

# FAITH AT THE UN GENDER IN THE CHURCH

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ECUMENICAL WOMEN'S GUIDE TO ADVOCACY

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## ABOUT ECUMENICAL WOMEN

Ecumenical Women is an international coalition of church denominations and ecumenical organizations which have status with the Economic & Social Council (ECOSOC) at the United Nations. Grounded in our faith and commitment to global justice, Ecumenical Women trains and empowers an expanding network to advocate for gender equality at the United Nations.

## MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

- Anglican Communion Observer
- Association of Presbyterian Women Aotearoa New Zealand
- Church Women United
- Episcopal Church (USA)
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- Lutheran World Federation
- National Council of Churches (USA)
- Presbyterian Church (USA)
- Salvation Army
- United Church of Christ
- United Methodist Church
- World Conference on Religions for Peace (collaborator)
- World Council of Churches
- World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women
- World Student Christian Federation; and
- WorldYWCA

*Note: The views expressed in this guide may not necessarily reflect the official policies or views of the participating organizations.*

# INTRODUCTION

Every year more than two thousand women come to the United Nation’s Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) — traveling for hours and arriving in New York in the depths of winter. Often it is their first experience in the halls of the United Nations and with an intergovernmental process. As a coalition of faith-based organizations with offices at the UN, we work hard to prepare as hosts: we plan an orientation, parallel events, dinners, and worship. In between the business of organizing, we take a moment to appreciate the fact that annually the global women’s movement comes to our doorstep.

The goal of this book is to prepare Ecumenical Women delegates for advocacy at the CSW, but we realize our work extends far beyond the UN. We hope this book helps equip a movement of women and men who will transform their churches and societies to be places where girls and boys, men and women, have access to resources and opportunities to reach their greatest potential.

**This book has four sections:**

**Part I The History of Ecumenical Women and the United Nations**

This section details more than 100 years of advocacy, but focuses on the history and significance of the CSW and the Beijing Platform for Action.

**Part II Advocacy and Women’s Rights at the United Nations**

With a short overview of the UN system, this section explains the process of the CSW and helps delegates know how to approach governments and plan their time during the commission.

**Part III Consider It! Ongoing Action Strategies**

With ideas for how to take what has been learned home, this section offers suggestions on how to bring gender perspective to the local church and community.

**Part IV Transforming Theology for the Sake of Women’s Empowerment: Eight Essays from Around the World**

From defining gender to deconstructing masculinity, these essays explore why gender perspective is important to the global church.

As you will read in Part I, the idea of an ecumenical women’s coalition is not new. Yet with the world becoming more interconnected, there is exciting potential for us to link the global to the local and to support and inspire advocates for gender equality around the world. We especially ask you to keep in touch with us through our blog at <http://ecumenicalwomen.org>, where we will have a feedback section for this guide.

Let’s continue to inspire each other. Thank you for being a part of this network.

Peace,

*Emily Davila*

Emily Davila

*Chair, Ecumenical Women (2009)*

# PART I

HISTORY OF ECUMENICAL WOMEN AT THE UNITED NATIONS

“Since the 1950’s women have tried to reconstruct development – to ‘tame’ it — by showing that the linkages between its social, economic and political elements have been neglected; by establishing ties with the excluded and discriminated against in order to broaden laws and rights to be inclusive; by building alternative indicators that made the invisible visible.”

~ *Devaki Jain*

There was a rich history of women in the church undertaking advocacy on behalf of marginalized groups (including themselves) long before the Ecumenical Women coalition was formed. For centuries, Christian women have been transcending the boundaries of denominationalism to act together to seek and defend basic rights, especially women's rights.

Historically, one of the first active groups of ecumenical women was the World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Founded in 1858, it began in New York City as the "Ladies Christian Association."<sup>1</sup> Their groundbreaking work with the United Nations set a valuable precedent for later groups of Christian women to model. In fact, the YWCA would later help to found the Liaison Committee of Women's International Organizations, which engaged the League of Nations and the International Labor Organization in the 1920s and 1930s. These conversations served as a precursor to the types of dialogue that nongovernmental organizations and coalitions enjoy today with the United Nations.<sup>2</sup>

In December 1941, 100 women representing 70 Protestant denominations and three large interdenominational women's groups joined together to form the United Council of Church Women, now known as Church Women United

