

Gender Justice

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1. Introduction

In this session, we, Isabel Apawo Phiri and Philip Vinod Peacock have been given the responsibility of reflecting on the theme of justice drawing from the experiences of Africa and Asia while bearing in mind that injustice permeates every dimension of human relationships and our relationship with the earth be it from the global North or the global South. Furthermore, we are working with the assumption that while humanity has the ability to control, oppress and exploit others and the earth, those with power also have the capacity to use it to do good by enabling, empowering and emancipating the oppressed, especially when inspired by their belief in God of justice who is the creator of humanity and the universe. God has given power to all. Those with more power have a greater responsibility to stand, speak and act with and on behalf of those with less power like the marginalized and discriminated against. In this case, the world is calling upon the faith leaders to use their power for justice for the excluded and discriminated against and for the exploited planet earth.

We are also working with the understanding that in the World Communion of Reformed Churches we call each other to account for the implementation of issues that bind us together. As a communion we exercise our ministry of solidarity by listening to one another and accompany one another towards fulfilling our mandate from our Lord Jesus that all those who are created in the image of God are assisted to live their lives according to the declaration of Jesus that he came that all may have fullness of life in abundance (John 10:10).

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In our presentation, we engage the concept of gender justice through the lens of postcolonial theory. We affirm the comment of Musa Dube, a postcolonial New Testament scholar that:

‘The struggle for liberation of postcolonial feminist readers is located within the framework of resisting global and national structures of oppression – be they politically, economically, socially, or culturally based. Since gender oppression pervades all sectors of life, postcolonial feminist readers add gender analysis to the struggle of Two-Thirds World communities of resistance to ensure that national and international efforts of establishing justice do not side-line gender justice. Postcolonial feminists thus ask how various forms of national oppression affect women and men, how international forms of oppression affect men and women, how gender oppression functions with other forms of oppression such as class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. They also propose various ways of reading that will chart social justice and that take on gender justice in national and international relationships.’²

Given the above framework, we see a link between postcolonial theory and the justice discourse within the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

2. Our own locality and experiences

Feminist scholars globally have argued for experience as the foundation and valid starting point for any liberating theology.³ These experiences are believed to be contextually based, but even within the same context, these experiences take different turns due to various factors such as culture, religion, and status. Thus, feminist thought emphasises the need to consider specifics and the location of experience. Given the significance of this argument, it is important to specify our own locality of experiences, especially as related to the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

²Musa W. Dube, “Rahab Says Hello to Judith: A Decolonizing Feminist Reading,” in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah, 142–158 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publisher, 2006), 142.

³For a detailed discussion on the significance of experience for feminist theological thinking, see Isabel A. Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, “African Women’s Theologies,” in *African Theology on the Way: Current Conversations* edited by Diane B Stinton, 90-100 (London: SPCK, 2010), 91-93.

I, Isabel Apawo. Phiri, was introduced to gender justice discourse through the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians starting from 1989 when the Circle was founded.⁴ My Christian faith has been shaped by the Presbyterian tradition in Malawi and South Africa. In addition I have lived most of my Christian life with the tension of conservative evangelical tradition and ecumenical experiences. Coming from Malawi where literacy rate of the adult population is 65.75% (i.e. aged 15 years and above of whom 73% are men 59% are women),⁵ I cherish the privilege to have come from a family that valued education, especially of girl children. Having studied and worked in the academic world in secular institutions but closely connected with institutions of the church, I came to experience the complexity of power dynamics when a female lay person who identifies with a feminist framework is significantly contributing to the education of the male clergy. In the context of Africa, I am constantly asked: ‘How can one be an evangelical Christian and also be an activist for gender justice?’ This hard question comes from women who are in the church and have a conservative understanding of the Bible and women who are gender activist who feel that the Bible is a patriarchal book and that the structures of the church are too patriarchal for their comfort. In my case leaving the church is not an option. It is my home where I live out my faith in God while drawing from prophetic theology which has turned me into activist for justice of all forms of which gender justice is one. Working for the World Council of Churches has been an opportunity to bring local activism on justice issues informed by prophetic theology to the international platform where I have learnt to speak the truth to power with and on behalf of the marginalised of our society. Leading the implementation of the pilgrimage of justice and peace in the programmatic work of the WCC has made me appreciate the connection between peace and justice issues and the unity of the church. The unity of the church is the basis on which we walk together for justice and peace. I have seen the importance of the creation of intergenerational safe spaces for the people of God to listen to one another and be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to transform us.

