonomy.

Discrimination operates on two interconnected levels: Theologically – through patriarchal interpretations of scripture that portray women as subordinate, temptresses, or morally weaker. Such interpretations often legitimise women's exclusion from leadership and their policing in matters of sexuality. Socially – through church practices, liturgical norms, and cultural traditions that reinforce male dominance. This includes silencing women in decision-making, imposing gendered rituals of discipline, and denying women equal space in shaping ethical discourse.

From a feminist theological perspective, this form of discrimination is not incidental but systemic, rooted in historical patriarchal structures of Christianity. Feminist analysis calls for a re-reading of scripture that affirms women as equal bearers of God's image, as well as reforms in church practice that dismantle oppressive hierarchies. Only by addressing both the theological and social dimensions of discrimination can the church move toward becoming a space of inclusion, justice, and equality where women's voices and sexualities are recognised as central to faith communities.

5.1.4 A Body Excluded

Women within ELCSA express a deep sense of marginalisation rooted in their biological make-up. Natural bodily processes such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbearing, and menopause, as well as life circumstances such as widowhood and divorce, often become stigmatised rather than embraced as integral to women's humanity. Instead of being celebrated as God-given aspects of life, these realities are framed within the church as sources of weakness, impurity, or moral failing.

For example, menstruation is frequently surrounded by silence, shame, and exclusion in both cultural and religious contexts. Women internalise these taboos, feeling unworthy of full participation in worship or ministry during their cycles. Similarly, pregnancy outside of marriage is treated as a moral transgression that demands disciplinary action such as penitential classes, while male counterparts are rarely held accountable. In widowhood and divorce, women's sexuality is often heavily policed; widows who express desire or seek companionship may be judged as immoral, and divorced women are viewed as failed Christians rather than as full members of the faith community.

This pattern illustrates how sexuality and reproduction become mechanisms of control. Women are made to feel that their bodies are sites of sin, danger, or shame that must be regulated by patriarchal authority. Theologies that emphasise purity, virginity, and submission to male leadership reinforce these ideas, stripping women of the ability to claim their own embodied experiences as valuable and sacred.

Ultimately, this exclusion reflects the church's longstanding discomfort with women's embodied realities. The body, particularly the female body, is perceived as threatening to spiritual purity and male authority. Such discomfort has theological roots in patriarchal readings of scripture that separate body and spirit, associating women more closely with the

“fallen” or “carnal” aspects of existence. Socially, this discomfort manifests in practices that silence women, restrict their roles, and discipline them disproportionately.

From a feminist theological lens, this theme calls for a radical re-evaluation of embodiment. Women’s biological experiences should not be treated as deficits but as vital expressions of life and faith. Reclaiming the body as sacred disrupts patriarchal control and affirms women’s full humanity within the church. Such an approach aligns with liberation theology, insisting that the voices and bodies of marginalised people must be honoured in the re-construction of Christian ethics.

5.1.5 Social Silence on Sexuality

One of the most striking findings in the study is the persistent silence surrounding sexuality within ELCSA. Women reported that conversations with pastors about sexuality are rare or non-existent. This lack of dialogue means that issues central to women lived realities such as relationships, reproductive health, consent, or sexual rights remain unaddressed in pastoral care and theological teaching. The absence of such conversations creates a void where women’s questions, struggles, and aspirations concerning sexuality are left unheard and unsupported.

This silence is not limited to pastoral relationships but extends to the very structures of worship and instruction. Liturgy, catechism, and doctrinal teaching largely ignore the topic of sexuality, except in contexts where sin and prohibition are emphasised. By failing to engage openly and affirmatively with sexuality, the church implicitly reinforces the notion that sexuality is shameful, taboo, or dangerous. In doing so, it perpetuates a theology of silence that denies the richness of women’s embodied realities.

The consequences of this silence are profound.

- First, it encourages misinformation: in the absence of accurate teaching or open dialogue, women and youth often rely on peers, media, or cultural myths for sexual knowledge, many of which perpetuate harmful stereotypes or unsafe practices.
- Second, silence breeds internalised shame, where women come to see their bodies and desires as sinful, leading to guilt and secrecy around sexual expression.
- Third, it promotes secrecy, where issues such as abuse, unwanted pregnancies, or struggles with sexual identity are hidden, out of fear of judgment or rejection.

This systemic silence functions as a form of exclusion. By refusing to speak on sexuality, the church effectively excludes women’s most personal and embodied experiences from

theological discourse and pastoral care. Silence becomes a mechanism of control, ensuring that sexuality remains regulated by unspoken norms rather than open, inclusive dialogue.

From a feminist theological perspective, breaking this silence is critical. Feminist ethics argue that silence around sexuality is not neutrality but complicity in sustaining oppression. Creating spaces where sexuality can be discussed openly, without judgment, is a step toward dismantling stigma and affirming women as whole persons. Such openness would allow the church to engage sexuality not as a threat but as a dimension of life that reflects God's creation, requiring care, justice, and affirmation.

5.1.6 Cultural and Religious Control of Women's Sexuality

The study revealed that the majority of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) perceive sex before marriage as sinful, with seventeen out of twenty respondents expressing this view. This consensus reflects the enduring influence of traditional Christian teachings and cultural expectations that elevate chastity as a moral imperative. Within this framework, marriage emerges as the only socially and religiously sanctioned space for sexual expression, a belief reinforced across theological, familial, cultural, and ecclesial domains.

Many participants justified their views by appealing to biblical authority, often stating, for example, that sex before marriage is a sin because the Bible said so. Interestingly, most respondents did not cite specific verses or theological arguments, suggesting that their moral understanding is mediated more through church teachings and communal interpretation than personal engagement with scripture. Patriarchal readings of the Bible thus emphasize chastity, virginity, and sexual purity as virtues for women, while largely minimising men's accountability, reinforcing gendered moral double standards.

Family structures also play a critical role in shaping these beliefs. Respondents recounted lessons from parents warning that sexual activity outside of marriage brings shame to the family and diminishes a woman's worth. Virginity, in this sense, becomes both a personal virtue and a marker of family honour. Fear of social ridicule being a laughingstock in the church and community, illustrates how family teachings are intertwined with broader cultural norms that regulate women's bodies and sexual behaviour. These lessons are reinforced by visible cautionary tales: respondents described peers who faced humiliation, social exclusion, or even suspension from school due to teenage pregnancy. Such stories act as powerful deterrents, creating a climate in which abstinence is equated with dignity and belonging.

Church practices further institutionalize these norms. Women who become pregnant outside of marriage are often subjected to public disciplinary measures, such as penitential classes, which serve as moral spectacles. These mechanisms disproportionately punish women, leaving men largely unaccountable, and reinforce the association of sexuality with shame, fear, and transgression rather than joy or personal agency. Taken together, theological teachings, family guidance, social monitoring, and church practices position marriage as the sole legitimate context for sexual expression. Women's bodies are framed as first belonging to their families, then to the church, and finally to their husbands, who are sanctioned as the only legitimate recipients of sexual intimacy and reproduction

From a feminist theological perspective, this framework is deeply problematic. It denies women ownership of their sexuality, reducing it to a moral commodity controlled by male authority, family structures, and religious institutions. By confining sexual expression to marriage, women's desires, choices, and bodily autonomy are marginalized. Culture and religion intersect to reinforce this control: cultural expectations valorize virginity as a marker of family honour, while the church presents chastity as a spiritual obligation. The combined force of these norms creates a double bind in which women who transgress are subject to both social condemnation and religious judgment, effectively suppressing sexual autonomy.

Feminist critique challenges these intersecting frameworks, insisting that sexuality should be affirmed as a God-given aspect of human dignity and flourishing rather than a site of prohibition and control. Such a perspective calls for disentangling cultural honour from moral policing and reimagining Christian ethics in ways that recognize women's agency, bodily integrity, and the legitimacy of their desires. By shifting the discourse from shame to justice, autonomy, and joy, feminist theology offers a liberatory approach to sexual ethics that affirms both women's spiritual and corporeal flourishing within and beyond the ELCSA context.

5.1.7 Liberation and Resistance

The theme of liberation emphasises the urgent need to free women from oppressive interpretations of scripture and restrictive church practices that constrain their sexual, social, and spiritual agency. Women in ELCSA frequently experience marginalisation through patriarchal teachings, disciplinary structures, and cultural-religious expectations that position their bodies and desires as morally suspect or inherently sinful. Liberation, therefore, is not merely about personal empowerment, it is a multi-dimensional task encompassing spiritual, theological, and social dimensions.

- **Liberation as a Spiritual Task** - From a spiritual perspective, liberation involves reclaiming women's relationship with God, free from fear, shame, and guilt imposed by patriarchal interpretations of scripture. Women are encouraged to see their bodies and sexuality not as obstacles to holiness but as integral components of their humanity and faith. This spiritual dimension affirms that God's creation includes sexual embodiment and that women's desires, identities, and choices are part of a divinely sanctioned life journey.
- **Liberation as a Theological Necessity** - Theologically, liberation challenges longstanding patriarchal readings of the Bible that subordinate women, silence their voices, and regulate their sexuality. Feminist theology critiques doctrines that treat women as morally weaker, spiritually impure, or primarily defined by their reproductive capacity. By reconstructing Christian ethics through a feminist lens, liberation promotes an understanding of scripture that centres women's experiences, affirms their moral agency, and validates their sexual autonomy. This approach calls for theological reflection that is inclusive, justice-oriented, and attentive to the realities of women's lives within the church.
- **Liberation as a Social Imperative** - Socially, liberation addresses the broader structures of power that enforce gendered hierarchies in church and community life. Practices such as penitential classes, exclusion from leadership, and public shaming exemplify how women's sexuality and moral choices are policed. Liberation entails dismantling these systemic barriers, ensuring women have equal access to decision-making, ethical discourse, and pastoral care. Social liberation also involves challenging cultural norms that intersect with church teachings to control women's bodies and limit their autonomy.
- **Feminist Perspective** - From a feminist perspective, liberation is holistic: it requires addressing oppression in both culture and church. Patriarchal authority is not confined to ecclesial structures but is reinforced through socialisation, family expectations, and community norms. Feminist theology insists that true liberation is impossible without confronting these intersecting systems of power. Women's sexuality, dignity, and agency must be recognised as central to their faith and humanity. This perspective reframes liberation not as a secondary issue, but as a core imperative for ethical and spiritual renewal within ELCSA.

5.2

Interpretation of the Themes through Theoretical Framework

5.2.1 Sexual Identity

Sexuality is understood as how individuals perceive and express themselves as sexual beings, encompassing beliefs, values, attitudes, and actions beyond orientation, procreation, or sexual relationships (Tamale, 2011). It is a complex social construct shaped by cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors, and historically has been used to measure morality (Holland et al., 1998). In this study, participants largely agreed that sexuality involves human expression, though interpretations of where and how it should be embraced vary.

Body theology was central to the study, enabling women to understand their embodied selves and link bodily experiences with spiritual life, challenging historical perceptions of inferiority. Religious institutions, including the Catholic and Lutheran churches, have shaped perceptions of sexuality through teachings that emphasise marriage, procreation, chastity, and purity (Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes, 1965; Mahoney & Pargament, 2009:81).

This often creates tension between spiritual beliefs and sexual identity, affecting mental health, self-esteem, and well-being (McClain, 2013:60; Poon et al., 2017:16).

Conservative religious doctrines have historically discouraged open discussions of sexuality, resulting in guilt, shame, and limited access to sexual education (Brennan, 2015; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2014; Petersen & Hyde, 2010:94). Participants indicated that their sexual experiences are largely separated from their relationship with God, which remains framed within biblical principles, reflecting a demonisation of bodily desires. Religious upbringing significantly influences women's sexual identities and gender roles, often reinforcing restrictive attitudes (Williams, 2018:7).

Indecent theology aligns with this study by exposing oppression in religious spaces and advocating for positive sexuality, emphasising the need to reinterpret biblical texts to support women in embracing and celebrating their sexuality. Revisiting Christian ethics and scripture can promote a holistic understanding of sexuality in ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit, thereby furthering inclusivity and acceptance within faith communities.

5.2.2 Discrimination of Women

The data from this study highlight that women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) continue to experience discrimination and marginalisation rooted in

entrenched moral and theological frameworks. Participants reported exclusion from church activities and leadership roles, with their bodies and sexual choices serving as grounds for judgment and social policing. This aligns with broader scholarship demonstrating that the regulation of women's sexuality has long been a mechanism for maintaining institutional power and reinforcing gender hierarchies.

Foucault's (1978) analysis of power and sexuality provides a useful interpretive lens for understanding these findings. Foucault argues that institutions, including religious bodies, exercise power by regulating bodies, desire, and conduct, shaping individuals to conform to socially sanctioned moral norms. Within ELCSA, the disciplining of women's sexual behaviour functions as a form of institutional control, reflecting a moral economy that sanctions compliance and punishes deviation. Women who engage in sexual activity outside marriage, or who fail to conform to ideals of chastity and purity, are systematically marginalised, illustrating the mechanisms of power Foucault describes.