(CWU). From the beginning, CWU was an active presence at the United Nations. In 1945, the Vice President of CWU, Georgiana Sibley, was an official observer at the signing of the original UN Charter in San Francisco.<sup>3</sup> Later, CWU petitioned the United States to "join and take its full responsibility in a world organization;" this petition even drew a note of thanks from Eleanor Roosevelt. Today, CWU continues to bring its history, energy and activity as an active member of Ecumenical Women.<sup>4</sup>

While there was a growing understanding that church women needed to unite for the sake of strengthening their presence and work in the world, there were also strong voices within governments at the United Nations who advocated for women's leadership. Although only four out of the 160 signatories to the UN charter were women, the group laid critical groundwork for gender equality. The four represented the following countries: Brazil (Bertha Luz), China (Wu Yi-Fang), the Dominican Republic (Minerva Bernardino) and the United States of America (Virginia Gildersleeve). As representatives of their governments, they made sure that the word "women" was inserted into the UN Charter. In doing so, they guaranteed that the principle of equality was part of the core of the United Nations. With the insertion of the word "women,"

the argument that "men" included "women" was finally put to rest.<sup>5</sup>

In 1946, as part of the inaugural meetings of the UN General Assembly in London, the wife of United States President Theodore Roosevelt participated as an outspoken advocate for women's rights. Indeed, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt spoke as a United States delegate in order to address the situation of the women of the world:

*To this end, we call on the governments of the world to encourage women everywhere to take a more active part in national and international affairs, and on women who are conscious of their opportunities to come forward and share in the work of peace and reconstruction as they did in war and resistance.*<sup>6</sup>

Within just one day of these words on June 21, 1946, a subcommission dedicated to the Status of Women was established under the Commission on Human Rights. Six months later, this subcommission formally became the

Commission on the Status of Women, a "full-fledged Commission dedicated to ensuring women's equality and to promoting women's rights."<sup>7</sup> One of the first tasks of the commission was to find out *what exactly is the status of women worldwide*. Because no comprehensive data had ever been collected, UN staff sent out a worldwide questionnaire. Governments responded with a wealth of information from around the world. The information received reinforced what many had suspected even without the data to prove it: inequality for women was based on cultural and religious customs, not laws.<sup>8</sup>

With the establishment of the United Nations, ecumenical collaboration for the purpose of advocating for human rights began in earnest. One of the most often-remembered human rights advocates, Lutheran theology professor Frederick Nolde, helped draft Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the process, he communicated multiple times with the first chair of the Commission on Human Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt. Article 18 reads:



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**The Ecumenical Decade (from 1985-1995) focused on themes such as women’s participation in the work and life of churches, violence against women in church and society, and global economic injustice and racism as related to the lives of women.**

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*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either along or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*<sup>9</sup>

Although this language is not gender-neutral, it is significant to note that the 15 members of the first Commission on the Status of Women argued strongly for the insertion of gender-inclusive language in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. While this was not achieved in Article 18, they did succeed in introducing new and inclusive language in other Articles. This was a tremendous achievement in its historical context.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time the UN was planting its roots, the World Council of Churches (WCC) was

established<sup>11</sup>. By 1949, women were solidly on the WCC’s agenda which set into motion a WCC Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church. By 1952, a Department of the Man-Woman Relationship in Church and Society existed; its purpose was to “help the churches to work towards such cooperation between men and women as may enable them to make their contribution to the common good of church and society.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1963, the busy ecumenical movement working at the United Nations realized they needed a space in which the agencies working for peace and human rights could collaborate more fully. The United Methodist Church set to the task and raised the finances to build the Church Center for the United Nations (CCUN). Mia Adjali worked for the United Methodist Church Women’s Division at the time the CCUN was founded.

“The Church Center was built about three years after I started working for the Women’s Division,” said Adjali. “We felt it was very important at the time to find a way to be a witness in the ecumenical movement to our belief and affirmation of the United Nations.”<sup>13</sup> It was largely through loans and donations of the Women of the United Methodist Church (now called United Methodist Women) that the building was even possible. The CCUN is still maintained and operated by the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church.

Today, the CCUN remains as it was at its inception: a space for collaboration and accompaniment for those advocating peace and human rights. The building houses offices of current Ecumenical Women members, including the Lutheran World Federation, Presbyterian Church USA, the United Methodist Office for the United Nations and the World Council of Churches. On the concourse level, it also houses the Esther Hymer Library, which remains dedicated to sharing documents of women’s human rights advocacy, including many historical UN documents about women.