In my life there have been two significant contacts with the then World Alliance of Reformed Churches which were life transforming and are relevant to the topic of gender justice. The

⁴ The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians was founded in 1989 by Mercy Amba Oduyoye with the purpose of creating safe space for African women Christians, Muslims, Jews and Indigenous Religions to come together and theologise about gender justice in the context of African religions, culture, political and economic context. African women wanted to generate literature about their experience of God and the society.

⁵ According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics (March 2016), 65.75% of the adult population (aged 15 years and above) in Malawi are able to read and write. For adult men, the literacy rate is 73% and for women it is 59%.

first was my participation in a women's consultation on the topic 'Walk My Sister: The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspectives'⁶ which took place at Kampen Theological Seminary in 1992. The consultation was organised by the Women's Desk of WARC. At this time WARC had just established the Programme on Partnership between Men and Women in the Church. Its aim was to 'encourage churches to promote partnership of women and men modelled in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Partnership was understood to be a gift of the Holy Spirit in which there is a new focus of relationship in Jesus Christ that brings wholeness and justice in communities.'⁷ Of significance was the fact that this was during the period of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998) built on the UN Decade for Women (1976-1985).⁸ The consultation organised by WARC left a big impression on me as we searched the scriptures together to understand afresh what God is saying to us about the place of women in the Church. At that consultation I found my Reformed sisters from all over the world who were raising the same questions I was raising in my own PhD studies as I worked with women and men of the Nkhoma Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Central Africa in Malawi. That consultation confirmed for me what Mercy Amba Oduyoye said in *Who Will Roll the Stone Away: The Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity With Women*,⁹ that the Ecumenical Decade was more of women in solidarity with each other than the churches in solidarity with women.

The second significant contact was in 1995 when the Executive Secretary of the Women's desk, Rev Dr Nyambura Njoroge and the then General Secretary, Rev Dr Milan Opocensky, wrote letters to my church in Malawi to express concern over the reaction of my church to the peaceful march of church women to present a petition raising issues of: lack of partnership between men and women in the church, violence against women, lack of participation of women in leadership roles including the ordination of women to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. The church women made history for being on such a march as it was the first of its kind. This should be understood in the context of the then just realised political transition

⁶ Phiri, Isabel Apawo, "The 'Proper' place of women (Genesis 1 and I timothy 2) A Biblical Exegetical Study from a Malawian Chewa Presbyterian Perspective." in *Walk my Sister' The Ordination of Women: Reformed Perspectives*. Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Vol. 18, July 1993, 42-33. And Phiri, Isabel Apawo, "Women's/Feminist Challenges for Wholeness" in *Reformed World*. Vol. 43, No. 4, Dec. 1993, 159-168.

⁷ See the letter of Nyambura Njoroge to the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian written in 1995 when she was the Executive Secretary for the Women's desk of WARC.

⁸ See the work of Dr Fulata Mbanjo Moyo on <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/women-and-men/history>

⁹ Published by World Council of Churches, 1991,

to democracy in the country where the church had played a significant role in taking a prophetic stand against all form of injustices experienced by Malawians in the country. Through the petition the women were demanding that the political and economic justice that the churches were seeking for all Malawians should include gender justice for women who are in the church and society too. In other words the church women were already pointing to the interconnectedness of oppression and the need for the church to be comprehensive in its resistance to all forms of oppression that dehumanises God's children irrespective of gender, race, age and class. The leadership of the church reacted negatively to the petition of the church women by setting a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the issue. Among other issues the Commission of Inquiry recommended the suspension of women church workers who were part of the march. The Commission also recommended that I leave the Blantyre Synod and go to the synod of my ancestors, Nkhoma Synod. I wrote back to the church to protest all the recommendations. Among other things I said:

‘I have no intentions of leaving the church unless I am asked by the church court to do so. My life has been lived in the grip of the Church. I have my roots in the CCAP.’¹⁰

Of particular significance to today's plenary topic was the letter of Rev Dr Milan Opocensky which stated;

‘the peaceful demonstration and the issues it had attempted to address had been widely publicized in Malawi, and thereby caught the attention of the international community, and that the world church was concerned indeed.

