Stitching Narratives of Gender-based Violence: Meaning-making through Embroidery

Puleng Segalo

University of South Africa

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Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol24/iss4/5
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By Puleng Segalo

Abstract

COVID-19 has altered how we engage with one another. With social distancing as the new norm, and the prolonged lockdown having affected people at various levels of their lives, life has had to be reimagined and reconfigured. One of the things that has remained stable, if not worsened, is the challenge of gender-based violence. In South Africa and many other countries in the world, when strict lockdown rules were introduced, Gender-Based Violence (GBV) started making headlines on many media platforms, sparking protests, online dialogues, and online support networks for those affected. While people were worried about protecting themselves against COVID-19, many women had to shoulder the added burden of worrying about their safety within their own homes. While the South African lockdown was meant for the nation’s safety (e.g., ensuring the minimization of infections), it also created a “nest” and “feeling of entrapment” for women experiencing gender-related violence. Drawing from a decolonial feminist approach, this article explores how needlework in the form of embroidery can be used to visually depict how gender-based violence affects families, and communities more broadly. Specific attention is given to how community women visually and creatively make meaning of gender-based violence and the various ways it manifests in their communities. The article concludes by offering some possible avenues for reflecting on and reimagining ways in which GBV could be tackled.

Keywords: embroidery, gender-based violence, COVID-19, decolonial feminism, visual methods

Introduction

The night is so still,
My mind is racing as I think of my options,
As I wonder whether I have any options,
For he reminded me that should I breathe a word to anyone, he will finish me.

Locked in this house alone with him for 21 days,
I count each day as it passes by, slowly,
As I struggle to breathe,
Feeling the suffocation of his presence.
(Excerpt from the poem, In the Still of the night, by Puleng Segalo)

1 Puleng Segalo is a National Research Foundation (NRF) rated Fulbright scholar and a Professor of Psychology at the University of South Africa. She currently holds the position of the Chief Albert Luthuli Research Chair which is housed in the College of Human Sciences. Her areas of research are Community and Social psychology, Historical Trauma, and Gender Studies. Her research focuses specifically on the experiences of African women and the importance of offering voice to the many muted voices of women. She believes in social justice and the importance of knowing one’s history. Her passion is mentoring young women and challenging gender injustices. She can be reached at segalpj@unisa.ac.za. Her ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7724-5434
The COVID-19 regulation of hard lockdown was meant for the nation’s safety, i.e., to ensure the minimization of infections. However, it also created a sense of entrapment for women experiencing gender-related violence in their homes. According to Shalu Nigam, “Coronavirus has also revealed the ugly face of crime committed within the so-called sacred domain of home” (2020, n.p.). Numerous scholars (Al-Ali, 2020; Cousins, 2020; Donato, 2020; Nduna & Oyama, 2020; Nigam, 2020; Parry & Gordon, 2021; Uzobo, & Ayinmoro, 2021) have engaged the devastating effects of COVID-19 on women’s lives; how women felt trapped, how their homes became unsafe spaces during the lockdown, and how women were/are caught between the pandemic of gender-based violence (GBV) and that of COVID-19. While details of call centres and websites were quickly made available to the public, many women were trapped in cramped spaces where privacy or reaching out was impossible. According to Jahid (qtd in Sifat, 2020, p.1),

in Bangladesh, there is growing evidence that domestic violence acts as an opportunistic infection that thrives in pandemic situations. Lockdown can also create a situation in which the victim cannot move out of the home to seek appropriate help and is more likely to be cut off from their normal support systems.