Historical and feminist scholarship corroborates this pattern. Christ (1987:84) notes that Christianity has traditionally positioned women as morally subordinate, tying their worth to sexual purity and compliance with church norms. Similarly, McClellan (2004) observes that religious moral codes prescribe strict boundaries for female sexuality, effectively policing women's autonomy. These frameworks remain visible in the contemporary ELCSA context, where unmarried, divorced, or widowed women often encounter restrictions or exclusion based on assumptions about sexual propriety. Miller and Wright (2019:66) specifically highlight how marital status has historically dictated women's social acceptance, with unmarried pregnant women frequently ostracised while men faced minimal consequences, a dynamic echoed in the experiences of participants in this study. Msibi (2011:14) further emphasises that women who deviate from prescribed behaviour may face shaming, harassment, discrimination, and even violence. Participants' accounts of exclusion and restricted participation in church life exemplify this dynamic, demonstrating that discrimination is not only doctrinal but also deeply embedded in social and cultural practices within the church.

African feminist theology offers critical insights for interpreting and responding to these forms of discrimination. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001:45–47) argues that African women's experiences of oppression, including the policing of sexuality, cannot be separated from their broader social, economic, and spiritual realities. She advocates for a theology that centres women's lived experiences, challenging patriarchal readings of scripture and church practice.

Similarly, Musa Dube (2011:23; 2019:54) emphasises the need to read biblical texts from the perspective of African women, exposing how normative interpretations often perpetuate control over women's bodies while marginalising their agency. Isabel Apawo Phiri (2008:77) extends this argument to church practice, highlighting how institutional structures in African Christianity frequently reinforce gender hierarchies and limit women's participation, particularly when sexual morality is rigidly enforced.

Contemporary scholars such as Sarojini Nadar (2013:102) and Fulata Moyo (2012:65) stress that discrimination based on sexual conduct or marital status reflects systemic injustices that require both theological and social redress. Nadar underscores the intersection of sexual ethics, gender-based violence, and institutional power, noting that women's marginalisation within church structures is part of a broader matrix of oppression. Moyo highlights the importance of transformative praxis, where African churches actively create spaces for women's autonomy, sexual expression, and leadership, rather than perpetuating exclusion based on patriarchal moral norms.

Indecent theology (Althaus-Reid, 2001:31) complements these perspectives by advocating for inclusive understandings of liberation, supporting the inclusion and autonomy of women regardless of marital or parental status. In line with this, participants in the study emphasised that sexual expression should not be constrained by marital or societal expectations. Miller (2001:191) observes that promoting sexual autonomy dismantles outdated notions governing women's sexuality, a principle directly applicable to ELCSA. Integrating African feminist theology with indecent theology thus provides both a critical lens for interpreting discrimination and a constructive framework for advocating liberative reforms within the church.

The study's findings illustrate that women's experiences of discrimination in ELCSA are deeply entwined with historical, doctrinal, and social mechanisms of control. Engaging African feminist theologians such as Oduyoye, Dube, Phiri, Nadar, and Moyo allows for a more nuanced interpretation of these experiences, foregrounding women's voices, affirming sexual autonomy, and offering pathways for transformative theological praxis that challenge patriarchal structures while promoting justice and inclusion.

The study positions indecent theology as the most appropriate framework for liberating women in ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit, while body theology complements it by emphasising the moral significance of women's sexual experiences. Women should understand that they are both

spiritual and sexual beings, with bodily experiences informing their relationship with God. The reclamation of female sexuality is framed as both a personal and collective effort to redefine societal norms around sexual rights. O'Sullivan and McGraw (2015:80) stress the importance of open dialogue, enabling women to take ownership of their bodies and desires. By promoting a culture that respects and celebrates female sexuality, ELCSA can help ensure that women's sexual rights are recognised and upheld as fundamental human rights.

5.2.3 A Body that has been Excluded

Cultural, ethical, gender, and societal standards shape ongoing debates about morality, with the church, including ELCSA, committed to upholding these principles. Milani (2014:161) argues that the rigid enforcement of Christian ethical rules, including punitive measures, reinforces obedience but can be oppressive and exclusionary. Historically, women's bodies have been viewed through a dualistic lens as sites of temptation or sin, resulting in their marginalisation from leadership and ritual spaces (Parsons, 2004). These restrictive practices have overlooked women's voices, which hold valuable insights into the intersection of body, spirit, and sexuality.

Rituals involving bodily movements and communal practices illustrate the integral role of the body in faith, challenging dualistic interpretations and emphasising transcendence and community (Csordas, 1994). Recognising God as the creator of beings with intrinsic needs affirms bodily experiences, encouraging the celebration of physical and emotional aspects often deemed taboo. Body theology emphasises that bodily experiences shape how individuals understand and navigate the world, enabling a sense of belonging (Van Niekerk & Niemand, 2019:79).

Indecent theology, with its liberal stance, highlights the church's failure to positively address women's liberation and bodily concerns. Exclusion of women from church structures based on their bodies reflects ongoing marginalisation, demonstrating that institutions like ELCSA continue to confine women to the margins rather than affirming their full participation and embodied experiences.

5.2.4 Liberation

Nineteen out of 20 participants emphasised that women should have autonomy over their bodies, reflecting a strong call for sexual emancipation and bodily self-determination. This aligns with indecent theology, which advocates women's right to express and live out their sexuality without harming others or infringing on rights (Roberts, 2011:99). Women, whether

single or married, should have agency over reproductive decisions, including family planning, fertility treatments, contraception, and abortion, free from shame, stigma, or discrimination. Body theology underscores that such choices are foundational to women's bodily autonomy and should not be externally controlled.

Indecent theology has supported a cultural shift, embracing female sexual pleasure and autonomy, including premarital sex, thereby challenging historical restrictions on sexuality (Tolman & McClelland, 2011). This struggle for sexual liberation intersects with broader social justice concerns such as race, class, and sexual orientation, requiring an intersectional approach to ensure all voices are represented (Collins, 2000:44). Advancing women's rights necessitates sustained advocacy for comprehensive sex education, access to reproductive healthcare, and dismantling societal stigmas, creating an environment that promotes sexual autonomy, diversity, and intergenerational empowerment.

5.2.5 Positive Sexuality

Of the 20 participants in the study, 15 clearly articulated their understanding of what constitutes positive sexuality, demonstrating a commendable level of awareness necessary for engendering healthy sexual attitudes. This understanding marks a significant step toward embracing a more inclusive perspective on sexuality. However, it is noteworthy that seventeen participants, including those who championed positive sexuality, held the belief that premarital sex is sinful. This contradiction invites a deeper exploration of the motivations behind such views. Sartre (2007:69) poses this question, "are people bound by entrenched conventional beliefs and societal norms, or is there an innate resistance to exploring a more liberated and life-affirming moral framework?" This tension encapsulates a broader struggle to envision a world that embraces new moral paradigms.

Indecent theology calls for a comprehensive approach to sexuality that celebrates women's bodies and sexuality as legitimate sources of moral authority. Harrison (1985:307) states that "acknowledging women's autonomy over their bodies is vital for dismantling patriarchal structures that have sought to control and restrict female sexuality".

On the other hand, by aligning body theology, this study will assist to empower women, particularly those in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit, to embrace and affirm their own bodies, a crucial step in asserting their rightful place within the moral universe.

Given this perspective, seeking an approach to sexuality that is both holistic and transformative becomes imperative. Such an approach would entail creating environments that encourage open debates about sexuality, allowing for the exploration of how love, respect, and consent intersect with sexual ethics. Engaging in these critical discussions enables communities to confront outdated norms and ideas that limit personal freedom and expression.

5.2.6 Sex before marriage

According to participants, 17 out of 20 participants consider sex before marriage a sin, while three disagree. Sexual revolution led some girls to become sexually active early, often as an expression of sexual freedom or to gain self-esteem, creating tension with the church's ongoing advocacy for purity and abstinence. Many unmarried women still attend penitential classes to reconcile premarital sexual activity with religious obligations.

From a body theology perspective, the body is a sacred vessel, expressing dignity, identity, and one's relationship with the divine. Premarital sex can be viewed as violating this sacredness, leading to guilt, shame, and spiritual disconnect. Martin Luther's teachings link sexual activity to human sinfulness, framing premarital sex as morally and spiritually problematic, which can stigmatise natural desires and reinforce restrictive interpretations of sexuality.

Cultural, societal, and economic influences, peer pressure, and limited sex education further shape women's engagement in premarital sex despite religious prohibitions. These factors highlight the complexity of navigating sexuality within ELCSA, underscoring the need for holistic approaches that integrate cultural, theological, socio-economic, and moral considerations, leading to the development of a better understanding of sexuality as part of God's creation.

5.2.7 Sex and Culture

Sexual norms are deeply embedded in cultural and historical contexts, with religious and societal expectations shaping behaviours around modesty, purity, and morality (Okafor, 2018:205; Hunter, 2002:72). Religious doctrines, including Christianity, often confine sexual activity to marriage, framing it as sacred and morally regulated (Green, 2010:33). In ELCSA, women's sexuality is influenced by cultural elements such as virginity and purity expectations, marriage centrality, patriarchal gender roles, community surveillance, and socialisation, which collectively enforce restrictions, stigma, and silence around sexual expression. Practices like

virginity testing and church reinforcement of purity norms exemplify how culture and religion intersect to control women's bodies.

Body theology highlights that women's bodies are sacred vessels whose dignity, identity, and relationship with the divine are often undermined by these cultural and religious constraints. Indecent theology challenges these oppressive norms, advocating for autonomy, positive sexuality, and liberation from patriarchal control. While cultural and religious norms in ELCSA perpetuate restrictive notions of female sexuality, some women are beginning to resist, embracing bodily autonomy and advocating for inclusive, affirming approaches to sexuality that integrate faith with self-expression.

5.2.8 Social Silence on Sexuality

There is a pervasive silence on sexuality within social and religious spaces, including ELCSA, with 19 out of 20 participants reporting they never discussed sexuality with their pastor. This silence is reinforced by fear of social repercussions, lack of comprehensive sex education, and gendered double standards that marginalise women's sexual experiences. Historically, conservative religious teachings have prioritised spiritual growth and moral instruction over open discussions of sexuality, leaving pastors unequipped to address these topics sensitively.

From a body theology perspective, this silence undermines recognition of the body as a sacred vessel through which dignity, identity, and spirituality are expressed. Indecent theology complements this by challenging oppressive norms and advocating for inclusive conversations that affirm women's sexual autonomy and liberation. Creating safe spaces, providing sexuality education, equipping leaders for pastoral care, and encouraging open dialogue can reduce stigma, shame, and guilt while promoting a holistic spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being.

Addressing sexuality within ELCSA through these theological lenses promotes healthier attitudes toward sexual identity, consent, and relationships, integrating faith with human experience. By combining body theology and indecent theology, the church can transform silence into informed, compassionate discussions, supporting both individual autonomy and communal inclusivity while upholding faith-based principles.

5.3 Commonalities and Tension from the Themes

The following are common elements from the themes as well as tensions identified from the themes.

5.3.1 Commonalities

- **Focus on Women's Positionality and Experience**

Themes like Sexual Identity, A Body Excluded, and Discrimination of Women centre on women lived experiences within the church, highlighting how their gender and sexuality intersect with religious life. Both Positive Sexuality and Liberation extend this focus by advocating for recognition and agency, emphasizing ethical and theological reflection from women's perspectives.

- **Critique of Institutional and Cultural Constraints**

A Body Excluded, Discrimination of Women, Sex and Culture, and Social Silence on Sexuality point to structural, cultural, and social mechanisms that marginalise women or limit their agency in sexual ethics. These themes collectively underscore that women's sexual experiences are socially and institutionally mediated, not just individual concerns.

- **Moral and Ethical Concerns**

Sex before Marriage, Positive Sexuality, and Sexual Identity engage with ethical questions of sexual conduct, highlighting the need to reconcile moral expectations with lived sexual realities. Both Liberation and Positive Sexuality are aligned in promoting ethical frameworks that affirm women's flourishing, not just obedience to tradition.

- **Silencing and the Need for Voice**

Social Silence on Sexuality intersects with almost every other theme, highlighting that lack of dialogue or pastoral engagement limits both the recognition of women's experiences and the possibility for ethical or theological change.

- **Common threads:**

Common threads are centring women's experiences, highlighting exclusion and silencing, and emphasising ethical and theological reflection. Advocacy for liberation and positive sexuality connects ethical critique with actionable change.

5.3.2 Tensions

- **Tradition vs. Liberation**

Sex before Marriage and Sex and Culture represent normative moral and cultural perspectives, often emphasising restraint or prescribed behaviour. These tensions clash with Liberation and Positive Sexuality, which advocate autonomy, agency, and self-expression, potentially challenging church authority or cultural norms.

- **Embodiment vs. Exclusion**

A Body Excluded highlights how biological realities can be used to marginalise women. This creates tension with Sexual Identity and Positive Sexuality, which seek to integrate women's embodied experiences into theology as sites of knowledge and agency.