People who are aware of WARC's involvement in Malawi during the political transition are inquiring from us what we are doing to address the injustices the women have expressed in their petition to the church leadership in Malawi. Since Dr Njoroge has not received any response from your office, I kindly urge you to treat this matter with utmost priority, and send the report of the inquiry as soon as possible I am sure that you are aware that the implications of this whole affair go far beyond the issue of suspension. We are requesting the church to look seriously into how the whole church treats women and deals with their concerns. **Justice delayed is justice denied. The church has the responsibility of "breaking the chains of injustice",**¹¹ as the theme of the next General Council of WARC attests. The credibility of the local as well as the world church is at stake if concrete action is not taken to address the issue at hand: discrimination of women in the church and society.¹²

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¹¹ The use of bold letters is mine to emphasise the importance of what he was saying for us today.

¹² See the letter of Rev Dr Milan Opocensky to Blantyre Synod in 1995.

A pastoral team of six Reformed members was organised by WARC and sent to the Blantyre Synod to discuss the role of the Church in promoting justice in the country and the partnership of women and men. The letters from WARC and the pastoral visit had a huge impact on the churches commitment to resolve the issue because it was made clear that there is a link between what was happening in a member church with the wider Reformed family. It is about accompaniment and accountability to each other in the body of Christ, which I believe should always be the case to witness to the world that we are one.

Thereafter a process was established for church members and the leadership of the church on partnership between women and men in the church. This was the beginning of change and the concerns of the women were addressed over a period of five years. As from 2000, the Blantyre Synod has been ordaining women to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments and continues to work on the partnership of women and men in the church. This is an example to show that it is possible for a church in our communion to go through total transformation in the area of gender justice and continues to do more and more.

3. Discerning the signs of our times

At a global level and within our communion, we have seen that the partnership of women and men has continued to be pursued through asking different hard questions based on context. In some of our churches the conversation has continued to be about whether gender differentiation is as a result of creation by God and therefore given and to be accepted as the norm or to accept the argument of those who believe that gender is constructed by cultures and religions in our particular context and therefore is open to change with time as humanity evolve.

Difficult conversations are still taking place about how Jesus dealt with the question of gender differentiation in the society that he belonged to and what we today can learn from his way of being a man which was different from the men of his time.¹³ Questions are being asked whether or not to include studies on Patriarchal Masculinities and “Liberating Masculinities in our theological institutions or during seminars in our churches.

Our use of worship language is still in question. There are also debates still taking place about whether we should use inclusive language in our worship or continue to use male dominated language on the understanding that man stands for all humanity despite the fact that in 1975 the UN declared that the term man does not stand for all humanity.

Furthermore, hard conversations are still taking place about whether women should be allowed to take leadership positions in the church or not. There are still few women who are participating in leadership roles including the ordination of women. Some of our churches

¹³ See the work of Tinyiko Maluleke, Gerald West, Kä Mana and Ezra Chitando

had been moved by the power of the Holy Spirit to start ordaining women to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments and to become Church Elders. To everyone's surprise the steps forward have since been rescinded. Who is on a pilgrimage of justice and peace with such churches to accompany them in their struggle for the implementation of justice for all?

Still hard conversations are happening about what to do with the ordained women. Peggy Mulambya Kabonde's PhD thesis,¹⁴ which I had the honour to supervise, made me realise how difficult life continues to be for Reformed ordained women in terms of churches establishing true partnership between ordained women and ordained men, let alone between ordained women and their congregations. Kabonde also highlighted that most of our theological institutions are yet to include gender as a tool of analysis in research or when teaching theological subjects. This is also connected to lack of inclusion of feminist theological studies and gender studies in our theological curriculum.