COVID-19 has laid bare the often-hidden scars carried by women, many of whom are sole caregivers of their children (Parry & Gordon, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis has put a spotlight on the multidimensional issues that confront South Africa, a country with a very high unemployment rate. According to F. Udo (2020), in the first week (March 2020) of lockdown in South Africa, over 87 000 reports of gender-based violence were made to the police – and in the third week, the number had escalated to 120 000. This figure offers a glimpse of the magnitude of GBV in a country such as South Africa. Responding to these high numbers, the South African president, Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa, expressed in his weekly email (April 2020) how “it is disturbing that […] women and girls are being terrorised inside their own homes, forcing them to make desperate calls for help”. This terror is what many women live with daily; a condition made worse by the outbreak of COVID-19. The 2017/2018 Police Statistics and Statistics South Africa (2018) report that one woman is killed every three hours in South Africa and half of these are killed by men with whom they have a relationship.

The challenge of gender-based violence in South Africa is pervasive and complex, as the UN special rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonovic, observed on her 2015 visit to South Africa:

I have heard on many occasions that violence against women is normalized in South Africa […]. The violence inherited from apartheid still resonates profoundly in today’s South African society, dominated by deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes towards the role of women in society, which makes violence against women and children an almost accepted social phenomenon. Despite an arsenal of progressive laws and policies to deal with gender-based violence put very ably in place, there has been little implementation, hence little impact, and gender-based violence continues to be pervasive and at the level of systematic women’s human rights violations.

From colonialism to apartheid, and now in ‘post’-apartheid South Africa, women (and Black women in particular) continue to exist in what Frantz Fanon (1952) calls the zone of non-being. Their humanity is always in question as they continue to be brutalized, side-lined, ignored, and violated as if their existence does not matter. Their roles as homemakers, community builders, peacekeepers, activists, and more continue to be ignored. They are seen as disposable and less than human. They experience what Walter Mignolo (2007) calls the
coloniality of being, where talks about gender equality, women’s rights, and emancipation continue to be hollow slogans that disregard women’s agency and their right to be treated first and foremost as humans. According to Mignolo, the concept of the “coloniality of being” speaks to “the need to thematise the question of the effects of coloniality in lived experience and not only in the mind” (2007, p. 242). South Africa has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence, with femicide being one of the main challenges women face in various communities. The country’s lockdown brought with it an added challenge that saw many women reaching out to the police within the very first weeks of the lockdown.

COVID-19 made hyper-visible the perpetual challenges that are faced by many women and gender non-conforming individuals in many communities across the globe. It is critical to pay attention to manifestations of gendered violence within communities and how women create safety zones, spaces of care, and resistance. The current crisis puts a spotlight on the multidimensional issues that confront South Africa. In this article, I point out how the usage of visual artistic methodologies in the form of embroidery can provide us with an avenue to highlight the multi-layered ways in which gendered violence is woven into everyday encounters. I offer the following provocations: what does GBV look like? Who is involved? Whom does it affect? What are its implications/consequences? And what possibilities are there for us to confront it?

On COVID-19, Home, and Gender-based Violence

Puleng Segalo and Michelle Fine (2020) call for the re-imagining of the home as a complex space – where both care and violence can co-exist; where feeling safe and being in danger can co-exist. They argue that the home space privatizes suffering, pain, and violence and that this privatization needs to be problematized. From the foregoing, there is a need to acknowledge that homes (private spaces) are affected by capitalism, global markets, and patriarchal systems. To this end, gender-based violence is not an individual but a collective/structural challenge. When women are violated at homes, it affects familial relations, productivity at work, and overall societal functioning. COVID-19 has highlighted these knotty intersections. As Segalo and Fine (2020, p. 3) note:

as COVID has made painfully clear today, when the world is unsafe, and the state fails, home is the space where dependencies, pain, fear, and existential terrors flee. The original carved-out space for privatization, the home and intimate hetero and child-rearing relations, constitute a swelling and throbbing affective zone where care and solidarities, power and brutality, property and bodily rights, and violations can be found.

In a similar tone, Shalu Nigam (2020, n.p.) argues that:

Home, in simple terms, conveys a place which is associated with simple pleasures, privacy, freedom, security, togetherness and a sense of belonging. In complex notion, home is a space where the household tasks of caring as well as the politics of domestic social relations are embedded in the relation of power and patriarchy. It is therefore also associated with slavery, feudalism, capitalism and a site for production and reproduction of patriarchal ethos.