In the 1960s, concrete evidence began to build demonstrating that women were disproportionately affected by poverty. As a response, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) focused its discussions on

“women’s needs in community and rural development, agricultural work, family planning and the impact of scientific and technological advances.”<sup>14</sup> Hoping to consolidate standards on women’s rights as they had been developed since 1945, the General Assembly (GA) requested in 1963 that the CSW draft a Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. Adopted by the GA in 1967, this declaration highlighted the need for a legally binding convention that defined women’s rights, out of which emerged the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Convention was ultimately adopted in 1979.<sup>15</sup>







In 1972, the Commission recommended that 1975 be designated as International Women's Year, an observance which was intended to "remind the international community that discrimination against women, entrenched in law and deeply rooted cultural beliefs, was a persistent problem in much of the world."<sup>16</sup> The hallmark World Conference of the International Women's Year was held in Mexico City. It was the first world

conference which provided a set of guidelines for the advancement of women for the next decade. As a follow-up action, the United Nations declared 1976-1985 the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace,<sup>17</sup> a decade which included two more global conferences, first in Copenhagen (1980), and then in Nairobi (1985).

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## Their message spoke powerfully to “the positive and negative role religion can play in women’s lives”

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After the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi (1985), the World Council of Churches promoted an Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women. This 10-year program was established in 1988 as a means to challenge churches not only to examine their structures, teachings and practices as they related to women but also to make a commitment to the full participation of women. The Ecumenical Decade focused on themes such as women's participation in the work and life of churches, violence against women in church and society, and global economic injustice and racism as related to the lives of women.<sup>18</sup>

Ten years passed between the Third World Conference on Women and the Fourth, which was held in Beijing in 1995. Regarded by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women as “one of the greatest achievements of the Commission on the Status of Women,” the Fourth World Conference on Women significantly advanced the agenda for women's rights and gender equality on a global scale. Along with

the related NGO Forum in nearby Huairou, it was the “largest gathering of government, NGO, and media representatives ever held for a UN conference” — more than 36,000 participants — and it was completely devoted to women.<sup>19</sup> The outcome document of the conference is called the Beijing Platform for Action. The production of this outcome document was especially significant because of the challenge in drafting it; a wide variety of viewpoints on issues such as family planning and reproductive health made consensus at times difficult, if not impossible.

Throughout the spring of 1995, the churches, along with other NGOs,<sup>20</sup> criticized the movement of the NGO part of the Forum to Huairou, 50 km outside the inter-governmental deliberations in Beijing. They also advocated on behalf of women from Tibet and Taiwan who were not given visas because of their pro-choice and feminist agendas. In statements, actions and official interventions at the UN Conference, women of faith offered insights and correctives throughout the drafting process of the Declaration and the Platform for



Action. One example is “A Statement on Gender by Communities of Faith,” which was submitted as a joint effort endorsed by the Anglican United Nations Office, the World Council of Churches, the Christian Peace Conference and the United Church Board for World Ministries.

During this conference in Beijing, a strong delegation of “Ecumenical Women United” included the following organizations: Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women, The Lutheran World Federation, The World Council of Churches, World Union of Catholic Women, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, World Student Christian Federation, World Young Women’s Christian Association, World Federation of Methodist Women, and World Vision International.<sup>21</sup>

The Beijing Platform for Action was adopted by consensus by the 189 countries represented at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. At the time, it was considered to be the “most comprehensive document on women’s rights ever agreed upon by governments.”<sup>22</sup> In response, the “Religious Right,”<sup>23</sup> a coalition initiated within the United States of America, vocally determined that the Beijing Platform for Actions was “one of the most radical documents you can imagine.” In her article about the meetings, Jennifer Butler, then Director of the

Presbyterian United Nations Office and a member of the ecumenical delegation wrote:

Austin Ruse, Director of the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, sent out a call to action. In his rallying cry, Ruse summoned hundreds of “pro-family and pro-life advocates” to come to the UN to fight against the Beijing Platform for Action ... His call took on biblical proportions as he promised his people, “You will work alongside Catholics, Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, Mormons.... We are the children of Abraham,” claimed Ruse, “arising to fight for faith and family.”

