

Pre-Assembly Report - Just Community of Women and Men

29 and 30 August 2022 | Karlsruhe, Germany

*And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? (Luke 18:7)
For wisdom opened the mouths of those who were mute... (Wisdom of Solomon 10:21)*

From the time of the first assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, the World Council of Churches (WCC) has worked in multiple ways to foster a just community of women and men, in church and society. This process continued as Christians gathered August 29-30, 2022, for the Just Community of Women and Men (JCWM) pre-assembly to the WCC's 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany. Through bible study, liturgy, workshops and presentations participants explored the assembly's theme through the lens of gender justice, identifying avenues for reconciliation and collaboration.

Biblical-theological reflection during the pre-assembly focused on Acts 8:26-39, the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. This story challenged us to reflect on our understanding of inclusion and transformation, and how injustice occurs on the basis of identity and particularity, including sexual and gender identity, class, ethnic, and racial identity, and religious identity. We asked: what prevents us from experiencing the fullness of life in God? What maintains exclusion and prevents radical welcome?

Our study and discussion also drew on key documents reflecting JCWM work since the 10th Assembly in Busan, and documents coming to the 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe. These included Gender Justice Principles, the Code of Conduct, strategies developed during the consultation for the 20th Anniversary of the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace women's team visits, and the PJP Orthodox Women's Meeting. In all of these, we reflected the pilgrimage movement of celebrating gifts, visiting wounds and transforming injustice. While we recognize and celebrate this history of work for transformation toward inclusive participation and gender justice, we are still advocating for essential changes to be made. From our discussions in the pre-assembly, we lift up four areas calling for continued urgent attention.

1. Violence and abuse:

Reports from every region and programme focus revealed that multiple forms of sexual and gender-based violence and abuse are represented in all regions and have devastating impacts on those on the margins, most vulnerable to mega-trends such as the COVID pandemic, the climate

crisis, conflict and war, racism, migration, and the role of media in shaping experience including violence. We recognize with concern the emerging forms of violence against women and children in online spaces, exacerbated by the impunity accorded social media.

We noted the intersectionality among these issues and in relation to gender injustice. A vivid example is the particular experience of widows, single mothers, and others made vulnerable to poverty and abuse by isolation in the community. These highlight the economic and ecological crises and their effects on women, with threats to employment, food security and health care exacerbated by the pandemic.

Sadly, almost a quarter century since the Harare assembly declared that violence against women is a sin, we continue to hear the stories of sexual and gender-based violence in our churches as well as in society. We trace its effects throughout our communities: against women and children, often as a weapon of war; against the LGBTQIAA+¹ community; against refugee, migrant and trafficked women, against indigenous and minority women and girls; often overlapping with racism, xenophobia, and selective inclusion. We are reminded of the harmful theological doctrines and biblical interpretations that help to perpetuate structural and systemic violence. We acknowledge the continuing culture of silence around the presence of violence within our churches, and abuse by clergy in particular.

These stories of sexual and gender-based violence in all its forms were powerfully portrayed in the Waterfall Tapestry of patches from around the world, and in the witness of Thursdays in Black Ambassadors and Trailblazers, but so too were stories of courage, resilience and resistance as we celebrated networks engaged in solidarity, advocacy, and action.

2. Praxis (Policy and Practice):

Our discussions named barriers to equity and equality related to tradition, culture, and politics which plague our theologies and praxis of faith. Harmful cultural norms and Christian fundamentalism often join to threaten women's rights, at times with violence, pushing women and men into regressive and oppositional gender roles. Sociocultural realities that impose themselves on our religious lives distort God's vision of life in fullness, abundance, and love. Patriarchy hurts and exploits women, men, and people of all genders. The operation of patriarchy or the power imbalances between women and men results in an inclusion that comes with

¹ LGBTQIAA+ stands for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, Allies and more community.

conditions set by those in power. As Christians, we are called to employ the “power of love” and not the “love of power”.