It is, therefore, critical to rethink how we think about the idea of home and acknowledge the intersections that influence the ways in which women experience the home space. When the public and the private co-exist in the home space, how can women navigate their space, agency, and feeling of safety when brutality exists alongside love? How can women navigate
the inconsistencies they are perpetually confronted with? We need to lay bare and grapple with these contradictions if we are to reimagine home as a place where patriarchy can be challenged, power relations can be interrogated, and women’s voices heard.

**The Power of the Collective**

(Black) South African women have for a long time believed in the power of the collective. Their belief in solidarity and collective resistance has always been one of their strategies for survival (Sullivan & Stevens, 2010). Importantly, the solidarity is not in isolation but in recognition of their coexistence with men. This recognition assisted in fighting the apartheid regime, where women understood that their freedom was interwoven with that of their male counterparts.

Working together with a group of women embroiderers from a collective called *Intuthuko* (progress) based in the Ekurhuleni municipality in the Gauteng Province of South Africa, we sought to collectively engage the ways in which we could creatively make meaning of gender-based violence in our communities. We sought to create a space where we could, together, imagine ways in which challenges faced by communities because of gendered violence could be given attention. The project followed participatory action research, where I worked collaboratively with the women to produce knowledge through the making of embroideries. Working collaboratively affords what Moya (as cited in Kiguwa, 2006) calls “epistemic privilege”. The notion of epistemic privilege “for black women is only possible when they collectively acknowledge their shared and similar experiences” (Kiguwa, 2006, p. 14). Methodologically, we aimed to practically show how visual methodologies and approaches could be sources of knowledge based on skills that communities already have. The intended outcome was to show the possibility embroideries hold in assisting us to paint a picture of GBV challenges faced by communities and visually depict ways in which meaning is made around experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to gendered violence. The following questions steered our process: What are the various forms of gendered violence in our communities? How can community women give attention to challenges faced by communities because of gender-based violence? And how can embroideries be used to speak back and make visible the various ways in which gender-based violence manifests?

*Using Embroidery to Map the Everyday Experiences*

At a time when the globe is confronted with perpetual challenges of various forms of injustice that have been made more visible by the COVID-19 pandemic, artworks such as embroideries force people to pause and reflect on the perpetual injustices and challenges confronting us daily. Artistic visual images such as embroidery are useful tools that can be utilized to represent people’s reflections on their everyday experiences. Embroidery has the potential to contribute to how we make meaning of everyday realities that confront people, and how we can imagine the possible transformation of society. The practicality of doing needlework is a decolonial opportunity—the coming together of women is an important act that has healing potential. The personal encounter of women with each other to do a practical exercise of making embroidery while they share a meal, share stories, laugh, and create a sense of community is critical. This is more important in moments of crisis such as COVID-19, where people experience loss, loneliness, and a sense of hopelessness. Additionally, the women’s collective consists of an intergenerational group, which affords the opportunity for the transmission of stories and lived experiences from one generation to the next. In the moment of embroidery making, knowledge is shared, care for one another is expressed, and solidarities are forged.
Embroidery as a Method

I chose embroidery as a form of data collection because it offers a visual methodology. Embroidery “allows people to document their stories, pains, voices, struggles, subjectivities and dreams as they perceive them; they refuse linearity, transcendence or single-voicedness and enable narratives typically silenced” (Segalo & Fine, 2017, p. 109). Embroidery further allows space for the interweaving of people’s life stories with history. It highlights the importance of acknowledging the interconnections between the individual’s narrative, and how their experiences cannot be separated from those of their families and communities. Embroidery forces researchers to analyse the complexities, contradictions, and multi-dimensional understandings of life experiences. Furthermore, embroidery offers the opportunity to highlight structural violence and inequalities that have a direct impact on people’s everyday encounters.