I have come to accept that there is a link between the way the churches have handled the issues of the leadership of women in the church with the support or lack of it for women in political leadership. Torild Skard in *Women of Power*¹⁵ has demonstrated that where participation of women in the faith institutions is a difficult conversation, faith communities as citizens of their country tend to vote for a man than for a woman for the position of president or prime minister of their country. She has shown that by 2012, there were 10% female and 90% male presidents and prime ministers worldwide. She argues that culture and religion account for this screwed percentages even in countries where democracy has been in existence for a long time. In the thinking of many, including women, they find it difficult to vote for a female president or prime minister because in their reflection of God and human leadership, they understand that it is the will of God for men to lead and women to follow even though the Bible and the experience of women today tells a different story.

4. Intersectionaries of oppression of marginalised groups

The extremely difficult conversations of our times have been about all forms of sexual and gender based violence in the church and society. Sexual and any form of violence against minorities and marginalised groups of people is about power and control. Of particular concern for us today, which has become a global phenomenon, is when the gender based violence is happening in our own churches and homes. Pope Francis led by example by refusing to be silent about the sexual abuse of children by church leaders. The joint publication of the World Student Christian Fellowship and the World Council of Churches entitled: '*When Pastors Prey: Overcoming Clergy Sexual Abuse of Women*'¹⁶ is another example of refusing to join the conspiracy of silence over sexual and gender based violence in the church and in Christian homes. Campaigns like 'Thursdays in Black', which has been observed at this General Council is a significant symbol of our solidarity to end any form violence in the church and society.

¹⁴ Peggy Mlambya Kabonde, 'Ordination of Women: Partnership, Praxis and Experience of the United Church of Zambia'. University of KwaZulu Natal, 2014, Supervisor: Prof IA Phiri, Co supervisor: Dr Julius Gathogo

¹⁵ Torild Skard, *Women of Power Half a Century of Female Presidents and Prime Ministers Worldwide* 2014

¹⁶ Edited by Villi Boobal Batchelor. WCC publication, 2013.

The huge wave of migrants and refugees from the global South to the global North and the internal displacement of people in their countries or outside due to conflict or economic reasons or due to environmental disasters has exposed the existence of modern day slavery and racism. Human trafficking is on the increase and many more children and women migrants and refugees are going through sexual and gender based violence in camps, enroute to their new countries and in the host countries. They cannot afford to use the legal system to seek protection because they cannot afford or they are afraid of being sent back to their countries. Testimonies are shared through media of terrible conditions in many camps where the migrants live, exposing them to sickness. Fear of migrants and refugees, which in some cases is understandable when viewed in the context of increased terror attacks from extremists, is also exposing racist tendencies. At the sometime we acknowledge the excellent work done by people from the global North who have opened their homes and churches to welcome and assist migrants and refugees. On this pilgrimage of justice and peace, what can we do together to address the fear of the receiving countries, racism and support the migrants and refugees?

Then there is the state sanctioned or community inspired sexual violence or killing of people who are sexual minorities. While the message of the gospel is about inclusivity, as communities of faith, we are not speaking out loud enough to stop the killing of people on the basis of their sexual orientation. As people who stand in solidarity for justice for all God's people, we cannot afford to be quiet when life is destroyed through what is termed righteous anger directed towards sexual minorities. On a pilgrimage of justice and peace we are walking together and discussing about human sexuality in its totality. We celebrate God's gift to humanity of sexuality. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit we listen to each other's stories with love and compassion. As we listen we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us to see the topic of human sexuality from God's perspective as revealed to us for our times.