At the Preparatory Committee for the Beijing Plus Five Special Session of the General Assembly meeting from March 3-18th, 1999, scores of lobbyists wearing red buttons emblazoned with the word “motherhood” swarmed the room where government delegations were gathering. While conservative and pro-life groups have attended other United Nations events, their numbers at this meeting were far greater than ever before. They were highly visible among the 1,700 NGO representatives and appeared to have reached their goal of having at least 300 participants.<sup>24</sup>

It was in this heated environment that the current Ecumenical Women at the United Nations was founded. The coalition worked to counteract the rising tide of negative public sentiment against the Conference, which was often deemed

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**Ecumenical Women works hard to continue the tradition of advocating for both a liberative gospel and a society where women are free to make choices over their health, their lives, their jobs, and their status in society.**

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as “anti-family” because it advocated women’s rights to education, equality with men in decision making, fair employment, family planning, and reproductive health. At its founding, the Ecumenical Women Network consisted of Church Women United, Church World Service and Witness Unit, the Presbyterian Church, USA-UN Office, US National Council of Churches of Christ, United Church of Christ Coordinating Center for Women, and Women of Reform Judaism.<sup>25</sup>

They joined forces under the platform that “family life,” which was mentioned over 70 times in the outcome document, would only be strengthened when women are:<sup>26</sup>

- More educated
- Healthier and better able to care for their children
- Treated equally with men at home and at work
- Given an equal say with men in making decisions
- More informed about reproductive health and family planning
- Not sexually oppressed, as in prostitution, forced marriages or sexual violence

Rooted firmly in their denominational bodies and an ecumenical tradition of working together for change at the United Nations, women delegates of Ecumenical Women voiced their absolute support of the Beijing Platform for

Action. Their message spoke powerfully to “the positive and negative role religion can play in women’s lives,” and “their witness to the international community whereby religion and culture can and are being transformed in favor of gender equality.”

Since its founding, Ecumenical Women has grown in numbers and strengthened its purpose. We have trained over 1,000 women in advocacy for women’s rights, have deepened our theological lens on gender justice, have launched a website, and have become increasingly strategic in our advocacy at the Commission on the Status of Women. Coalition membership has grown to 14 organizations, including the Anglican Communion Observer, Association of Presbyterian Women Aotearoa (New Zealand), Church Women United, Episcopal Church (USA), National Council of Churches (USA), Presbyterian Church (USA), The

Lutheran World Federation, The United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, World Council of Churches, World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women, World Student Christian Federation, Salvation Army, and the World YWCA.

Today, Ecumenical Women continues to fulfill an extraordinary legacy as a strong voice for gender equality at the United Nations. Together, denominational representatives actively pursue the creation of national and international policies which challenge structures of inequality. Members of Ecumenical Women advocate not only for a few improvements but for a fundamental system change in church and state to invest in and empower women worldwide. It is our understanding that the church at its best can be a center that models policies that reinforce gender equality, creates budgets that

reflect a desire to invest in women’s equality, and which develops networks of women and men who resist systems of patriarchy, domination, and abuse. We believe that the church is a powerful transformative vehicle for the teaching, protection, and enforcement of women’s rights and gender equality when its constituents and leadership are informed and empowered.

Ecumenical Women acknowledges that theology can oppress or it can liberate its adherents, and our attention continues to focus on the most vulnerable. In recent years, Ecumenical Women has invested in efforts to bring partners from the global South. The Coalition works hard to continue the tradition of advocating for both a liberative gospel and a society where women are free to make choices over their health, their lives, their jobs, and their status in society.



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<sup>1</sup>Devaki, Jain, Women, Development and the UN: A Sixty-year Quest for Equality and Justice (Bloomington: Indiana Press University, 2005) 10.

<sup>2</sup>YWCA Website, “Our History,” <http://www.ywca.org/site/pp.asp?c=djlSl6PIKpG&b=281379>, January 20, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Hilkka Pietilä, The Unfinished Story of Women and the United Nations (United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service: Geneva, 2007) 4.

<sup>4</sup>United Nations Department for the Advancement of Women, “Short History of the Commission on the Status of Women,” <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/CSW60YRS/CSWbriefhistory.pdf>, January 20, 2009, 1.

<sup>5</sup>Church Women United, “Information Handbook and Directory: September 1998 through August 1999” 11.

<sup>6</sup>Devaki Jain, Women, Development and the UN: A Sixty-year Quest for Equality and Justice (Bloomington: Indiana Press University, 2005) 12-13.

<sup>7</sup>United Nations, “Short History” 1.

<sup>8</sup>United Nations, “Short History” 2.

<sup>9</sup>Devaki 31.

<sup>10</sup>Dennis Frado, “Human rights from the perspective of recent Lutheran experiences: Lecture notes for October 3,” presented at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, January 7, 2008, 7.

<sup>11</sup>Devaki 19-20.

<sup>12</sup>World Council of Churches, “The Role of the World Council of Churches in International Affairs” (World Council of Churches: Geneva, August 1999) 31.