Embroidery enables what Lois Weis and Michelle Fine (2012) call “critical bifocality” which compels us as scholars and researchers to stand back and notice, through the artwork, the interweaving of history, politics, and the role of various institutions in the making and unmaking of lives and communities. It is with this as a backdrop that I see using embroideries as one of the alternative platforms to grapple with what GBV means to families, communities, and to women who witness and experience it. Embroidery allows for collective seeing, for everyone participating in the project to be the teller of the narrative. To this end, embroidery carries decolonial possibilities.

According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 31), “there are numerous oral stories which tell of what it means, what it feels like, to be present while your history is erased before your eyes, dismissed as irrelevant, ignored or rendered as the lunatic ravings of drunken old people”. Using a decolonial approach means “being committed to producing research knowledge that documents social injustice, that recovers subjugated knowledges, that helps create spaces for the voices of the silenced to be expressed and ‘listened to,’ and that challenges racism, colonialism and oppression […]” (Smith, 1999, p.198). In critical research, “participants are not considered drive-by sources of information for the researcher, but rather are seen as active agents that contribute as equals to knowledge production, dissemination, and change” (Teo, 2015, p. 247). The women collaborators I worked with already had embroidery skills, and I had rapport with them as we had worked together before on a different project. The collective working on the GBV embroidery project consisted of 18 women, including myself.

I went into the community, acknowledging my role as an insider-outsider. I represent the university, and therefore I entered the space with the name of the university. However, I also acknowledged my role as an insider—as someone also coming from the township with whom the women collaborators could easily identify. I managed to establish respectful, reciprocal, and long-lasting relationships because I related easily to the community I worked with. The university/Western education alienates us from our communities and ways of knowing, and because of a long history of exploitation and one-way relationships the academy has had with communities, there is always some level of suspicion when we enter communities. As Thomas Teo (2015, p. 247) points out:

Because researchers are socio-historically constituted, as are the methods, concepts, theories, and practices they engage in, researchers need to assess critically the reasons for the choices they make in the process of knowledge-making and knowledge application. In addition, critical psychologists (researchers) need to examine their own biases and limitations from the perspective of their own social characteristics (e.g., class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability– disability). This reflexivity must include questions regarding the ways in which critical psychologists (researchers)
contribute to injustices—not only general questions about the role of power and money in research but also questions regarding how researchers themselves exert power in theory and practice.

We, therefore, need to rethink the ways in which we work together with communities; we need to create spaces where our community research collaborators have a more visible and bigger stake in the kinds of projects that happen within their spaces/communities. We need to think of ways and possibilities of having research projects that get developed alongside or with community members. We conduct research in communities that still carry the scars of colonial exploitation and that continue to suffer from structural inequities and lack of access to valuable resources. It is pertinent, therefore, that we acknowledge this, be humble, and conduct our work in ways that respect the humanity and dignity of people.

**Making of Embroideries: Process**

I draw from the Māori notion of *Kaupapa* (Smith, 2015), which privileges the principles of collective philosophy, and acknowledges communities’ aspirations, ideals, and hopes. *Kaupapa* is in line with the African notion of *Ubuntu*, which speaks to how a person is who they are through other people—that our well-being is interlinked with that of others. Drawing from these indigenous philosophies, it makes sense to approach my research process from a participatory perspective. Using participatory action research, the process started with me and the women collaborators, coming together as a collective to brainstorm how we define and make sense of gender-based violence in our communities. Sarah Mohr (2021, p. 2) asserts that participatory action research (PAR) “in its conceptualization challenges power relationships in the relationship between the researcher and subjects, or participants”. Mohr (2021, p. 2) goes on to argue that “PAR reframes knowledge production as inherently reflective of the perspectives and biases of the people who generate it”. PAR then does not presume to be objective, in fact, “a central tenet of PAR, then, is to disrupt and destabilize the characterization of traditional knowledge production and social science research as objective, apolitical, and democratic” (Houh & Kalsem, 2015, as cited in Mohr, 2021, p. 2). Our process of co-producing knowledge/ideas started with us sitting in a circle with flip charts, and there we used to brainstorm and record the themes that we collectively came up with. Following the brainstorming session, we purchased the embroidery materials and started with the embroidery process. We each decided on a theme we would like to focus on for the individual embroidery piece we would be making. Following the purchasing of the materials, the themes were first drawn onto the clothes with the assistance of a sketch artist, and this was followed by the making of the individual embroideries. The making of the embroideries involved us coming together weekly to make embroideries as a collective. It is worth noting that the making of the embroideries took place during an adjusted level 1 lockdown where restrictions were relaxed. All COVID-19 protocols were adhered to. The coming together allowed us space and the opportunity to reflect collectively and have conversations on the various themes we were each working on.