- **Institutional Power vs. Individual Experience**

Discrimination of Women and Social Silence on Sexuality point to structural barriers enforced by church leadership or tradition. These tensions conflict with the individual-focused themes like Sexual Identity and Positive Sexuality, revealing the gap between lived experience and institutional ethical frameworks.

- **Cultural Norms vs. Feminist Ethics**

Sex and Culture and Sex

before Marriage may perpetuate conservative moral norms that limit feminist reinterpretation of sexual ethics. Feminist analysis exposes this tension, as it seeks to redefine ethical standards from women lived experiences rather than inherited tradition.

The study identified several primary tensions that shape women's experiences of sexuality and ethical engagement within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA). These tensions reveal the complex interplay between institutional authority, cultural expectations, and women's own desires and ethical reasoning.

Firstly, there exists a persistent tension between institutional, cultural, and religious constraints on one hand, and women's agency and ethical autonomy on the other. Church doctrines, liturgical practices, and culturally embedded norms establish strict boundaries around what constitutes acceptable behaviour, particularly regarding sexual conduct. Women are often expected to conform to these externally imposed standards, leaving little room for personal interpretation or ethical decision-making. At the same time, women seek to exercise agency over their bodies, choices, and moral reasoning, navigating a space where their ethical autonomy is continually challenged by hierarchical structures. This tension underscores the struggle between obedience to authority and the pursuit of self-determination.

Secondly, a significant tension arises between moralised sexual norms and feminist theological reimaginings of sexuality. Traditional Christian teachings within ELCSA frame sexuality primarily in terms of sin, shame, and moral accountability, particularly for women, while largely ignoring or minimizing men's sexual responsibility. Feminist theology, in contrast,

challenges this restrictive framework by asserting that sexuality is a God-given aspect of human dignity, worthy of affirmation, celebration, and ethical reflection. The friction between these opposing visions, the prescriptive moral lens versus an emancipatory, justice-oriented lens, creates a space of conflict in which women must negotiate their sexual identities and values.

Finally, there is a tension between women's embodied experiences and structural exclusion. Women's lived experiences, including their desires, feelings, and corporeal realities, often diverge from the prescriptions imposed by religious and cultural authorities. Yet institutional and social structures frequently marginalize these embodied perspectives, denying women a voice in ethical discourse or decision-making processes. This creates a disconnect between what women feel and experience in their bodies and what the surrounding structures recognize or validate. The resulting gap reinforces exclusion, perpetuates silencing, and diminishes women's capacity to integrate their embodied realities into moral and spiritual life.

Taken together, these tensions highlight the multidimensional challenges faced by women in negotiating their sexual and ethical identities. They illuminate the ongoing struggle between obedience and autonomy, prescriptive morality and feminist critique, as well as lived experience and institutional marginalization. Understanding these tensions is crucial for developing theological and pastoral frameworks that affirm women's dignity, agency, and ethical participation within the church and broader society.

The study would benefit from deeper engagement with African Christian ethics and the unique cultural and social dynamics shaping women's experiences within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA).

5.5 African Christian Ethics

African Christian ethics emphasises the interconnected relationship between faith, community, culture, and moral life, recognising that ethical reflection in African contexts is embedded within communal values and social relationships rather than solely individual moral reasoning (Bujo, 2001, pp. 3–5). Within many African societies, morality is shaped by communal expectations, family structures, and cultural traditions that influence how sexuality, gender roles, and respectability are understood.

Women in ELCSA therefore negotiate their sexuality not only through Christian doctrine but also through cultural norms that emphasise marriage, family honour, and socially sanctioned expressions of sexuality. These cultural frameworks often reinforce patriarchal systems that

regulate women's bodies and sexual agency, while simultaneously shaping interpretations of biblical teachings on sexuality (Kanyoro, 2002, pp. 20–23). As Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues, African women frequently experience the intersection of religion and culture in ways that both affirm communal identity and perpetuate gender hierarchies that limit women's autonomy (Oduyoye, 2001, pp. 15–18).

Engaging African Christian ethical perspectives would allow the study to more fully explore how women themselves understand morality, sexuality, dignity, and relational responsibility within their socio-cultural context. Scholars such as Isabel Apawo Phiri emphasise that African women's theological reflection must engage the realities of culture, patriarchy, and lived faith in order to articulate liberating ethical alternatives that affirm women's dignity and agency (Phiri, 2004, pp. 68–70). Similarly, Sarojini Nadar and Musimbi Kanyoro highlight that feminist engagement with African cultural hermeneutics can open spaces for reinterpreting both culture and scripture in ways that challenge oppressive norms while affirming life-giving aspects of African traditions (Kanyoro, 2002, pp. 34–36).

Integrating African Christian ethics alongside feminist, body, and indecent theologies would therefore strengthen the contextual grounding of this research. Such an approach would illuminate how women in ELCSA navigate the tension between Christian moral teachings and cultural expectations, while also recognising the potential within African ethical concepts such as relational personhood and communal responsibility (ubuntu) to support more holistic, dignifying, and life-affirming understandings of women's sexuality.

5.6 Recommendations Arising from these Findings

Recommendation arising from the findings include the following:

- Integrate Feminist Theology into Pastoral Education: ELCSA should equip pastors and church leaders with theological tools that recognise women's bodily experiences, sexual autonomy, and rights as part of faith-informed ethical reflection. This includes training clergy to facilitate sensitive and open conversations about sexuality.
- Promote Open Dialogue and Sexuality Education: Creating safe spaces within church programmes, women's groups, and youth ministries to discuss sexuality, consent, reproductive health, and sexual ethics can dismantle silence and stigma, empowering women and youth to engage with faith and sexuality holistically. Promoting open dialogue and sexuality education within church contexts requires intentional pastoral, educational, and communal strategies that respect Christian teachings while

acknowledging the lived realities of congregants. Within the context of ELCSA and similar African church settings, several practical approaches can be implemented to create safe spaces where issues of sexuality, consent, reproductive health, and sexual ethics can be discussed openly and constructively.

One possible approach is the integration of structured sexuality education into church programmes. Churches can incorporate discussions on sexuality and relationships into existing programmes such as confirmation classes, premarital counselling, youth fellowships, and women's ministries. Rather than focusing solely on abstinence or moral prohibition, these sessions could address broader themes such as bodily autonomy, consent, emotional wellbeing, reproductive health, and responsible relationships. By grounding these discussions in theological reflection and pastoral sensitivity, the church can present sexuality as part of God's creation and human dignity rather than as a taboo subject.

Another important strategy is the training of clergy and lay leaders to facilitate conversations on sexuality. Many church leaders feel unequipped to discuss sexual matters due to cultural discomfort or lack of formal training. Workshops and theological seminars can help pastors, catechists, and youth leaders develop the pastoral skills and theological language necessary to address sexuality responsibly. Such training could draw on feminist theology, African Christian ethics, and pastoral counselling frameworks, enabling leaders to respond compassionately to issues such as sexual violence, reproductive choices, and marital relationships.

The creation of dedicated discussion forums within church structures can also foster openness. Women's groups, youth fellowships, and small Bible study groups can be intentionally structured to include conversations about sexuality and gender relations. These forums allow participants to share personal experiences and concerns in supportive environments, helping to break the culture of silence that often surrounds sexual matters. When facilitated carefully, these conversations can encourage mutual learning and collective reflection on how Christian faith informs sexual ethics.

In addition, churches can collaborate with healthcare professionals and community organisations to provide accurate information on reproductive health and sexual wellbeing. Inviting Christian healthcare practitioners, counsellors, or social workers to participate in church workshops can bridge the gap between theological teachings and medical knowledge. This interdisciplinary approach ensures that congregants receive reliable information while still engaging the topic within a faith-based framework.

Another strategy involves developing contextual theological resources on sexuality that speak directly to African cultural and religious realities. Bible study guides, sermons, and discussion materials can be produced to address themes such as consent, mutual respect in relationships, and the dignity of women's bodies. By integrating insights from African feminist theology and African Christian ethics, these materials can challenge harmful cultural practices while affirming positive values such as communal responsibility, respect, and care for human dignity. The active involvement of community elders and respected leaders can also play a crucial role in promoting open dialogue. In many African contexts, elders hold significant influence in shaping moral discourse. When these leaders participate in conversations about sexuality and gender equality, they can help legitimise these discussions and encourage broader community acceptance. Their involvement can assist in reshaping cultural norms that perpetuate silence or stigma around sexuality.

Finally, churches can encourage pastoral counselling and confidential support structures for individuals facing sexual or relational challenges. Establishing counselling ministries or referral systems for survivors of sexual abuse, individuals experiencing marital difficulties, or young people navigating questions of sexual identity can provide compassionate support. Such services signal that the church is a place of care and understanding rather than judgement. Through these initiatives, churches can gradually transform the culture of silence surrounding sexuality. By fostering dialogue, education, and pastoral support, faith communities can empower women and young people to engage with their sexuality in ways that affirm both their dignity and their Christian identity

- Address Cultural and Institutional Constraints: ELCSA should critically assess church practices and policies that disproportionately regulate women's bodies or restrict sexual agency, such as punitive measures for premarital pregnancy. Incorporating intersectional perspectives on gender, marital status, socio-economic background, and culture will ensure policies support all women.
- Affirm Positive Sexuality: Church teachings should move beyond a purely prohibitive framework and embrace sexuality as a life-giving, sacred aspect of human experience. Recognising sexual pleasure, mutuality, and dignity as part of ethical discourse can align Christian ethics with human flourishing.
- Centre Women's Voices in Ethical Discourses: Women's experiences and narratives should inform theological reflection, ethical guidelines, and church governance.

Inclusion in decision-making processes can ensure that sexual ethics are co-constructed rather than imposed, promoting justice, equity, and liberation within ELCSA.

By implementing these recommendations, ELCSA has the potential to transform its approach to sexuality, moving from control and exclusion toward affirmation, liberation, and holistic pastoral care. This shift not only benefits women but strengthens the entire faith community by aligning church practice with ethical integrity, human dignity, and the sacredness of embodied life.

5.6 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has explored how women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit, experience and interpret Christian ethics in relation to their sexuality. Eight key themes emerged: sexual identity; discrimination and exclusion; a body excluded; liberation; positive sexuality; sex before marriage; sex and culture; and social silence on sexuality. These highlight both the constraints imposed by church teachings and cultural norms, and the creative ways women navigate and resist these restrictions.

The analysis revealed persistent tensions between doctrine and lived experience. Patriarchal interpretations of scripture, coupled with cultural expectations around virginity, marriage, and moral conduct, regulate women's sexuality, often marginalising their voices and restricting bodily autonomy. Silence on sexual matters, lack of pastoral engagement, and punitive measures for transgressions reinforce exclusion and shame.

Theoretical frameworks of body theology and indecent theology provided tools to interpret these findings. Body theology affirmed the sacredness of women's embodied experiences, while indecent theology exposed oppressive practices and advocated for sexual liberation. Together, these frameworks illuminated women's struggles and resistance, emphasising the need to integrate lived experiences into ethical reflection. However, limitations exist, as these frameworks alone cannot fully address institutional hierarchies, doctrinal rigidity, or deeply embedded cultural norms.

The findings of this study underscore that women's sexuality in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) is far from being a private or purely individual matter; rather, it is deeply shaped by intersecting theological, cultural, and social forces. Church doctrines, reinforced by patriarchal interpretations of scripture, cultural norms, and community surveillance, have historically constrained women's sexual expression, positioning their bodies as sites of moral regulation and social control. Yet, the voices of women in this study reveal

that they are not passive recipients of these restrictions. Instead, they actively resist, challenge, and negotiate these constraints through asserting bodily autonomy, advocating for positive expressions of sexuality, and seeking inclusive and justice-oriented interpretations of Christian ethics.

This chapter highlights the critical need for transformative approaches that integrate feminist perspectives into Lutheran theology, pastoral care, and educational practices. Acknowledging women's embodied experiences is essential for dismantling the historical dualism that separates body and spirit, which has long been used to marginalise women. By promoting open and affirming dialogue on sexuality, the church can break the culture of silence that perpetuates shame, misinformation, and exclusion. Addressing structural, hierarchical, and cultural barriers is also necessary to ensure that women's sexual agency is recognised, respected, and integrated into theological discourse and church practice.

Furthermore, centring women's voices in ethical reflection engenders not only liberation and dignity but also a more holistic understanding of sexuality as an integral aspect of faith, humanity, and the sacredness of the body. Incorporating frameworks such as body theology and indecent theology allows the church to critically engage with the lived realities of women, challenge oppressive interpretations, and reimagine ethical frameworks that affirm sexual rights, agency, and joy. Ultimately, this approach invites ELCSA to cultivate a faith environment that is inclusive, affirming, and transformative, where women's sexual identities and embodied experiences are celebrated rather than silenced, and where the moral and spiritual dimensions of sexuality are recognised as essential components of holistic Christian life.

