

SECTION ON GENDER JUSTICE

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A Introduction

A major challenge for the ecumenical movement in the 21st century is to work for gender justice and partnership of women and men. The church has been slow in recognising women as equal partners with men. This is evident in the ecumenical movement and in many churches, where the “glass ceiling” is still very much intact. The paradigm of power relations based on patriarchy remains prevalent in church and society and is sustained by systems of hierarchy, domination and control. It is intrinsic to sexism, racism, tribalism, casteism, xenophobia, homophobia and other related intolerances. Gender and economic injustice, violence, HIV and AIDS and a whole range of societal issues are rooted or affected by power relations between women and men.

Gender as a transformational concept, grew out of the realization that women’s disempowerment concerns not only women, but also men and the wider society. Gender analysis is critical in examining and making visible inequalities and injustices that exist, not only between men and women, but also in other situations affected by power and domination. Gender justice speaks to the need for men to work in partnership with women, with the understanding that women and men are created by God, redeemed by Christ, and gifted by the Spirit without distinction or partiality. It refers to just and right relationships, mutual respect and accountability of women and men; respect for creation; the recognition of women’s rights as human rights and the right for both women and men to live life in fullness.

B Biblical and theological references

Theology comes alive when it responds to questions of life. Gender and theology offers dynamic ways in understanding how God is speaking about creation and the interconnectedness of women, men and community. The Bible is more than a historical document. It is inspired Scripture that speaks about God’s love, compassion and liberation for all of creation. Theology helps us probe deeper, beyond the traditional stereotypes for God. Women and men are both created in God’s image (Genesis 2:26) to live in partnership with each other. They are made to act in love, compassion and justice. Feminist and womanist theologians have made significant contribution to theology by introducing new approaches to biblical interpretation. They have looked to the Bible for liberation perspectives, not only for women, but also for all those who are marginalized.

The Gospels tell of ground breaking encounters and experiences of women with Jesus, their brother and friend, who demonstrates his solidarity with their struggle within a patriarchal society. He stands on the side of justice for women and shares in their lives, offering them friendship, compassion, and understanding, thus restoring them to dignity as children of God. There are many Bible stories of women as prophets, preachers, healers, leaders, mothers, sisters, and nurturers of life. The women, who, after his crucifixion, went to Jesus’ tomb to pay their last respects, were the first to receive the good news of his victory over death. They were charged to go and spread the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, many churches deny them this God given gift.

Reformed Protestants speak of the "priesthood of all believers" and the “community of believers” as images for the Church. We believe that Christ has set us free from bondage and sin, to freedom and new possibilities. The old baptismal formula: *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28), empowers the community of those baptized into Jesus Christ, to break all human barriers. Women and men, who see this vision of God’s reign and the new creation, are drawn by God’s future and empowered to break free from the patriarchal past.

Oneness in Christ compels the Christian community to challenge injustices and power constructions, which separate men and women, rich and poor, black and white, young and old, and across other differences. The Church of Jesus Christ cannot be one which divides people. The Church is part of humanity, which participates

in the communion of God, in faith, hope and glorification of God's name. John Calvin defined ministry as apostolic, supported by an egalitarian rather than hierarchical structure.

C Section on Gender Justice

The Gender Justice Section will provide space to hear from delegates about the situation of women in their churches and give an assessment of advancement and setback. The Section will review the work of the gender justice programme from 2004 to 2010, deliberate on key issues including reflections on gender justice as critical to being a communion. Delegates will discern how the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) will witness to the call to bring about gender justice and partnership of women and men in church and society.

The Section will propose ways to move forward and will give directions to the WCRC, Area Councils and member churches. The main expected outcomes are: 1) highlights of advancement and setback of women and gender justice, 2) a prophetic word for church and society on gender justice and the advancement of women, and 3) a report to the Uniting General Council to be incorporated into its Policy Report. The report will be the main gender justice document for WCRC to provide vision, direction and setting priority for gender justice and partnership of women and men.

In preparation for the Section meeting in Grand Rapids, churches are asked to prepare a critical assessment of advancement and setback regarding women in their churches. Delegates need to be equipped with knowledge and information on priority gender justice issues for the Reformed family and also with a vision on how to move forward with gender justice in the WCRC.