We met once a week, and the day started with us checking in and finding out how each person and their family were doing, sharing a meal together; checking on each other’s embroidery progress, and assisting one another with the stitching where needed. We worked from an understanding that the individual and the collective are interconnected, and, as a result, helping each is to the benefit of us all. Embroidery, as a form of needlework, allows those participating in its space to construct narratives and tell stories from their own perspective; by assisting each other, we acknowledged how we were implicated in each other’s stories. As a researcher using visual methodologies, I work with the assumption that increased participant control of data generated through the production of visual images can...
help to illuminate important aspects of lived experiences and perceptions that might otherwise have been overlooked or ignored by researchers—perhaps even be invisible. The making of embroideries allowed us to document the pains, struggles, and challenges faced by communities dealing with the scourge of GBV.

Embroidery offers the opportunity to highlight structural violence and inequalities that have a direct impact on people’s everyday encounters. Furthermore, embroidery offers space to those who embody the injustices (i.e., women) to create knowledge, produce and lay out their experiences onto the cloth that then becomes multi-layered with stories of pain, anger, resilience, resistance, and hope. To this end, our hope was that through making embroideries that focus on GBV, we could speak back and challenge the persistent inequalities and struggles faced by women and the marginalized in society. We further hoped that the embroideries created would offer an opportunity to speak beyond the local, to challenge the global cancer that is GBV. I ponder that it should be noted that participatory action research, which falls under the qualitative research method umbrella, is exploratory by nature. I, therefore, cannot claim exactness and precision. However, I intend to be trustworthy and, respectful, and always honour what my collaborators bring to the research space. In what follows, I shall offer three of the 18 embroideries that we produced. The three chosen embroideries were randomly selected and in no way serve as a representation of what themes are valued more. These are offered here as an illustration of the power of the visual. The embroideries provided here are meant to offer a glimpse of the many themes we gave attention to in the project. I draw from Luttrell’s (2010) notion of collaborative seeing to highlight how we can engage and make meaning of the embroideries in ways that allow for multiple interpretations—where the viewers can ‘see’ and make meaning of the visuals for themselves. The embroideries visually tell the narrative of GBV in colourful and creative ways, paying attention to moments of encounters where those who perpetrate and those whom the violence is perpetrated against appear in the same frame. The visual artwork invites the viewer to witness—the hope is that beyond the witnessing is a call for action.
Feeling Unsafe: The Production of Fear

Approaching women’s bodies as ‘lived’ would mean paying attention to how women, themselves, make meaning from their material bodies. The body itself would become the pivotal site at which gender, race, class struggle would be ‘read’. ‘Reading’ individual women’s lives/situations in this way would also enable insight into ‘the general situation of women – in terms of the ways in which social structures and regulatory discourses might work to structure or limit women’s freedom (Chadwick, 2006, p. 247).