CHAPTER SIX – SUMMARY OF THE STUDY`S FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

6.1 Introduction

The task of chapter five was to theoretically interpret the findings through the chosen frameworks of body theology and indecent theology. By bringing the lived experiences of women into dialogue with these theological lenses, the discussion examined how Christian ethics within ELCSA has constructed, constrained, and excluded women's sexuality, while also exploring alternative possibilities for liberation and transformation.

This chapter provides a summary of the study`s findings, proposes recommendations and draws conclusions. The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section revisits the aim, research problem, and objectives of the study in relation to the findings. The second section considers the study by revisiting the main and sub-questions and highlighting key arguments against the findings identified. The third section presents another theoretical framework and also outlines new knowledge, which is this study's contribution to the area of research. The fourth section it presents recommendations for the study, further research and concluding remarks

6.2 Revisiting the Study

Revisiting the study involves reflecting on the original aim of the study, the research problem, objectives and research questions, and situating the findings within this framework. This section demonstrates how the research has addressed the gaps identified in the earlier chapters and how it contributes to a deeper understanding of women's sexuality within ELCSA. In Chapter five found the following:

The findings collected in all the eight themes collectively demonstrate how patriarchal ethics can restrict, silence, and stigmatise women, while also highlighting the transformative potential of feminist theological engagement. They establish the foundation for reimagining Christian ethics in ways that are inclusive, liberative, and responsive to the lived realities of women.

6.2.1 Aim

The aim of the study was to explore the potential of feminist theological perspectives to critically challenge Christian ethical teachings as interpreted and practiced within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), and to propose a theoretical

framework that reinterprets these ethics in ways that align with Lutheran values of justice, equality, and human dignity, thereby enabling a more inclusive, affirming, and liberating approach to sexuality.

6.2.1.1 Linking the Aim of the Study to the Findings

The central aim of this study was to explore the potential of feminist theological perspectives to critically interrogate Christian ethical teachings as they are interpreted and practiced within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA). Furthermore, the study sought to propose a theoretical framework that reinterprets these ethics in ways consistent with Lutheran commitments to justice, equality, and human dignity. The findings of the research confirm the relevance of this aim in substantive ways, illuminating both the extent of the challenges that women face within ELCSA and the possibilities that feminist theological resources offer in responding to those challenges.

A significant finding of the study is the extent to which women's sexuality within ELCSA is shaped and constrained by intersecting theological, cultural, and social frameworks. The research revealed that patriarchal interpretations of scripture, rigid purity norms, and community surveillance operate together to marginalise and regulate women's sexual identities and practices. For instance, teachings on premarital sex, abortion, contraception, and childbearing reflect an ethic that privileges male authority and community expectations over the lived realities of women. These findings underscore the study's aim by demonstrating the urgent need for feminist theological perspectives that can expose these inherited frameworks, unmask their exclusionary character, and contest their theological legitimacy.

In this respect, the findings affirm that Christian ethics within ELCSA, as currently practiced, often functions as a mechanism of control rather than liberation. The analysis shows how traditional Lutheran moral discourses have been selectively interpreted through patriarchal lenses, thereby perpetuating hierarchies that limit women's autonomy over their bodies and identities. This reality validates the study's original concern and highlights the contribution of feminist theology as a critical lens to interrogate and dismantle oppressive theological constructs.

6.2.1.1.1 Women's Resistance and Agency

Equally significant in the findings is the evidence of women's resistance and agency within ELCSA. Despite the constraints imposed by patriarchal theological and ethical systems, women are not passive recipients of exclusionary discourses. Instead, the study found that women actively negotiate, reinterpret, and resist oppressive teachings in ways that affirm their embodied experiences of sexuality. Practices of advocacy, silence-breaking, and reinterpretation of faith traditions emerged as recurrent themes among participants, demonstrating that women find creative ways to reclaim their dignity and humanity.

This finding directly resonates with the study's aim to propose liberative frameworks informed by feminist theology. By affirming the agency of women in resisting exclusion, the research reveals that feminist theological perspectives are not merely theoretical tools of critique but are embodied in women lived practices of faith and sexuality. Women's insistence on autonomy and positive sexuality challenges reductive ethics rooted in regulation and opens possibilities for a theology that is inclusive, justice-oriented, and affirming of sexuality as an integral aspect of human flourishing.

6.2.1.1.2 The Need for Reinterpretation of Christian Ethics

. Participants expressed a yearning for theological approaches that affirm sexuality as sacred, rather than treating it as a source of moral suspicion or regulation. This demonstrates not only dissatisfaction with the inherited patriarchal frameworks but also an openness to new, life-giving interpretations rooted in both Lutheran tradition and feminist critique.

This aligns with the study's aim of developing feminist-informed theological and ethical frameworks that move beyond regulatory models. Rather than positioning sexuality solely within the confines of sin and purity, feminist reinterpretations emphasise relationality, mutual respect, embodiment, and justice as central ethical concerns. The findings confirm that such an approach would not only resonate with women's experiences but also remain faithful to Lutheran theological commitments to human dignity and God's grace.

6.2.1.1.3 Synthesis of findings

Taken together, the findings and aims of this study converge in meaningful ways. On one hand, the findings reveal the extent to which current ELCSA ethical frameworks perpetuate exclusion, marginalisation, and control over women's sexuality. On the other hand, they demonstrate the resilience, agency, and theological creativity of women who resist and reinterpret these constraints. The study's aim to employ feminist theological perspectives is

thus validated: feminist frameworks are shown to be necessary both for exposing the oppressive structures of existing Christian ethics and for constructing liberative alternatives that affirm women's dignity and humanity.

The synthesis of the aims and findings therefore underscores two critical contributions of this study. First, it highlights the problem: Patriarchal ethical structures within ELCSA have served to silence and regulate women's sexuality in ways that undermine justice and equality. Second, it illuminates the possibility: Feminist-informed reinterpretations of Lutheran ethics can provide inclusive, justice-oriented frameworks capable of transforming both ecclesial discourse and lived practice. In this way, the study contributes both to scholarly debates in feminist theology and to the practical transformation of Christian ethics within ELCSA.

By linking the aim to the findings, this chapter demonstrates that feminist theological perspectives are not an external imposition upon Lutheran tradition but an internal corrective that reclaims its core values of justice, equality, and human dignity. The findings thereby confirm that the aim of the study is not only relevant but also necessary for both academic and ecclesial engagement with the sexuality of women in ELCSA.

6.2.2 Research Objectives

The abovementioned aim was carried out with the following objectives in mind:

- To identify and analyse the historical elements of Christian ethics that have been used within ELCSA to shape the ethical regulation of women's bodies and sexual practices.
- To examine the theological constructs of Christian ethics, particularly within Lutheran doctrinal categories such as law and gospel and vocation, that continue to shape women's sexuality in ELCSA.
- To explore the embodied experiences of women in ELCSA regarding their understanding of sexuality and Christian ethics, highlighting the tensions between church teachings and lived realities.
- To propose a feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics within ELCSA that promotes inclusivity, justice, and the full participation of women in church and society.

The study was guided by four key objectives, each of which sought to address a dimension of the research problem by engaging both the historical and theological roots of Christian ethics in ELCSA and the lived realities of women. The findings demonstrate a strong and consistent

relationship with these objectives, showing how each one was achieved and how they collectively advance the aim of proposing a feminist-informed framework for Christian sexual ethics.

6.2.2.1 Identifying and Analysing Historical Elements of Christian Ethics

The first objective was to identify and analyse the historical elements of Christian ethics that have been used within ELCSA to regulate women's bodies and sexual practices. The findings clearly confirmed that historical interpretations of scripture, particularly those informed by patriarchal readings of Lutheran tradition, have shaped rigid moral codes that emphasise purity, obedience, and reproductive responsibility. Women's sexuality has been historically framed in terms of sin and transgression, with their moral worth often linked to compliance with sexual norms set by the church and community.

For example, teachings on premarital sex, abortion, and contraception reflect inherited traditions of moral regulation that have been uncritically preserved within ELCSA. The findings thus validate the first objective by showing how these historical elements continue to function in the present, regulating women's bodies and silencing their sexual agency. In doing so, they underscore the importance of exposing these inherited frameworks in order to challenge their ongoing influence.

6.2.2.2 Examining Theological Constructs in Lutheran Ethics

The second objective was to examine the theological constructs of Christian ethics, particularly within Lutheran doctrinal categories such as law and gospel and vocation that continue to shape women's sexuality in ELCSA. The findings reveal that these categories, though central to Lutheran theology, have often been interpreted in ways that reinforce patriarchal structures.

The category of law, for example, has been used to emphasise sin, purity and sexual discipline, while the liberative aspect of the gospel has been underemphasised in discussions of sexuality. Similarly, the doctrine of vocation has frequently been interpreted in ways that confine women to roles of motherhood and subservience, limiting their full participation in both church and society. These findings confirm the second objective by demonstrating how theological constructs are not neutral but can be mobilised to sustain gender hierarchies. At the same time, they point to the possibility of reinterpreting these constructs through feminist lenses so that they can serve liberative rather than restrictive purposes.

6.2.2.3 Exploring Embodied Experiences of Women

The third objective was to explore the embodied experiences of women in ELCSA regarding their understanding of sexuality and Christian ethics, with particular attention to the tensions between church teachings and lived realities. The findings directly respond to this objective by foregrounding the voices of women who articulated both the constraints and the opportunities they experience.

Women consistently reported that the church's teachings often failed to resonate with their lived realities, producing guilt, silence, or stigma rather than affirmation. Yet, the findings also revealed that women exercise agency in negotiating these tensions. Many resist restrictive teachings, reinterpret their faith traditions, and advocate for positive expressions of sexuality. These lived experiences not only highlight the gap between ecclesial teachings and daily realities but also provide a resource for theological reflection. By centring embodied experience, the findings demonstrate the necessity of feminist theological perspectives that prioritise lived realities as legitimate sources of ethical and theological insight.

6.2.2.4 Proposing a Feminist-Informed Framework

The fourth and final objective was to propose a feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics within ELCSA that promotes inclusivity, justice, and the full participation of women in church and society. The findings provide a strong foundation for this constructive task. They revealed both the persistence of patriarchal ethical structures and the resilience of women who resist, reinterpret, and reimagine their sexuality in life-giving ways.

Women's calls for justice-oriented, inclusive, and affirming interpretations of faith validate the need for such a framework. The data confirmed that without a new theological ethic, women will continue to experience marginalisation, stigma, and exclusion. Conversely, feminist-informed frameworks, rooted in Lutheran commitments to grace, justice, and dignity, offer the possibility of transforming Christian ethics into a resource that affirms women's humanity and flourishing. The findings thus provide both the critique of current practices and the constructive insights necessary for building such a framework.

The findings of this study are tightly linked to the research objectives. They identified the historical roots of patriarchal ethics, examined the theological constructs that sustain them, foregrounded the lived realities of women negotiating these constraints, and illuminated the potential for feminist reinterpretation to generate liberative alternatives. Together, the findings demonstrate that the objectives were not only met but also that they converge to advance the

central aim of the study: to propose feminist theological perspectives as tools for critique and reconstruction of Christian ethics within ELCSA.

The alignment between the objectives and findings highlight the coherence of the study and reinforces its contribution to both scholarship and praxis. The objectives framed the problem of women's marginalisation within ELCSA, while the findings confirmed and expanded upon this problem, pointing toward transformative possibilities. This linkage ensures that the study remains firmly grounded in both empirical realities and theological reflection, thereby offering a meaningful path forward for reimagining Christian ethics in ways that affirm the dignity, agency, and full humanity of women.

6.2.3 Research Problem

At the beginning of the study, the following research problem was identified. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), women's sexuality is regulated by strict moral teachings grounded in traditional Christian ethics. These teachings often marginalise women's sexual agency, voice, and lived experiences. The result is a tension between the church's inherited ethical framework and women's quest for dignity, autonomy, and holistic participation in faith communities. This exclusion raises questions about how Lutheran theology and ethics can be reinterpreted in dialogue with feminist perspectives to affirm women's sexuality as part of their full humanity.

This presents a dual problem. First, ELCSA's inherited ethical frameworks reflect patriarchal assumptions that marginalise women, resulting in the silencing of female voices and the regulation of their bodies through moral and theological prescriptions. Second, the absence of a liberative and inclusive theological discourse on sexuality perpetuates gender inequality, contributing to broader social issues such as gender-based violence, stigma surrounding reproductive health, and the invisibility of women's sexual rights within faith communities.

6.2.3.1 Absence of Liberative Theological Discourse

The second dimension of the problem concerned the absence of an inclusive, justice-oriented theological discourse on sexuality within ELCSA. The findings confirm this absence w while simultaneously highlighting its consequences. Women in the study articulated a strong sense of dissonance between their lived realities and the church's ethical teachings. Without the presence of affirming theological narratives, their experiences of sexuality are often relegated to silence or framed solely in terms of sin and transgression.

This silence does not exist in isolation; it contributes to wider social challenges. The lack of liberative discourse leaves women vulnerable to reproductive stigma, normalises gender inequality, and fails to address systemic issues such as gender-based violence. In effect, the church's neglect of a constructive theological engagement with sexuality perpetuates not only individual marginalisation but also broader patterns of social injustice. These findings directly mirror the second part of the research problem: the church's failure to provide an affirming theological ethic of sexuality creates a vacuum in which patriarchal control is perpetuated, and women's dignity remains unrecognised.