D Brief overview of Gender Justice in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches – 2004 to 2010

The perspectives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) on gender are founded on the principles of gender equality with justice and partnership as its goal. It is rooted in the belief that the Church of Jesus Christ belongs equally to women and men, who are both called to work for mutual respect, dignity and caring communities, based on justice, love, understanding and right relationships. The main objectives of the gender justice programme are: 1) to challenge patriarchy (its ideology, structures and images) and the systemic exclusion of women in the church; 2) to enable churches to identify and address gender injustices, 3) to strengthen women's participation in the ecumenical movement - ensuring that their voices and visions are included, and 4) to facilitate renewal and transformation of churches. The Alliance developed its programme with a pedagogical approach, which facilitates high involvement of women and men at all levels of the church. Importance is placed on contextual framework, life experiences and communication methodologies. The aim is to develop leaders who model patterns of ministry that foster renewal and transformation.

The 22nd General Council of WARC in Seoul, Korea, in 1989, placed emphasis on partnership and community of women and men, expressing the Alliance's concern for both women and men in church and society. The 23rd General Council of WARC in Debrecen, in 1997, established the first Department of Partnership of Women and Men with the aim to advance the Alliance's commitment to gender justice and to build partnership of women and men. At the 24th General Council in Accra, Ghana, in 2004, women who gathered for the Women Pre-Council spoke about the urgency to address threats to life, particularly regarding women and children. In a Statement, they affirmed "the right to live a whole life, to have healthy and affirmative relationships in society, as well as the challenge to create and maintain healthy relationships, both within the family and the wider community. To us this means that political domination in all its forms, globalization and other threats to life need to be resisted." (World Alliance of Reformed Churches 24th General Council Proceedings, Women's Pre-Council Statement, page 131)

The main gender justice foci since 2004 are on gender, leadership and power; ordination of women; theological education scholarship fund for women to prepare for the ordained ministry; men as partners: promoting positive masculinities and economy, ecology and empire. The office for gender justice also contributed to the strengthening of women's voices and visions in the organisation and to mainstreaming gender perspectives, methodologies and strategies in its work for justice. It has made critical input in the covenanting for justice process and has contributed significantly to feminist/womanist thinking on economy, ecology and empire.

E Main programme highlights

1. Gender, Leadership and Power is an important component for the Alliance and is aimed at deconstructing the paradigm of power, based on domination and control and to develop transformative processes that foster leadership models, which affirm justice and partnership. In November 2006, WARC held a leadership development workshop in the Pacific with the aims of building the capacity of churches to challenge patriarchal principles, values, systems and structures within the church; to narrow the gap between male and female leaders and to enrich ministry with increased participation of women. Key challenges identified for churches included recognition of leadership capacities in women, need to challenge perceptions, images and social orientation that perpetuate sexism and seeking accountability from leaders.

In June 2007, a global consultation on Gender, Leadership and Power was organised in collaboration with St Paul's United Theological College, Kenya. Its main goals were to identify and examine leadership models which limit partnership and inclusivity and to envision new models of leadership by drawing on feminist theology, principles and practice. Following the consultation, a proposal for a global study was developed with five themes: use of Bible and theology in church, globalization, cultural identity, leadership in the church and racial/ethnic identity.

In 2008, a Prize for Women in Leadership was established in partnership with the Reformed Church of Argovia, Switzerland. The prize was named after Sylvia Michel, a Swiss pastor who, in 1980, was the first woman to be president of a Swiss church. Every two years, a Prize of USD 5,000 is awarded to outstanding women leaders, who have made significant contribution to their church and/or community. The aim is to give recognition to women leaders, and to encourage and promote women in leadership.