In her book entitled Rape: A South African Nightmare, Pumla Gqola (2015) introduces us to the concept of ‘the female fear factory’. Gqola (2015) argues that we live in a society where fear is manufactured, created, and produced by patriarchal and unjust structural violent systems, which in turn leads to women living in perpetual fear. The high rates of gendered violence which are perpetrated against women means they cannot feel safe within and outside of their homes – their bodies are regulated and controlled; in other words, they do not entirely own their bodies. As can be seen in the embroidery above, a woman walking in the street runs the risk of being violated, robbed, and reduced to ‘kneeling down’ for mercy. Conducting daily routines such as going to the grocery store or leaving one’s house to run errands has become a dangerous endeavour. The streets are not safe for women as they are...
never sure whether they will make it back home safely. This factory of fear leads to possible trauma from the everyday possibility of being attacked, of feeling unsafe, of constant fear for one’s life. Tamaryn Jane Nicholson (2016, p. 52), in her reflection of Pumla Gqola’s book, *Rape: A South African nightmare*, argues that “no woman can be empowered when her body and psyche are routinely subjected to acts of war, and how warnings to women about how we must protect ourselves against violence serve as constant reminders that South African spaces do not belong to us”. Nicholson’s assertion is in line with Chielozona Eze’s (2014, p. 92) argument that “the fundamental assumption of patriarchy raises the question of whether women’s bodies really belong to them because it assumes that women’s bodies belong to society, i.e., men”. Patriarchy robs women of their agency, and as Kiguwa points out, “when women do not imagine themselves as victims or dependents of dominant male authority but as agents of their own lives, they assume ‘agency’. Agency in broad terms, may be described as the capacity to act” (2006, p. 14). Feeling unsafe and in a constant state of fear makes it difficult for many women to exercise their agency—when society is structured in ways that make women victims, then patriarchy prevails. With the visual depictions of this production of fear, the aim is to spotlight/zoom in and draw attention to how problematic it is to rob women of their agency.

Figure 2: Embroidery depicting human trafficking
*Hiding in Plain Sight: The Complexities of Human Trafficking*
One of the themes that stood out as part of our reflections was the issue of human trafficking. The trafficking of women and girls within communities is part of the gendered violence that confronts many families. Young girls are abducted at schools, at the malls, and many get lured through false promises by people they meet on social media. It is critical to note the linkages between human trafficking and the persistent inequalities and pervasive poverty faced by many people in society. To this end, the challenge should be approached from a holistic and systematic view, acknowledging the many factors that play a role in creating a fertile ground for the trafficking of women and children. According to Bello and Olutola (2018, p. 275), human trafficking:

is not a once-off event, but a product of certain interlocking factors and processes. Most of these factors are embedded in current socio-cultural, political, economic, and technological milieu of most countries of the world, especially the less developed and developing nations, including the Republic of South Africa.

South Africa, like many other countries in the world, has made attempts to put processes in place to combat the challenge of human trafficking. In 2015, the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act of 2013 (PACOTIP) came into operation. The aim of PACOTIP is to identify and prosecute those who are part of human trafficking operations. The 2015 and 2020 United States trafficking in-person reports have indicated that South Africa falls under Tier 2 which consists of “countries whose governments do not fully meet the TVPA’s (Trafficking Victims Protection Act) minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards” (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2020, p. 40). All countries in the world are ranked according to various tiers, which aim at determining the efforts countries make to combat human trafficking. According to the 2015 report:

South Africa is a source, transit, and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labour and sex trafficking. South Africans constitute the largest number of victims within the country. South African children are recruited from poor rural areas to urban centres, such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and Bloemfontein, where girls are subjected to sex trafficking and domestic servitude and boys are forced to work in street vending, food service, begging, criminal activities, and agriculture. Large numbers of children, including those with disabilities, are exploited in forced begging.