6.2.3.2 Women's Resistance and the Seeds of Transformation

While the research problem underscored the persistence of patriarchal regulation and the absence of liberative discourse, the findings extend this picture by revealing the resilience and agency of women within ELCSA. Far from being passive recipients of patriarchal norms, women actively resist, negotiate, and reinterpret their experiences of sexuality. Acts of resistance range from private forms of defiance to public advocacy and reinterpretation of scripture. Women assert bodily autonomy, embrace positive understandings of sexuality, and call for new theological approaches that are inclusive, just, and affirming.

This finding not only validates the research problem but also expands it by showing that the absence of liberative discourse does not mean the absence of liberative practices. Women's voices, though often marginalised within official ecclesial structures, already embody feminist theological insights in their lived practices. This suggests that the problem is not simply one of external imposition but one of ecclesial recognition: feminist perspectives are already at work within the faith community, but the church has yet to integrate them into its formal ethical discourse.

6.2.4 Integrated Findings

This section of the study has presented the findings of the study in light of the central aim, the research problem, and the guiding objectives. The aim of the study was to explore the potential of feminist theological perspectives to critically interrogate Christian ethical teachings within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), and to propose a framework that aligns with Lutheran commitments to justice, equality, and human dignity. The research problem identified a dual challenge: first, the patriarchal regulation of women's sexuality

through inherited theological and ethical frameworks; and second, the absence of liberative and inclusive theological discourses that affirm women's embodied experiences and dignity. The objectives sought to address these challenges by analysing historical and theological frameworks, foregrounding women lived realities, and constructing feminist-informed alternatives.

The findings provide substantive evidence that these aims and objectives were met, while also confirming the relevance of the research problem. Women's sexuality in ELCSA is far from being a private or individual matter; rather, it is shaped by the interplay of theology, culture, and communal norms. Doctrines, moral teachings, and community surveillance collectively serve to regulate women's bodies, often silencing their voices and excluding them from full participation in the life of the church. Yet, the findings also reveal women's resilience and agency, demonstrating that women resist, reinterpret, and reimagine their faith traditions in ways that affirm their dignity and humanity.

6.2.4.1 Linking the Research Problem to the Findings

The findings directly substantiate the dual dimensions of the research problem. First, the patriarchal regulation of women's sexuality is evident in the persistence of inherited ethical teachings that emphasise purity, obedience, and reproductive duty. These teachings position women's bodies as sites of moral control, aligning with the research problem's claim that ELCSA's ethical frameworks reflect patriarchal assumptions that marginalize women. Second, the absence of a liberative theological discourse is confirmed by women's accounts of silence, guilt, and stigma when confronting issues such as reproductive health, sexuality before marriage, or the decision not to have children. The church's reluctance to engage these realities theologically perpetuates exclusion and contributes to broader social injustices such as gender inequality and gender-based violence.

At the same time, the findings expand the research problem by highlighting women's acts of resistance and reinterpretation. Where the church has failed to articulate affirming theological discourses, women themselves have generated alternative narratives of dignity.

6.3 Revisiting the Main Research Question

Building on this, deconstructing Christian ethics within the ELCSA Pretoria Circuit can lead to transformative outcomes that challenge entrenched patriarchal norms and foster gender equity. Research indicates that when religious communities critically examine traditional

interpretations of scripture and doctrine, they open pathways for women to participate more fully and authentically in faith-based life. For instance, studies have shown that feminist theological approaches can reframe biblical narratives to highlight female agency and leadership, thereby inspiring women to take on active roles within church settings. Such deconstruction can dismantle harmful gender stereotypes that have historically marginalised women, creating a more inclusive environment that affirms their dignity and worth.

This process also encourages dialogue around sexuality, allowing women to view their sexual identities as compatible with their faith, which can significantly enhance their self-esteem and spiritual well-being. Moreover, by intentionally creating spaces where women's voices are prioritised, the church can become a catalyst for broader societal change, influencing community attitudes towards gender equality and justice. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to a faith community that not only respects but celebrates women's rights and autonomy, fostering a culture of empowerment rooted in biblical principles reinterpreted through a feminist lens. Such a shift is vital for cultivating a church environment that genuinely upholds the dignity and life-affirming values of all its members.

6.3.1 Revisiting the Study's Sub-Questions in Relation to the Findings

- What historical elements of Christian ethics have been used within ELCSA to shape the ethical regulation of women's bodies and sexual practices?
- Which theological constructs of Christian ethics, particularly within Lutheran doctrine, continue to shape the sexuality of women in ELCSA?
- What insights can be drawn from the embodied experiences of women in ELCSA regarding their understanding of sexuality and Christian ethics?
- How can a feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics be developed within ELCSA to promote inclusivity, justice, and women's full participation in church and society?

6.3.1.1 Linking Findings to Research Question One

The research question, "What historical elements of Christian ethics have been used within ELCSA to shape the ethical regulation of women's bodies and sexual practices?" provided the first entry point for the analysis. It required not only the identification of the theological and ethical traditions inherited by ELCSA, but also an exploration of how these traditions continue to operate in the regulation of women's sexuality. The findings across the eight thematic categories offer strong evidence that patriarchal ethics have historically restricted, silenced,

and stigmatized women, while simultaneously pointing to the potential of feminist theological re-engagement to transform these legacies.

6.3.1.1.1 Historical Elements of Christian Ethics in ELCSA

The findings reveal that several enduring elements of historical Christian ethics have shaped women's sexual regulation within ELCSA. These include:

- Doctrines of sexual purity and sin, which frame women's bodies as sites of temptation, moral weakness, and contamination. Women are expected to embody chastity and modesty as markers of holiness, thereby internalizing the burden of regulating not only their own sexuality but also male desire.
- Teachings on marriage and reproduction, which define women's vocation almost exclusively in terms of motherhood, marital submission, and reproductive duty. This aligns with long-standing Christian traditions that equated women's value with childbearing and family maintenance, reducing sexuality to procreative functions.
- Law-oriented readings of scripture, which emphasize rules, prohibitions, and moral codes over the liberating grace of the gospel. Such readings, historically dominant in Lutheran contexts, have disproportionately been applied to control women's sexual conduct, often leaving little space for agency, conscience, or freedom.
- Community-based surveillance and discipline, which stem from older church practices of penitential control. In ELCSA, these historical mechanisms persist through practices such as penitential classes or exclusion from communion, which stigmatize women who are perceived to have violated sexual norms (e.g., pregnancy outside of marriage).

These elements collectively illustrate how historical theological traditions, and moral teachings have not disappeared but rather have been re-inscribed into the practices of ELCSA, shaping the ethical regulation of women's bodies.

6.3.1.1.2 Linking Findings to the Themes

The eight themes identified in the findings substantiate this historical continuity. For example, the theme of discrimination and exclusion echoes the legacy of penitential practices, where women are disciplined and silenced for transgressing prescribed norms of sexuality. Similarly, the theme of sexual identity and positive sexuality demonstrates how historical constructs of purity and sin continue to marginalize women's self-understanding, even as women seek new, affirming frameworks for sexual identity.

Moreover, the theme of pastoral silence reflects the historical absence of theological engagement with sexuality beyond prescriptive moral codes. Instead of offering pastoral care that affirms dignity and agency, silence perpetuates stigma, showing how inherited frameworks have failed to evolve into liberative discourses.

At the same time, the theme of liberation and resistance highlights women's active reinterpretation of historical traditions. While historical Christian ethics sought to limit women's sexuality, the findings reveal that women draw upon both theological and experiential resources to resist marginalization and reclaim their bodies as sacred. This demonstrates that the same historical elements which once restricted can, when reinterpreted through feminist theological lenses, become resources for liberation.

6.3.1.1.3 Transformative Potential and Feminist Theological Re-engagement

The findings not only confirm the historical weight of Christian ethics in shaping ELCSA's regulation of sexuality but also underscore the urgent need for transformation. The persistence of patriarchal interpretations reveals that ELCSA remains bound to inherited frameworks that perpetuate stigma and exclusion. However, women's narratives reveal that these frameworks are not static; they are constantly being contested and reinterpreted.

This creates fertile ground for feminist theological engagement. By interrogating the historical elements of Christian ethics such as purity codes, law-heavy doctrines, and vocation narrowly defined as motherhood, feminist theology offers alternative interpretations that affirm women's agency and sexuality as integral to their humanity. The transformative potential lies in reclaiming Lutheran principles such as grace, justice, and the priesthood of all believers to resist patriarchal distortions and to reimagine a sexual ethic that is inclusive and liberative.

6.3.1.1.4 Synthesis of findings

The findings link closely with the first research question by demonstrating how the historical elements of Christian ethics continue to regulate women's sexuality in ELCSA. These elements, manifested in doctrines of purity, reproductive duty, and communal discipline, have contributed to the silencing and stigmatization of women. Yet, the findings also reveal a counter-narrative: women's voices of resistance and reinterpretation. This duality underscores the study's central argument that while historical Christian ethics have marginalized women, feminist theological re-engagement holds the capacity to transform these traditions into sources of justice and liberation. Thus, the first research question is answered not only by identifying

the historical elements themselves but also by showing their ongoing influence and the possibilities for their re-appropriation considering feminist theology.

6.3.1.2 Linking Findings to Research Question Two

The second research question asked: "Which theological constructs of Christian ethics, particularly within Lutheran doctrine, continue to shape the sexuality of women?" This question directed attention toward the doctrinal and ethical resources of Lutheran theology and how they are applied within ELCSA in ways that regulate or affirm women's sexuality. The findings across the eight themes illuminate how these theological constructs are both limiting and contested, shaping women lived experiences in ways that both perpetuate marginalisation and inspire resistance.

6.3.1.2.1 Law and Gospel: The Tension of Regulation and Grace

One of the most significant Lutheran categories influencing women's sexuality is the relationship between law and gospel. The findings reveal that in ELCSA, the "law" is often emphasised in its most prescriptive form, through moral codes and prohibitions that focus disproportionately on women's sexual conduct. Women are frequently taught that their sexuality must be disciplined, controlled, and policed to maintain purity and communal respectability. This interpretation of the law positions sexuality primarily as a potential site of sin.

However, the liberative power of the gospel, the message of unearned grace, freedom, and dignity, remains underemphasised in women's experiences. As reflected in the findings, pastoral silence on sexuality and rigid teachings create a disconnect between women lived realities and the gospel's promise of liberation. Thus, the construct of law and gospel continues to shape women's sexuality, not as a dynamic interplay of judgment and grace, but as an imbalance where law dominates. Women's resistance, however, points to a desire to reclaim the gospel's liberating force, affirming sexuality as sacred rather than shameful.

6.3.1.2.2 Motherhood and Domesticity as Ethical Norms

The findings also highlight how the Lutheran category of vocation has been narrowly interpreted within ELCSA in ways that constrain women's sexuality. Historically, women's vocation has been reduced to marriage, motherhood, and domestic responsibilities. This doctrinal framework positions sexuality as functional, primarily for procreation and the

preservation of family life, rather than as an aspect of human flourishing and relational intimacy.

In the findings, this narrow view of vocation is evident in the stigmatisation of women who choose not to marry, delay childbearing, or use contraception. The expectation that women's sexuality is always tied to motherhood creates exclusionary pressures, especially for those whose lives diverge from these norms. At the same time, women's advocacy for reproductive choices and autonomy demonstrates a reimagining of vocation, not as fixed roles imposed by tradition, but as diverse callings grounded in dignity and freedom.

6.3.1.2.3 Sin, Purity, and Moral Regulation

Another theological construct evident in the findings is the doctrine of sin as interpreted through purity discourses. Women's bodies are often framed as sources of temptation and moral weakness, requiring strict discipline to avoid sin. This is reinforced by community surveillance practices and penitential traditions that shame women who transgress sexual norms, such as premarital pregnancy.

The findings confirm that these purity-based teachings remain active within ELCSA, perpetuating stigmatisation and silencing. Yet women's embodied experiences reveal a counter-narrative: many resist shame-based ethics and instead affirm sexuality as a positive and integral dimension of their humanity. Here, feminist theology offers a reinterpretation of sin that focuses less on sexual policing and more on the systemic injustices such as patriarchy and gender inequality that distort human relationships.

6.3.1.2.4 Community, Sacraments, and Exclusion

Lutheran theology places high value on the sacraments and the life of the community. Yet the findings show that these can also serve as mechanisms of exclusion when linked to sexual ethics. Practices such as exclusion from communion or the requirement to undergo penitential classes illustrate how doctrinal constructs are used to enforce conformity to sexual norms. Women reported that such practices not only regulate behaviour but also deepen stigma, effectively weaponizing theological categories of community and sacrament against them.

At the same time, women's resistance and reinterpretation of faith indicate a yearning for a more inclusive vision of community, one that is rooted in justice, compassion, and the gospel's promise of grace. This points to the transformative potential of reconstructing sacramental and communal theology in ways that affirm women's dignity rather than policing their sexuality.