2. Ordination of women is one of the ongoing priorities of the Alliance and is seen as a significant step in the advancement of women in the church. Following a number of theological studies and events, steps were taken to support women in the ordained ministry through accompaniment, advocacy and calling on churches to be accountable. The Alliance has accompanied women in the Czech Republic, Ukraine and in Eldoret, Kenya, through team visits, advocacy and dialogue regarding difficulties women face in the ordained ministry.
3. The Theological Education Scholarship Fund for Women granted awards to more than 75 women from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Pacific and Eastern and Southern Europe. The fund was established in 2001 and supports women in the south to study theology in preparation for the ordained ministry. It is also aimed at encouraging churches to accept women in the ordained ministry. The fund has been appreciated for reaching the grassroots and minority groups in churches, and for making theological studies accessible to women, who are breaking new ground in their churches. The fund has had an impact on member churches, particularly in the recognition of women's ministry and has inspired new dialogues and studies on women's ordination. However, there is still much work to be done in this area, especially where setback to women's advancement has had severe implications for churches.
4. There is an increasing recognition that gender justice will not be significantly advanced and partnership will not be achieved, if men are not prepared for it. The Accra General Council in 2004 recommended a focus on men and gender awareness to enable them to be partners with women in the work for gender justice. Men's partnership with women provides a good basis for shared interests and constructive relations on which gender justice can be based. To this aim, WARC developed a process of gender awareness for men and, between 2006 and 2010, held four workshops with various ecumenical partners. These workshops were developed with the model and approach of the WARC process of gender awareness and leadership development (which were done from 1999 to 2003). These workshops were well received by churches and resulted in a gender manual: *Created in God's Image: From Hierarchy to Partnership*. The manual has been translated into Burmese, Spanish, French and Mandarin. It is being used in many churches, within and beyond the Reformed family, and also in theological seminaries.

The workshops on Men as Partners: Promoting Positive Masculinities addressed key gender concerns, primarily from men's perspectives. They provided space for discussion on issues affecting men, women, church and community and on how to transform gender relationships. Sessions included - sense of self; shaping of a man; understanding gender, sexuality and partnership; gender based violence and HIV and AIDS. Bible studies were a key component, which included various methodologies and approaches. Together with the World Council of Churches, WARC is developing a new gender manual with male gender perspectives and partnership approach. It is intended as a resource for churches and seminaries and will be available by September 2010.

5. Other areas of work carried out by the office for gender justice included projects to address critical gender issues, such as economy, violence and HIV and AIDS. These were carried out as part of the covenanting for justice project and with WCC and other ecumenical partners. (For more on this area of work, see Background Paper for the Section on Justice in the Economy, Ecology and for all of God's Creation.). The Alliance has developed and nurtured good networks with ecumenical partners, seminaries and local churches. Such initiatives brought closer relationship with the World Council of Churches, Swiss churches, World Day of Prayer, Mission 21, Council for World Mission, United Methodist Church and theological institutes. Gender advocacy has also been a strong point of the Alliance, especially in statements to mark International Women's Day and International Day for Violence Against Women.

F The Way Forward

In their May 2009 report to the joint WARC/REC Executive Committee meeting, the Gender Justice Network recommended that "The World Communion of Reformed Churches build on the good work on gender justice and partnership of women and men and that this continue to be significant on the agenda." This follows the recognition that the Alliance has made a significant contribution in strengthening faith perspectives and in supporting action to address critical gender justice issues. This needs to be nurtured and advanced.

The following are recommendations based on the 2009 Executive Committee Report and on major consultations:

- that a small international core group, including feminist theologians, pastors, economists and climate change experts, be established to develop a process for churches' engagement on economic and climate justice issues with critical gender perspectives;
- that a map of WCRC member churches around the world be developed, indicating where the issues relating to women ordination and gender justice are not yet adequately addressed;
- that the study on gender, leadership and power (referred to in E above) be followed up by the WCRC; and
- that the WCRC strengthen the accompaniment programme for women in the ordained ministry. This should also be included on the agenda of WCRC leaders, when they visit member churches.

G Reference documents/publications

- *From Accra and Utrecht to Grand Rapids*, WARC/REC, February 2010
- Gender Justice Reports of the WARC Executive Committees, 2005, 2007 and 2009
- *Created in God's Image: From Hierarchy to Partnership*, Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth, July 2003
- Section paper on Justice in the Economy, the Earth and for all of God's Creation
- Women in the Alliance, Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth, 2010