For both the 2015 and 2020 reporting periods, it was highlighted that government officials were involved in corrupt activities linked to human trafficking, and some were complicit in not acting where needed. While there may be legislation in place, this is insufficient, and a concerted effort is required to ensure that human trafficking is combated. According to the 2020 report, “the (South African) government approved its National Policy Framework, a strategic plan including a national action plan intended to improve capacity and coordination to combat trafficking among government agencies”. A study by Paul Oluwatosin Bello and Adewale A. Olutola (2018), highlights some of the challenges confronting the legal system: lack of funding to follow through with some of the investigations, lack of capacity and manpower, being unable to track human traffickers, lack of reporting; and lack of training of officers so they may properly respond to human trafficking cases. In addition, corruption continues to be a cancer in society that hinders proper delivery of service and the protection of ordinary citizens from various forms of exploitation.
Figure 3: Embroidery depicting silence, fear, and shame

Silence, Fear, and Shame

Gender-based violence thrives because of the lack of support and safe spaces for those who are violated to share their experiences. Some ‘choose’ to keep silent because of the shame, further victimization, fear, and threats that should they speak, they will be in more danger. In 2020, a South African rape statistics report indicated that there were 116 rape cases on average reported per day. In her book, Rape: A South African nightmare, Pumla Gqola (2015) urges us to understand and approach rape holistically and not look at it in isolation. She sees rape as an action that takes place within a violent system that ‘forces victims to prove their lived trauma’. Rape should be understood within the historical context of colonialism, apartheid, and patriarchy. In these contexts, (Black) women have been rendered unrapable – shame often finds a home in spaces where oppression and suffering are constant (rape as a shameful act – accompanied by the possibility of not being believed). According to Gqola (2015), white supremacist colonial culture perceives Black women’s bodies as over-sexualized, deviant, and spectacular. This perception has contributed over time to the ‘unbelievability’ of Black women reporting rape—and as a result, the un-mournable
trauma and suffering they experience. The above embroidery speaks to how women are silenced (both figuratively and literally) and, as a result, unable to speak of their pain and suffering. This silencing is in line with the production of fear, where, as stated earlier, even within the home, many women do not feel safe. The silencing happens at multiple levels:

I. Silence of girls being sexually molested by family members in the home,
II. Silence of girls being sexually assaulted at schools,
III. Silence of young women sexually assaulted within the walls of institutions of higher learning,
IV. Silence of women assaulted by intimate partners who threaten their lives and hold them hostage,
V. Silence of women sexually assaulted in the workplace.

In her call for action, Gqola stresses that: “it is time to apply pressure on men who rape, those who make excuses for rapists, those who make rape ‘jokes’, and to pressure our government to create a criminal justice system that works to bring the possibility of justice to rape survivors and all other survivors of violence” (2015, p. 15). It is only through ensuring that accountability and prosecution take place that justice can be realized. It is when the judiciary system does not treat women as suspects who are to be listened to with suspicion that we may move towards real accountability and the possibility of a safe world for those who suffer gendered violence.

Final Thoughts

The recent (August 2021) horrific death of a student at one of the institutions of higher learning in South Africa, whose dismembered body was packed in a suitcase by her ex-boyfriend, is a painful reminder of work that still needs to be done if we are to combat GBV. We continue a journey to fight for the humanity of women and their right to exist in a world where their very existence (of being women) does not put them at perpetual risk of unspeakable violations and even death. We need to collectively critique, challenge, and work collaboratively for social justice. We are communities under siege, and we need to demand justice and acknowledgement of women as fully human beings whose humanity should be protected. I echo Eze’s (2014, p. 101) assertion that “to write about the wrongs of society is to take steps towards righting them by drawing people’s attention to them” because silence should never be an option in the face of violations of human rights.

Conclusion

This article sought to highlight how South Africa continues to be home to gruesome acts of gender-based violence. I pointed to the ways in which Covid-19 played a role in amplifying and making hyper-visible, the acts of gendered violence. Using embroidery as a visual methodology, I sought to visually depict the myriad ways in which GBV manifests in the various corners of our society and to lay bare its multidimensional nature. To give attention to it, therefore, would require a systemic, micro-macro level, and multi-dimensional approach that involves various members of society – from the judiciary to the civil society.

Acknowledgement
This essay is based on research supported by the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS), in South Africa.
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