The findings, therefore, establish that Lutheran theological constructs, law and gospel, vocation, sin and purity, and community/sacrament continue to shape women's sexuality within ELCSA, often in restrictive and stigmatising ways. These constructs are not abstract theological categories but lived realities that regulate women's bodies, constrain their choices, and silence their voices. At the same time, women's practices of resistance, reinterpretation, and advocacy reveal that these very constructs can also be reimagined through feminist theological engagement to affirm sexuality as sacred, relational, and integral to human flourishing.

The findings answer the research question by demonstrating that theological constructs within Lutheran ethics remain powerful in shaping women's sexuality, but their interpretation and application determine whether they function as tools of control or as resources for liberation.

6.3.1.3 Linking Findings to Research Question Three

The third research question asked: "How do the embodied experiences of women in ELCSA reflect their understanding of sexuality and Christian ethics, particularly in relation to the tensions between church teachings and lived realities?" This question shifts the analytical lens from doctrine and history to the everyday lives of women in ELCSA, highlighting how they embody, negotiate, and contest the meanings imposed upon their sexuality by theological and ethical systems. The findings across the eight themes provide substantial evidence of these tensions, while also revealing the resilience and creativity with which women engage their faith.

6.3.1.3.1 Embodied Realities and the Weight of Church Teachings

The findings demonstrate that women's embodied experiences are profoundly shaped by ELCSA's inherited Christian ethical framework. Teachings that prioritise sexual purity, define women's value in terms of marriage and motherhood, and stigmatise reproductive autonomy position women's bodies as objects of regulation and scrutiny. In practice, this means that women who diverge from prescribed norms, such as those who engage in premarital sex, become pregnant outside marriage or opt for contraception, experience exclusion, moral judgment or enforced penitential practices.

Such embodied realities highlight the stark tension between doctrine and lived life. While church teachings construct women's sexuality primarily in terms of sin and regulation, women's experiences point to sexuality as a site of relational intimacy, self-expression, and

dignity. The dissonance between theological ideals and lived realities creates deep fractures in women's spiritual and communal lives, often leading to shame, silence, or alienation from the church.

6.3.1.3.2 Silence, Stigma, and the Marginalisation of Women's Voices

A recurrent theme in the findings is pastoral and institutional silence on sexuality. Women reported that pastors rarely create safe spaces for open conversations, thereby reinforcing stigma and leaving women without theological guidance that speaks to their lived realities. This silence is compounded by communal surveillance, which turns women's sexuality into a public matter policed by societal norms and church structures.

The embodied consequence of such silence is twofold. On one hand, women internalise shame, fear, and guilt regarding their sexuality, resulting in suppressed voices and constrained agency. On the other hand, this very silence forces women to seek alternative frameworks, drawing on personal, cultural, and theological resources to reinterpret their sexuality in ways that affirm their humanity. The tension between silence and reinterpretation illustrates how lived experience exposes the inadequacy of current ethical frameworks.

6.3.1.3.3 Resistance, Agency, and Reinterpretation

Despite systemic constraints, the findings underscore that women are not passive recipients of patriarchal teachings. Rather, they embody resistance and agency through multiple practices: redefining sexuality as positive and life-giving; advocating for reproductive choice; and challenging community norms that stigmatise them. Women draw on both embodied knowledge and faith resources to construct counter-narratives that affirm sexuality as sacred and integral to human flourishing.

This resistance reveals that the embodied experiences of women are not simply sites of oppression but also spaces of theological creativity. By asserting autonomy and advocating for justice-oriented interpretations of faith, women effectively challenge the dichotomy between doctrine and lived experience, insisting that theology must be accountable to lived realities.

6.3.1.3.4 Theological Tensions and Embodied Contradictions

The findings also highlight that women live within deep contradictions between the official teachings of the church and their everyday lives. For instance, while doctrine emphasises chastity and reproductive duty, women lived experiences often involve negotiating

contraception, navigating non-marital relationships, or advocating for sexual rights in the face of stigma. These contradictions create spaces of moral ambiguity where women must constantly negotiate their belonging in faith communities while seeking to preserve their dignity and agency.

This tension underscores the inadequacy of a purely prescriptive ethic. By privileging abstract moral codes over lived realities, ELCSA's ethical framework fails to account for the complexity of women's embodied experiences. The findings, therefore, illuminate the urgent need for theological ethics that engage seriously with embodied realities as legitimate sources of knowledge and moral reflection.

The findings provide a direct answer to the third research question. Women's embodied experiences vividly expose the tensions between inherited church teachings and their lived realities. On one side, women confront stigma, silence, and exclusion; on the other, they embody resistance, reinterpretation, and agency. These dynamics reveal that embodiment is not merely a passive reflection of doctrine but an active site of negotiation where theology is contested, redefined, and lived out in practice.

By attending to these embodied experiences, the study demonstrates that feminist theological engagement is indispensable for bridging the gap between doctrine and lived reality. Such engagement affirms women's sexuality as sacred, challenges stigmatising discourses, and creates space for inclusive, justice-oriented frameworks of Christian ethics. Thus, the findings confirm that the lived, embodied experiences of women are not only shaped by Christian ethics but also serve as a vital resource for reimagining them.

6.3.1.4 Linking Findings to Research Question Four

The fourth research question asked: "How can a feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics be proposed within ELCSA to promote inclusivity, justice, and the full participation of women in church and society?" This question represents the constructive dimension of the study, moving beyond identifying oppressive dynamics to envisioning alternative frameworks. The findings across the eight themes provide rich material for such a constructive turn, demonstrating both the necessity and the possibility of feminist-informed reinterpretation within ELCSA.

Although this study draws from established theories that support my arguments, none of them is suitable for this study. The study contends that there is a need for the production of the new

modes of interpreting biblical text and deconstruct the teachings from contemporary Christian ethics. The researcher's contribution in this study was to cultivate a transformative and inclusive framework that recognises diverse identities and experiences, aligning with indecent theology's core emphasis on justice and liberation for all marginalised groups. The researcher argues that adopting an integrated theology will assist in providing positive sexuality for women in ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit.

6.3.1.4.1 The Necessity of a Feminist-Informed Framework

The findings underscore that the current ethical framework within ELCSA perpetuates exclusion, silence, and stigmatisation of women's sexuality. Doctrines of purity, narrow interpretations of vocation, and law-heavy readings of scripture collectively constrain women's agency and reduce their sexuality to a site of regulation and moral policing. Practices such as penitential classes and exclusion from communion illustrate how these theological constructs are enacted in concrete disciplinary measures, further marginalising women.

At the same time, pastoral silence and the absence of open dialogue on sexuality exacerbate stigma, leaving women without affirming theological resources to navigate their lived realities. These findings collectively establish the necessity of a feminist-informed framework: without reinterpreting ethics through the lens of women lived experiences, ELCSA risks perpetuating theological and social structures that contradict Lutheran commitments to justice, grace, and human dignity.

6.3.1.4.2 Grounding the Framework in Women's Lived Experiences

The findings also show that women's embodied experiences are not only sites of marginalisation but also sources of theological wisdom. Women actively resist oppressive norms, advocate for autonomy, and articulate positive understandings of sexuality. Their practices of reinterpretation whether through affirming reproductive choice, redefining vocation beyond motherhood, or reclaiming sexuality as sacred, reveal that women lived realities already contain seeds of alternative ethics.

A feminist-informed framework must therefore be grounded in these embodied experiences, recognising them as legitimate theological sources alongside scripture and tradition. This epistemological shift is central to feminist theology: knowledge does not flow only from doctrine to lived reality but also from lived experience back into theological reflection. The

findings affirm that without centring women's voices, any attempt to reconstruct Christian ethics remains incomplete.

6.3.1.4.3 Theological Resources for Reconstruction

The findings reveal that existing Lutheran theological constructs, though often misapplied, also provide resources for reconstruction when read through feminist lenses. For example:

- Law and gospel can be reinterpreted to move beyond restrictive moral codes toward a balance where the gospel's message of grace affirms women's dignity and freedom.
- Vocation can be expanded to recognise diverse callings beyond motherhood, affirming women's contributions in all spheres of life.
- Sin and purity can be reframed to critique systemic injustices, such as patriarchy and gender-based violence, rather than policing women's bodies.
- Community and sacrament can be reclaimed as inclusive practices that embrace women in their diversity rather than excluding them for transgressing sexual norms.
- The findings demonstrate that women are already beginning to reinterpret these categories in practice, underscoring that feminist-informed frameworks are not foreign to Lutheran theology but emerge organically from within its own resources.

6.3.1.4.4 Toward Inclusivity, Justice, and Full Participation

A feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics for ELCSA, as suggested by the findings, would prioritise inclusivity, justice, and full participation. Inclusivity requires dismantling purity-based exclusions and creating safe, open spaces for theological and pastoral dialogue on sexuality. Justice entails recognising and addressing the ways in which patriarchal ethics perpetuate gender inequality and contribute to broader issues such as gender-based violence and reproductive stigma. Full participation calls for affirming women's sexual agency and dignity as integral to their humanity and central to their role in church and society.

The findings make clear that women are already embodying these commitments through acts of resistance and reinterpretation. The task of the church, therefore, is not to impose new prescriptions but to listen, affirm, and build theological frameworks that align with the gospel's liberating vision.

The findings directly support the fourth research question by revealing both the need and the resources for constructing a feminist-informed framework of Christian sexual ethics within ELCSA. By exposing the limitations of current ethical practices, highlighting women's agency, and pointing to Lutheran theological resources open to reinterpretation, the findings lay the foundation for a framework that affirms sexuality as sacred, relational, and life-giving.

Such a framework would not only address the marginalisation of women within ELCSA but also contribute to broader struggles for gender justice in South African society. The findings therefore provide a critical bridge between analysis and constructive theology, confirming that feminist-informed reimagining is not only possible but urgently necessary for the life and witness of the church.

Taken together, the findings across the four research questions reveal a consistent pattern: ELCSA's inherited Christian ethics regulate women's sexuality through historical legacies and theological constructs that prioritise control over dignity. Women's embodied experiences expose the inadequacy of these frameworks, while their resistance and reinterpretation highlight the transformative potential of feminist theological engagement.

The four research questions thus converge on a central conclusion: feminist-informed Christian ethics are not only necessary but already emergent within women lived faith. By recognising these realities, ELCSA can begin to reimagine its ethical framework in ways that affirm justice, inclusivity, and the full humanity of women.

6.4 Limitations of Body Theology and Indecent Theology

Body theology and indecent theology are excellent frameworks for highlighting embodied, ethical, and transgressive aspects of women's sexuality, but neither fully addresses the institutional, hierarchical, and doctrinal structures in ELCSA that enforce silence and exclusion. The following limitations are noted:

- **Institutional and Hierarchical Constraints**

Both body theology and indecent theology emphasise bodily experience, autonomy, and liberation, yet they often overlook the institutional and hierarchical structures within ELCSA that enforce silence and restrict sexual expression. Pastoral authority, doctrinal rigidity, and conservative leadership can limit the practical application of these frameworks in church settings.

- **Cultural and Social Embeddedness**

These theologies focus on individual experience and empowerment but do not fully account for deep-rooted cultural norms, community surveillance, and social pressures that shape women's sexual behaviour. Practices such as virginity testing, stigma around singleness, or expectations of marital sexuality are not easily challenged solely through theological discourse.

- **Limited Pastoral and Educational Integration**

While both frameworks advocate open conversations about sexuality, they offer little guidance on how clergy and church leaders can be trained to integrate these ideas within pastoral care or religious education. In ELCSA, pastors often lack tools or confidence to facilitate such dialogues, limiting the transformative potential of these theories.

- **Neglect of Intersectional Factors**

Body and indecent theology centre largely on gender and sexual liberation but may insufficiently address how race, class, socio-economic status, or marital status intersect to further constrain women's sexual autonomy in ELCSA.

- **Potential Theological Resistance**

Both frameworks can be perceived as challenging traditional interpretations of scripture. Their emphasis on bodily autonomy, sexual expression, and liberation may conflict with longstanding Lutheran teachings on chastity, purity, and moral conduct, creating resistance among congregants and church authorities.

- **Practical Application Challenges**

Translating the principles of body theology and indecent theology into concrete policies, programmes, or pastoral practices within ELCSA, is complex. These frameworks may inspire critical reflection but fall short of offering actionable strategies to restructure church culture, address discrimination, or provide comprehensive sexual education.

While body theology and indecent theology emphasise bodily experience, autonomy, and liberation, they face limitations in ELCSA due to institutional hierarchies, conservative leadership, and doctrinal rigidity that enforce silence on sexual matters. They also insufficiently address deeply rooted cultural norms, social pressures, and intersectional factors such as marital status, class, and socio-economic context that constrain women's sexual autonomy. Furthermore, these frameworks provide limited guidance for pastoral integration, practical application, or restructuring church practices, and may face resistance from traditional

interpretations of scripture. Consequently, while useful for critical reflection, they fall short in creating tangible change within ELCSA.