At times in our Christian communities, oppressive theology is used to justify discrimination on the basis of gender or sex. Even when theological education and entry into ministry have been accepted, barriers exist that prevent women from serving to their fullest potential. We lament limited mentoring, training, and resources to cultivate a new generation of women leaders and peacemakers in our communities.

It is imperative that men confront their own positions on gender justice. We must urgently and intentionally work with men and boys for transformative and positive masculinities, to name and resist the sin of patriarchy, and emphasize what it means to be truly an equal and just community of women and men.

There is immense potential to bridge these gaps and ensure that our devotional life, social action, theological work, and theoretical research reflect equity and equality not only in words but in funding, action and impact. While we shared anger and despair at the places in our churches where women’s rights and participation seem to be regressing, we also learned of work within the WCC and member churches that is contributing to agency and empowerment.

3. Rights and Responsibilities

Gender justice must be mainstreamed in all policies, language, programmes, structures, and institutions of our churches and communities, with attention to implementation and accountability. It is vital to allocate appropriate resources for women’s empowerment; which must include gender-responsive budgeting. We ask again for our churches and the wider ecumenical fellowship to be proactive and prophetic in discerning the signs of the times in relation to gender justice.

While acknowledging that there is not a consensus, a significant number identified and challenged the current gender binary framing of the JCWM. Change could begin with the transformation of language to respect persons of non-binary and non-gender-conforming community. The need for safe spaces in faith communities was identified in several dimensions: for women in all churches, for vulnerable men, for creating dialogue and affirmation around gender diversity, and for solidarity and accompaniment with victims of violence.

4. Affirmation with Respect:

The vocation of the Church is to be: foretaste of new creation; prophetic sign to the whole world of the life God intends for all; good news of justice, peace and love. We celebrate and learn from positive examples and best practices of theology, action and advocacy towards transforming injustice.

We cannot see visible unity and reconciliation as long as women are still suffering. The community of God is not served by a so-called unity that dilutes, dismisses, or negates the lived experience of women. The prioritization of unity must not prevent us from delving deeper and exploring the real issues that hurt women and men. We seek a fellowship through the WCC that reflects Jesus' advocacy for women, and his model of a community where all are included and honoured with dignity and respect.

In the life of the WCC, we denounce, a neocolonial approach that disrespects and exploits local and indigenous contexts. We continue to encourage churches to make use of the rich resources that the WCC has published over many years, and that reflects the call of the fellowship of churches to progress to gender justice.

Calls to Action: Our Vision for our Ecumenical Future

Being "disturbed" and moved by the Holy Spirit, we call on the WCC, its member churches, and ecumenical partners to:

1. **implement** the commitments already demonstrated by our churches through targeted and concrete actions;
2. **create space** for feminist and womanist dialogue among church leaders, pastors, and male clergy and for men to critically engage with their own positionalities, power, and privilege;
3. **nurture and mentor** intergenerational women's networks, encouraging women's potentials and leadership, especially those of young women;
4. **allocate funding** for gender justice and employ gender-responsive budgeting in the structures and institutions of our churches and communities;
5. **appoint and recognize** male allies and champions for gender equality;
6. **sustain and amplify** the **Thursdays in Black** campaign, Gender Justice Principles, Code of Conduct, DCSW strategies and other WCC and member church initiatives;
7. **transform language** to respect persons of the non-binary and non-gender conforming community;

8. **advocate** for nonviolent conflict prevention, resolution, and transformation, as well as the healing of personal and collective trauma;
9. **integrate** global, regional, and local programs and networks, such as the SDG Framework, CEDAW, and other UN instruments, for more effective communication and collaboration;
10. **address the intersectional dimensions of gender justice** including racial justice and reparations; economic exploitation and oppression; militarization and political violence; the vulnerability and exclusion of marginalized groups in our societies;

Without joint and just participation within church life, we cannot speak about humanity, *Imago Dei*, and the experience of the fullness of life bestowed upon us by Jesus Christ. The church is the body of Christ, and Christ is fully human. Gender justice is an issue of our authentic identity as Christian churches.