<sup>13</sup>“Report to WCC Member Churches Concerning the 42nd Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women,” The Ecumenical Team to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, March 2-13, 1998, 4.

<sup>14</sup>Mia Adjali, recorded interview/video, <http://humanrightschurch.org/main-page/>, ed., Christian Albers, 2008.

<sup>15</sup>United Nations, “Short History” 7.

<sup>16</sup>United Nations, “Short History” 8.

<sup>17</sup>United Nations, “Short History” 8.

<sup>18</sup>United Nations, “Short History” 9.

<sup>19</sup>“Report to WCC Member Churches Concerning ...” 4.

<sup>20</sup>United Nations, “Short History” 15.

<sup>21</sup>Lutheran World Federation Archives, “Summary of outcome of 8 May meeting re: NGO Forum site in Beijing.”

<sup>22</sup>LWF Archives, “Summary...”

<sup>23</sup>Jennifer Butler, “300 Religious Right Participants Attend Beijing PrepCom,” June 1, 2000, 1.

<sup>24</sup>The Religious Right or Christian right is a term used predominantly in the United States to describe a spectrum of right-wing Christian political and social movements and organizations characterized by their strong support of conservative social and political values (Wikipedia 2009).

<sup>25</sup>Butler 1.

<sup>26</sup>“U.S. Ecumenical Women’s Network: Empowering Women of Faith to be Instruments of Justice and Equality Everywhere,” produced at 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY, 1995.

# PART II

ADVOCACY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS AT THE UNITED NATIONS

“Attempting to bridge secular and faith-based women is very important. Women of faith feel that the rights movement is anti-religion, and the rights activists haven’t made enough effort to listen to include the women of faith. The social justice movement needs both voices. We need to be able to move to the next step, a dialogue between the rights world and the religious world.”

~ *Dorothy Q. Thomas*

Founded just after World War II, the United Nations (UN) is a system that remains a mystery for many people. Still even more obscure to many is the fact that churches have played a critical role in shaping the UN agenda.<sup>28</sup> This was highlighted briefly in the history section of this advocacy guide, but how the process of shaping the agenda or influencing change *actually works* will be explained in the following section.

**WHAT IS THE UNITED NATIONS?**

With the scourge of war heavy on the hearts and minds following World War II, 51 countries met in San Francisco to create the United Nations, where they drafted and signed its Charter. In turn, when these 51 countries signed the Charter on October 24, 1945, they became *member states* of the United Nations by committing their governments and peoples to “maintain international peace and security” as well as the other purposes and principles. When *states* become *members* of the United Nations, they agree to accept the many obligations of the UN Charter.

A common misunderstanding is that the UN is a director of action or that it has power over states. Much like an elected representative of your city represents a constituency and makes decisions about laws and legislation on its behalf, so too

does this happen (in many different ways) at the international level. Governments draft, debate and vote for or against treaties, conventions or action plans discussed at the UN. (Much of the work of the UN, like the CSW, sets normative frameworks, advancing global thought and priorities.)

In addition, the entire budget for the United Nations is financed by both dues and voluntary contributions from member states. Including the last member state to be added (Montenegro, June 28, 2006), there are 192 member states in the United Nations. This includes all “fully recognized independent states,” not including the Holy See and the Palestinian Authority which are only allowed observer status (speaking rights but no voting rights). Working with such a diversity of peoples requires a large full-time translation team, and the UN works in six official languages: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish.

There are five major organs of the United Nations: the Economic and Social Council, the General Assembly, the International Court of Justice, the Secretariat and the Security Council. These bodies all meet in New York, except for the International Court of Justice, which is located in The Hague, Netherlands.

PURPOSE OF THE U.N.

- Freedom from want, freedom from fear
- Support international cooperation to solve economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian problems
- Maintain international peace and security
- Promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms

**1. UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

Meeting annually, the General Assembly (GA) is the main deliberative body of the UN with all 192 member states having one equal vote. Each year, a new member state is elected as president of the GA. The GA is made up of various committees which make recommendations on issues relevant to those committees as well as to various programs, funds, and training institutes. Another important subsidiary body to the GA is the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC); it replaced the former Commission on Human Rights in 2006 which was a functioning body of ECOSOC. Today, the UNHRC (also run by member states) has the mandate and authority to make recommendations to the GA about reported situations of human rights violations.