6.4.1 Contribution to knowledge

This study generates new knowledge by providing the first empirical evidence of women's embodied experiences of sexuality within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA), Pretoria Circuit. While historical and theoretical scholarship has documented the regulation of women's sexuality within Christian ethics (Foucault, 1978; Christ, 1987:84; McClellan, 2004) and highlighted social penalties based on marital status, prior research has not captured the lived realities of women navigating sexual regulation, moral expectation, and ecclesial authority in a contemporary Lutheran context. By foregrounding participants' narratives, this study reveals how patriarchal and doctrinal norms manifest in everyday experiences of exclusion, shaming, and marginalisation, particularly for unmarried, divorced, or widowed women.

The findings illustrate that women's sexual autonomy remains constrained by both formal church structures and informal social policing. Participants reported being restricted from leadership and communal activities based on their sexual choices, reflecting systemic discrimination rooted in moral and theological regulation (Msibi, 2011:14; Miller & Wright, 2019:66). Foucault's (1978) framework on power and sexuality helps interpret these experiences as mechanisms through which institutions control bodies and desire, while indecent theology (Althaus-Reid, 2001:31) and African feminist theology provide lenses for critique, advocating for inclusion, bodily autonomy, and liberative praxis.

Engaging African feminist theologians further deepens this analysis. Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001:45–47) emphasizes the necessity of centering African women's lived experiences in theological reflection, while Musa Dube (2011:23; 2019:54) demonstrates how biblical interpretation has historically contributed to patriarchal regulation of female sexuality. Isabel Apawo Phiri (2008:77) highlights institutional practices that restrict women's participation based on moral expectations, and Sarojini Nadar (2013:102) and Fulata Moyo (2012:65) argue for transformative approaches that integrate ethical reflection with structural reform. By applying these perspectives to empirical data, this study demonstrates that women's exclusion and moral policing are not only doctrinal but also socially and culturally reinforced, creating intersecting layers of discrimination.

Crucially, this study moves beyond descriptive accounts to propose a context-specific framework for liberative sexual ethics within ELCSA. By documenting women's embodied experiences and situating them within African feminist and indecent theological frameworks, the study provides practical insights for reimagining church practice, including promoting women's sexual autonomy, leadership participation, and inclusion regardless of marital or parental status. It thus fills a significant gap in scholarship, bridging theory, empirical research, and praxis, and contributes to the broader discourse on gender justice, sexual ethics, and ecclesial transformation in Southern African Lutheran contexts.

This study establishes that women's embodied experiences of sexuality are central to understanding both discrimination and possibilities for liberation within ELCSA, offering a novel empirical and theoretical contribution that foregrounds female agency, critiques patriarchal moral structures, and suggests pathways for transformative reform.

6.4.1.1 Integrative Benefits for the Study

The study on feminist analysis on Christian sexual ethics in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) benefits from a hybrid theoretical approach in the following ways:

By combining multiple complementary frameworks, feminist theology, body theology, indecent theology, liberation theology, and practical theology, the study gains both theoretical depth and practical relevance. This multidimensional lens allows for a holistic engagement with women lived experiences, church teachings, and societal contexts. By Combining these frameworks will also:

- Ensure theoretical robustness: Each framework addresses a different dimension of sexuality, moral, embodied, social, political, and pastoral, providing a comprehensive lens.
- Enhance inclusivity: Women's diverse experiences, including marginalised sexualities, are recognised and validated.
- Promote justice: Structural inequalities within church and society are highlighted, and pathways for transformation are suggested.
- Link theory to practice: Practical theology ensures that insights translate into tangible strategies for pastoral care, education, and policy.

- Supports a multidimensional analysis: The framework allows simultaneous attention to individual experiences, institutional ethics, cultural norms, and social structures, offering a holistic understanding of the tensions between church teachings and women's realities.

The integrative approach provides a powerful, multidimensional framework for analysing Christian sexual ethics in ELCSA. By synthesising feminist, body, indecent/queer, liberation, intersectional, and practical theological perspectives, the study is able to critique exclusionary practices, affirm women lived experiences, and develop actionable recommendations for promoting justice, inclusivity, and full participation of women in church and society. This ensures that the study is both academically rigorous and socially transformative.

6.5 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are proposed to bring about a more inclusive, affirming, and liberating approach to women's sexuality within ELCSA. These recommendations are framed across three key domains: theological reform, pastoral care, and educational practice.

6.5.1 Theological Recommendations

1. Theological Reform

Theological reform refers to re-examining and reshaping doctrines, interpretations, and ethical frameworks within the church to address historical biases, patriarchal structures, or practices that may have constrained women's agency.

Recommendations in this domain might include: Reinterpreting Scripture through an inclusive lens: Encouraging the use of feminist and contextual theological methods to highlight narratives that empower women, recognize their agency, and critique interpretations that have historically sanctioned gender inequality. Addressing patriarchal constructs: Identifying and reforming doctrines or liturgical practices that perpetuate male dominance or marginalize women, particularly in areas of leadership, sexual ethics, and decision-making authority. Integrating African feminist theology: Recognizing African cultural and social contexts in theological reflection, thus making ethics and doctrines

resonate with lived experiences of African women. Promoting ethical frameworks of equality and justice: Shifting church teachings toward principles that balance moral guidance with recognition of women's dignity, autonomy, and sexual self-determination. This domain seeks not only doctrinal clarity but also a systemic transformation of the theological imagination to allow more equitable participation of women in church life.

2. Pastoral Care

Pastoral care focuses on the lived, relational support that women receive within the church, addressing emotional, spiritual, and ethical needs.

Recommendations here may include: Empowering women through counselling and mentorship: Providing spaces where women can discuss their sexuality, identity, and moral dilemmas without fear of judgment, thereby fostering spiritual and psychological well-being. Training pastors in gender-sensitive ministry: Equipping clergy with skills to engage with women's experiences empathetically, challenging harmful norms while offering guidance rooted in justice, compassion, and respect. Addressing sexual ethics practically and pastorally: Moving beyond abstract doctrinal prohibitions to offer guidance that considers consent, mutual respect, and personal dignity in relationships. Building inclusive community practices: Encouraging small groups, prayer circles, or support networks that affirm women's voices and validate their experiences, creating a church culture where ethical reflection and personal empowerment coexist. Pastoral care thus becomes a bridge between doctrine and daily life, ensuring ethical reform is internalized and embodied in supportive practices.

3. Educational Practice

Educational practice involves using teaching, curricula, and formation programs to reshape knowledge, understanding, and moral reasoning within the church.

Recommendations might include:

Integrating gender justice into religious education: Designing curricula that critically engage with gender norms, sexual ethics, and feminist theological insights, fostering reflective thinking among congregants of all ages.

Promoting critical theological literacy: Training church members to read and interpret sacred texts with awareness of historical, cultural, and gendered influences, encouraging active dialogue rather than passive acceptance.

Workshops and seminars on sexuality and ethics: Creating structured learning opportunities that equip women and men to navigate moral, relational, and social challenges with informed ethical reasoning.

Supporting lifelong formation: Encouraging ongoing education for clergy, youth leaders, and lay members to sustain progressive, contextual, and inclusive theological engagement over time.

Educational reform ensures that theological and pastoral recommendations are not only aspirational but actively translated into knowledge and praxis, shaping future generations of church members and leaders.

Framing recommendations across these three domains ensures a holistic approach: theological reform reshapes doctrine and moral imagination, pastoral care provides relational support and ethical guidance in practice, and educational practice sustains transformative understanding through knowledge and formation. Together, they create a systemic pathway for empowering women and fostering justice within church life.

6.5.2 Summary of Recommendations

Overall, the study recommends a transformative approach that integrates feminist perspectives into theology, pastoral care, and education. By centring women's experiences, promoting inclusive dialogue, and challenging patriarchal ethical norms, ELCSA can create a faith environment where women's sexuality is affirmed, respected, and harmonised with Christian ethical reflection. Such reforms not only empower women but also enhance the church's witness as a community committed to justice, equality, and holistic human flourishing.

6.6 Operationalization of recommendations within ELCSA

Integrating feminist theology into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) requires a context-sensitive approach that respects both tradition and indigenous cultural practices. Rather than challenging Lutheran doctrine, feminist theology can be presented as a lens that deepens understanding of Scripture and ethics, highlighting women's dignity, agency, and lived experiences while remaining faithful to the principles of grace, vocation, and the priesthood of all believers. In this way, feminist perspectives enrich existing theological frameworks without displacing them.

African Christian ethics, with its emphasis on relationality, communal responsibility, and moral integrity, provides a natural bridge for this integration. Feminist insights can be framed as promoting the flourishing of the community as a whole affirming women's participation in decision-making, recognizing their spiritual guidance within families and congregations, and creating space for discussions on sexuality and embodiment. By aligning feminist theology with communal well-being, it becomes a constructive rather than disruptive force within church life.

The involvement of elders and community leaders is central to this process. As respected mediators, they can guide congregations in interpreting feminist principles within familiar cultural and theological frameworks. Dialogue platforms, workshops, and Bible study sessions allow elders, pastors, and lay leaders to engage with issues of gender, sexuality, and ethics alongside women's lived experiences. Leaders who model inclusive practices such as supporting women's leadership in liturgy, pastoral care, and community initiatives demonstrate that feminist perspectives can complement rather than contradict tradition.

Pastoral care and counseling provide further opportunities for integration. Clergy trained in gender-sensitive approaches can address women's experiences holistically, attending to spiritual, psychological, and cultural dimensions without moral judgment. Support networks and women's groups create safe spaces for reflection, empowerment, and community building, balancing respect for local family structures with affirmation of women's autonomy.

Community engagement reinforces these efforts. Storytelling, testimonies, and media outreach can highlight women's contributions to church life, demonstrating the practical benefits of inclusive ethics. Initiatives led by women in education, health, and social justice exemplify how feminist insights promote communal flourishing while remaining culturally rooted.

Implementation should be incremental and contextually grounded. Gradual changes, such as recognizing women in leadership roles or reinterpreting ethical teachings on sexuality, allow congregations to adapt without resistance. Local adaptation, guided by elders and community reflection, ensures that feminist principles are applied in culturally appropriate ways, while feedback mechanisms support continual evaluation and refinement.

Finally, feminist theology can contribute to ethical and cultural reframing. By emphasizing mutual respect, consent, and dignity, churches can promote positive sexuality consistent with biblical and African moral principles. Men and women are encouraged to co-create ethical norms that uphold gender equity and holistic community well-being. Rather than discarding indigenous practices, feminist theology offers a path to reinterpret them in ways that affirm justice, inclusion, and the flourishing of all members.

Through education, leadership engagement, pastoral care, community involvement, incremental change, and ethical reframing, feminist theology can enrich Lutheran teaching in ELCSA. This approach fosters community ownership, mitigates resistance from traditionalists, and ensures that African Christian ethics remains central, enabling a church that is both faithful to tradition and responsive to women's lived experiences.

6.7 Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the findings of this dissertation, several areas for further research emerge:

- **Comparative Denominational Studies**

Future research could examine how women's sexuality is shaped in other Christian denominations in Southern Africa, such as the Roman Catholic Church, Pentecostal traditions, or African Independent Churches. A comparative approach would highlight whether similar patriarchal ethical constructs are at play and how different traditions engage with feminist reinterpretations.

- **Intersectional Analyses**

This study primarily focused on gender and sexuality; however, further research should incorporate intersectional perspectives, examining how race, class, rural/urban location, and generational differences shape women's experiences of sexuality in ELCSA. Such work would provide a more nuanced understanding of women's diverse realities.

- **Engagement with Male Perspectives**

While this dissertation centred women's voices, future studies could explore how men (both clergy and laity) understand and reproduce (or resist) Christian sexual ethics. Investigating male perspectives would shed light on the dynamics of power, complicity, and potential allies in reimagining inclusive frameworks.

- **Practical Theology and Pastoral Approaches**

Additional research could focus on how feminist-informed frameworks can be translated into pastoral care, liturgical practices, and catechetical teaching. This would provide concrete strategies for transforming ecclesial practices and moving beyond theoretical reflection into lived ecclesial renewal.

- **Global Lutheran Engagement**

Since the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa is part of a wider global Lutheran communion, future research could explore how feminist-informed sexual ethics are being engaged within other Lutheran contexts worldwide, and what lessons or solidarities could be shared across regional and cultural boundaries.

These areas of further study would deepen the scope of feminist theological inquiry, broaden the conversation beyond the immediate context of this study, and contribute to the ongoing task of developing liberative, inclusive, and justice-oriented Christian ethics within and beyond ELCSA.

6.8 Closing Remarks

This study demonstrates that women's sexuality within ELCSA is shaped by intersecting theological, cultural, and social forces, yet remains a site of negotiation, resistance, and transformative potential. While patriarchal interpretations of Christian ethics continue to constrain sexual expression, women actively assert agency, advocate for positive sexuality, and seek inclusive understandings of faith. Integrating feminist perspectives, body theology, and indecent theology provides a pathway for ethical and theological reform that affirms women's dignity, embodied experiences, and sexual rights.