As a person who comes from Malawi, which is listed among the least developed countries, I cannot fail to point out the interconnectedness of extreme poverty, experiences of draught and floods, food insecurity and lack of access to clean water and poor health, and exposure to HIV. The effects of climate change and degradation of our forests is very visible. The majority of people in Malawi still use firewood for cooking, which in turn brings health complications as they are constantly exposed to dangerous fumes from firewood. It is not enough to say that people should stop cooking using firewood when they cannot afford the alternatives which are being offered. It is the agenda of the churches to advocate for a life lived with dignity for all people by holding governments accountable to prioritise the basic human rights of their people. Churches have a long history of involvement in the provision of health services, agriculture, education just to mention a few. Let us not get tired of doing good but continue to engage with the Sustainable Development Goals from a faith perspective to promote justice for all so that no one is left behind.

I could go on listing the issues that are calling for hard conversations and action. But it is better that we now turn to discuss why I believe we ought to act differently in the face of all the hard issues that require our agent attention and action.

5. Biblical and theological reflection on justice

Our Christian faith empowers us to live a life of hope for transformation in the face of brokenness. We have hope because we believe that the Bible has shown us that God created every human being with inherent dignity through being created in God's image, male and female.¹⁷ As argued by Suzan Berber, 'on this basis Christians affirmed the equality of men and women in God's sight. This means that every community or culture shaped by Christian theology, with an understanding of the unique and inestimable dignity of each human being, should be one in which women and men live alongside one another in peaceful and just relationship'.

I find the story of Exodus 2:16-22 very inspiring as it deals with injustice and justice issues in an interconnected way. The story is as follows:

¹⁶ Now a priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came to draw water and fill the troughs to water their father's flock. ¹⁷ Some shepherds came along and drove them away, but Moses got up and came to their rescue and watered their flock.

¹⁸ When the girls returned to Reuel their father, he asked them, "Why have you returned so early today?"

¹⁹ They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock."

²⁰ "And where is he?" Reuel asked his daughters. "Why did you leave him? Invite him to have something to eat."

²¹ Moses agreed to stay with the man, who gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses in marriage. ²² Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, ^[a] saying, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land."

What I like about this story is the way power is being used over the issue of water. Moses is a man of power from outside this community. He sees the injustice done to the 7 daughters of Reuel, the priest of Midian, another man of power. The 7 girls arrived at the well first, but were pushed aside by the shepherds who came later than the girls. Moses uses his male power to defend the rights of the girls. He does not allow gender to be used to disadvantage the girls. He even helps the girls by watering their animals. The shepherds noticed that Moses was a man of authority; they listened to him and allowed the girls to go first. Reuel the father of the girls is surprised that today they have come home early, did he know that his daughters were being harassed by the shepherds? I believe he did but did not use his position as priest to protect his daughters. He normalised their oppression and made them also accept it as normal.

I would like to conclude by urging our church leaders to use their authority to speak out against any form of injustice, starting from within the church itself. The time of normalising the oppression of the minorities in our churches is over. We are now leading by example by protecting those who are not able to speak for themselves or those whose voices are not listened to. Let your voices be heard in your countries and in international spaces as you speak out for justice.

6. Conclusion

The hymn below inspires me when I think of justice promoting Reformed churches. It says:

1 The Church is wherever God's people are praising,
knowing they're wanted and loved by their Lord.
The Church is wherever Christ's followers are trying
to live and to share out the good news of God.

¹⁷ Genesis 1:27

2 The Church is wherever God's people are loving,
where all are forgiven and start once again,
where all are accepted, whatever their background,
whatever their past and whatever their pain.

3 The Church is wherever God's people are seeking
to reach out and touch folk wherever they are --
conveying the Gospel, its joy and its comfort,
to challenge, refresh, and excite and inspire.

4 The Church is wherever God's people are praising,
knowing we're wanted and loved by our Lord.
The Church is where we as Christ's followers are trying
to live and to share out the good news of God.¹⁸

¹⁸ Church Hymnary (4th ed.) #522, Author: Carol Rose Ikeler (b. 1920), Publication Date: 2005,
Meter: 12 10 12 11 Irregular , Scripture: 1 John 3:1; Acts 2:43-47; Acts 4:32-35; Ephesians 5:1; Hebrews 13:16
Topic: Our Response to Christ: In Discipleship; Our Response to God: in the worship of God's house; Children
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