Centring women's voices enables the church to transform control into empowerment, silence into dialogue, and restriction into inclusion. By incorporating feminist-informed approaches into theology, pastoral care, education, and policy, ELCSA can foster a more just, holistic, and spiritually enriching understanding of sexuality, one that aligns faith with human dignity, equality, and flourishing.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I: Application for Ethics Approval

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL
For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE TEMPLATE

Note to researchers: Notwithstanding the need for scientific and legal accuracy, every effort should be made to produce a consent document that is as linguistically clear and simple as possible, without omitting important details as outlined below. Certified translated versions will be required once the original version is approved.

There are specific circumstances where witnessed verbal consent might be acceptable, and circumstances where individual informed consent may be waived by HSSREC.

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: 24 September 2024

Greetings: To mothers and young women within the Lutheran church ELCSA Pretoria Circuit.

I am Lesego Temane, a University of KwaZulu Natal student doing Gender and Religious studies. My interest is in gender and sexuality, especially in women's rights. My contact number is [redacted], t[redacted]

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research that uses a feminist Lens to analyze Christian Ethics and its effect on the sexuality of women within ELCSA Pretoria Circuit.

Christian Ethics and the church have always described how women should behave as sexual beings. The aim and purpose of this research is to examine ways in which women can have a say in how they should behave as sexual beings. The study is expected to enroll twenty (20) women between the age of 25-55 all from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (ELCSA) Central Diocese, Pretoria Circuit, which is in Gauteng Province, Tshwane District.
The study will involve the following procedures: there will be a questionnaire that needs to be filled in. The questionnaire will be followed by a one-on-one interview. Where necessary, a follow-up interview will be held. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be a maximum of two (2) months. The study is not funded thus I will personally travel to where the participants are so that they don't incur any cost for participating in this research.

The study may involve the following risks and/or discomforts, it will require you to be honest and open about how you feel. It will require you to be free to tap into your innermost

feelings without being judged. We hope that the study will create the following benefits for women in ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit

- A platform to find posture as spiritual as well as sexual beings.
- It will award them a platform to have a say in how they want to be defined as sexual beings.
- An opportunity to make choices with regards to their bodies and their bodily needs.
- Award women a voice in contributing to body theology that is life-affirming and that will allow women an opportunity to flourish.
- The information participants will provide will assist the research to determine if there is a need to reshape or deconstruct historic Christian Ethics.

The research does not involve any risks that will require medical and/or psychosocial intervention, however, should any participant feel the need for any of the abovementioned interventions, a referral will be made.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at ([redacted] or 219086391@stu.ukzn.ac.za OR my supervisor siwila@ukzn.ac.za 033 260 6485) 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

If you agree to participate in this study, please note that your participation is non-binding and on a voluntary basis. Should you decide at any stage to withdraw, you are free to do so. In the event of withdrawal of participation, you as the participants will not incur any penalty or loss of treatment or any other benefit which you are normally entitled to. Should you wish to withdraw your participation, please do it by writing e.g WhatsApp message or SMS a week before we begin. Fabricating stories and lying are not acceptable in this study. Should a participant be found guilty for any of the abovementioned issues, the researcher will be forced to terminate the participant from the study. This is very important to note.

Any information provided by the participant will be kept confidential. When writing a report, the researcher will use pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants. The data will be saved at a locked office and no one other than the researcher and the supervisor will have access to stored information. Full confidentiality will be guaranteed.

CONSENT

I (Name) have been informed about the study entitled Feminist analysis of Christian Ethics and its effects on women within ELCSA, Pretoria Circuit by Lesego Temane.

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.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at cell: [redacted] or email: [redacted] OR my supervisor email: siwila@ukzn.ac.za ,tel: (033 260 6485)

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:

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

_____ _____

Signature of Participant **Date**

Appendix II: Ethical Clearance

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

03 February 2025

Rev Lesego Martha Temane (219086391)
School of Rel Phil & Classics
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear Rev Temane,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00008033/2024
Project title: A feminist analysis of Christian ethics and their effects on sexuality of women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa
Degree: PhD

Approval Notification – Full Committee Reviewed Protocol

This letter serves to notify you that your response received on 28 January 2025 to our letter of 17 December 2024 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid for one year until 03 February 2026
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours faithfully

[redacted]

.....
Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair) /nng

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix III: Gatekeeper's Letter

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA
(ELCSA) CENTRAL DIOCESE

Growing Together In Christ

PRETORIA CIRCUIT

01 Sompane Street, Atteridgeville, Pretoria 0008
P.O.Box 47, Atteridgeville, 0008.

To whom it may concern

Be greeted in Christ Jesus name while remembering that He suffered so that we ourselves may be crowned Victorious at His resurrection. While we were sinners, He demonstrated His love by dying for us. Rom 5:8

This letter gives permission for your student (219086391) Rev Lesego Temane who is part of clergy within Pretoria Circuit, working under my supervision to conduct interviews within the Circuit. She is doing research on the following topic:

A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON SEXUALITY OF WOMEN IN THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA, CENTRAL DIOCESE, PRETORIA CIRCUIT

I understand that she will be handing out questionnaires and also doing face to face interviews where-by she will be directly interfaced with participants. She assured me that participants will not be harmed or exposed to any form of danger thus I support and approves her conducting her research project within this Circuit.

Your acceptance of this letter will be highly appreciated

[redacted]

Be Blessed n Stay Blessed

Rev L H Molebatsi

Dean of Pretoria Circuit

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
CENTRAL DIOCESE
PRETORIA CIRCUIT
1 SOMPANE STREET
ATTERIDGEVILLE
P.O. BOX 47
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

PRETORIA CIRCUIT EXECUTIVE COUNCIL MEMBERS: ***Dean**: Rev. Herbert Molebatsi;* ***Dean's Deputy**: Rev. Sipho Mthethwa* ***Chairperson**: Jeff Nthite;* ***Deputy Chairperson**: [Vacant];* ***Secretary**: Joseph Lemao;* ***Assistant Secretary**: Merriam Bvuma;* ***Treasurer**: Thiathu Mulaudzi.* ***Circuit Delegate to DC**: Kutlwano Huma;* ***Synod Delegates**: Adv. Andrew Matube, Shayne Van Rooyen, Mokgadi Senyolo,* ***Pastor's Reps to PCC**: Rev. Timothy Chao, Rev. Richard Munzhelele,* ***Chairpersons of L&O**: YAL-Prince Monama, YL-Rep Mpho Sithole, PML-Solly Bosoga, PWF-Blossom Rantloane, PWL-Sugar Ntwampe, ELCSAMO-Semele Tseka*

Appendix IV: Interview Schedule

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

FOCUS AREA	EXAMPLE OF PROBING QUESTIONS
1. Introduction of the study	What is your understanding of sexuality of women?
2. Diagnosis of the study	What informed your knowledge regarding sexuality of women?
	Can you share examples of norms in your church that speaks to human sexual engagements?
3. Perceptions on current and past practices	If you reflect on the church`s teachings on sexuality, do you think they are still relevant to-date?
4. Social justice	Do you think that Christian ethical principles offer life affirming spaces for women to embrace their sexuality within the church?
5. Evaluative	Reflecting on Christian ethics, is there anything that you think should be change?

Appendix V: Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. In your definition, what is sexuality?/What do you know about sexuality?

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2. Have you ever had a platform for engagements about sexuality in your church? / with your pastor? If Yes, please elaborate.

YES NO

3. Do you believe that women should have the right to make choices about their bodies?

YES NO

4. In your opinion, what defines positive sexuality for Christian women?

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5. Do you know what Lutheran Ethics say about women and their bodies?

YES NO

6. Do you think it is fair for women to go through penitential class and exclude men? If yes, please elaborate.

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7. If sexual ethics would include voices of women, what would you as a women recommend to be included or excluded on sexual ethics?

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8. Should divorced women not be allowed to have sexual engagements?

YES NO

9. Should widowed women not be allowed to have sexual engagements?

YES NO

10. Do you think sex before marriage is a sin? If yes, please elaborate.

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11. Feminist theology informs positive sexuality for women and Christian sexual ethics puts restrictions on women`s bodies. Do we lose our rights as women when we enter the church?

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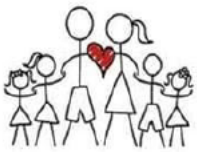
Appendix VI: Social Worker's Letter



Nalini Paul
Social Worker in Private Practice

Specializing in Family Care and Support
Registered with the SA Medical and Dental Council
Practice No: 089 [redacted] 0321
SACSSP No: 10 15988

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Pietermaritzburg
[redacted]
privatesocialworker17@gmail.com

10/10/2024

To whom it may concern

I Nalini Paul am a social worker in private practice. My practice no is [redacted] 610 321.

I am willing to offer my services for participants of the research, which will be conducted by Rev Lesego Temane, Id No. [redacted], Student No. 219086391

Her research topic is on Feminist analysis of Christian Ethics and their effects on sexuality of women in ELCSA Pretoria Circuit. This research is done in the field of theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg.

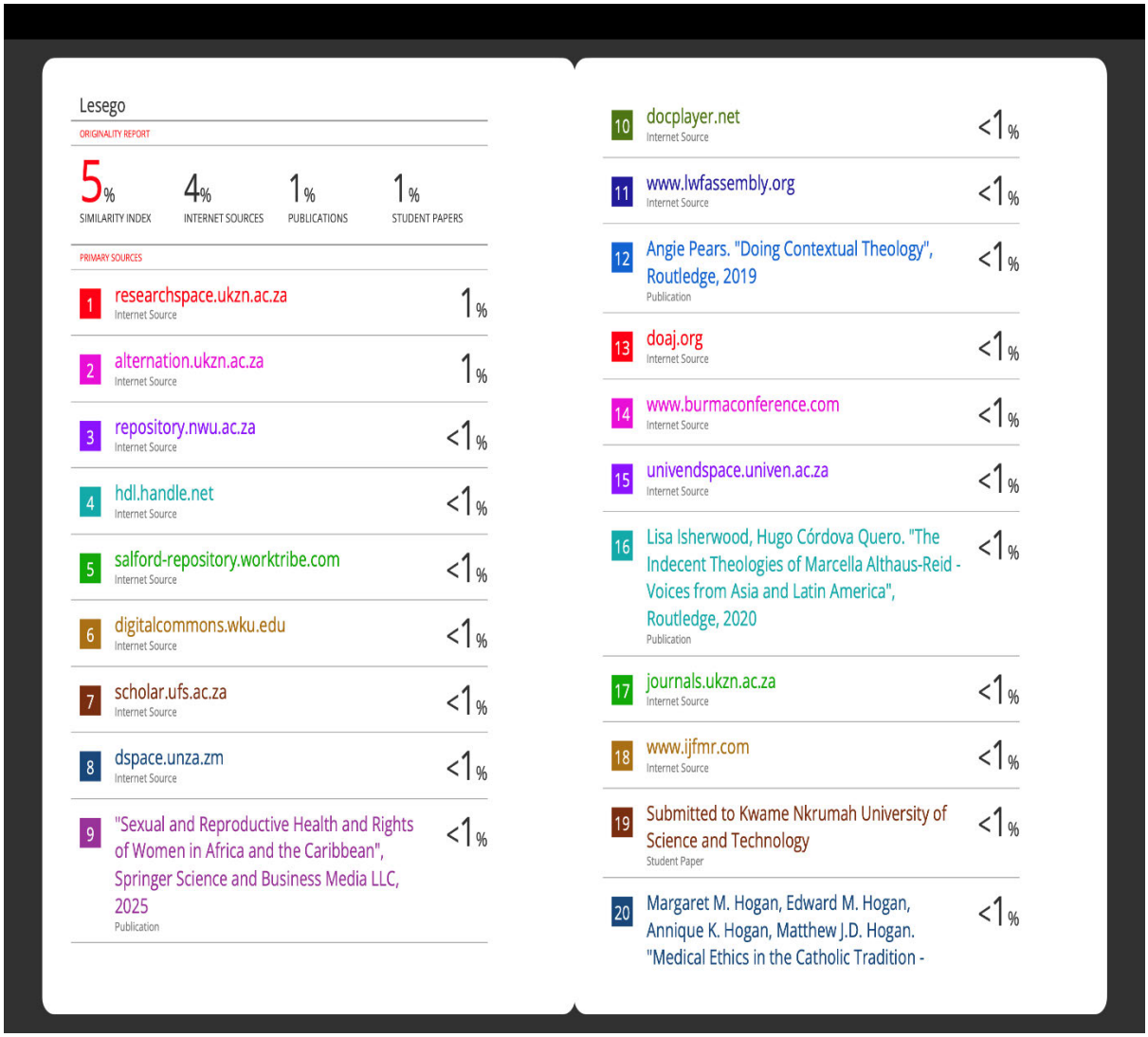
Should you have any further queries you may contact me on the details below:
Cell: [redacted]
Email: [redacted]

Kind regards

[redacted]

Nalini Paul
Social Worker

Appendix VII: Turnitin Report



Lesego

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