When GA member states vote on important

questions (for example: UN elections, peace and security issues, or admitting new members), a motion will pass only with a two-thirds majority. For all other questions, decisions are made by a majority vote. With each member state allowed one vote, it would seem that the GA is the most democratic and potentially powerful international body in the world. However, none of the resolutions passed here are binding except for internal UN and budgetary matters. Two examples include the creation of the Human Rights Council and the Millennium Development Goals. In terms of the situations of human rights violations mentioned above, the GA member states can only advise the Security Council to take action.

**2. SECURITY COUNCIL**

The function of the Security Council is to maintain

peace and security among countries; it too is operated by member states. Specifically, there are 15 member states that participate on the Council; of those, five are permanent members (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States) and ten are non-permanent members elected for two-year terms. Whereas the GA could only make recommendations, the Security Council is the only place where legally binding decisions are made. Under the terms of the Charter, Article 25 is clear that “members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council.”

An imbalance of power is often cited because the five permanent members hold “veto power” which allows them to block the adoption (but not the debate) of a resolution. This means that

if a permanent member engages in a war not approved by the Security Council, the other members of the Security Council will be unable to pass a resolution condemning the actions of that permanent member. In short, while the actions of the state are considered to be breaking the conditions of agreement with the UN Charter, it is one of only two UN entities that have the authority to pass a resolution to effectively stop the actions of the state. (The other is the International Court of Justice, although the Security Council must enforce its decisions.)

In the year 2000, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. By doing so, member states affirmed the role of women in preventing and resolving conflicts. It



## HISTORY OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS AT THE UN

- 1945** UN Charter
- 1946** Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) established
- 1948** UN Declaration of Human Rights
- 1975** International Women’s Year
- 1975** First World Conference on Women, Mexico City
- 1976-1985** UN Decade for Women
- 1976** International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) established
- United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) established
- 1979** Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination against Women CEDAW) adopted
- 1980** 2nd World Conference on Women, Copenhagen
- 1985** 3rd World Conference on Women, Nairobi
- 1995** 4th World Conference on Women, Beijing China
- 2000** 23rd Special Session of the GA on Women, Equality, Development and Peace (Beijing+5)
- 2000** UN Millennium Development Summit Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted on Women, Peace and Security
- 2008** Security Council Resolution 1820 adopted on Sexual Violence

calls on member states “to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict.” This was a landmark resolution that women and men around the world celebrated. In 2008, the Security Council passed Resolution 1820 on sexual violence. This resolution declared that “rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide.”

### 3. SECRETARIAT

This is the only organ of the United Nations wherein member states do *not* make up the core “staff.” In fact, the nearly 9,000 civil servants provide studies, information and facilities as requested by the other UN organs. The head of this body is the United Nations Secretary General, whose duties include resolving international disputes, administering peacekeeping operations, organizing conferences, gathering information on the implementation of Security Council decisions, and consulting with member states. Currently, the Division for the Advancement of Women and the Office of the Advisor to the Secretary General (OSAGI) are the only two women-specific offices of the secretariat.

### 4. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL (ECOSOC)

The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as-



sists the General Assembly in “promoting international economic and social cooperation and development.” In doing so, this body serves as

the central UN forum for discussing social issues and formulating policy. Its work is divided into regional and functional (topical) commissions, such as the Commission on the Status of Women. Much like the GA, ECOSOC has little authority to “force action”; however, some member states have attempted to strengthen some of its policy responsibilities.

Additionally, ECOSOC was the organ that authorized the creation of a new joint and cosponsored program on HIV and AIDS. Created in 1994 and operating since 1996, UNAIDS brings together the UN’s existing AIDS-related work, expertise and resources into one consolidated program that enhances cooperation between the World Health Organization, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO and the World Bank. This joint program and interagency project eliminated duplicated efforts and enhanced the global response to the AIDS pandemic. Civil society representatives serve as board members of UNAIDS.

The 54 member states of ECOSOC are elected for three-year terms by the member states of the

Without real people, the words of policies would be empty.

General Assembly. Part of the overall mandate of ECOSOC allows the organ to grant nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

accreditation for access to attend (and influence) United Nations meetings. Because of this, our denominations, agencies and bodies like the World Council of Churches have access to meetings at the United Nations.

FAITH-BASED ADVOCACY FOR GENDER EQUALITY

As Christians, we know and experience the power of the word. Jesus said, “*And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold*” (Mark 4:20). In this parable of the sower, Jesus taught us about the power of God’s word to multiply and even bear enormous fruit. We know that *the sower sows the word* (Mark 4:14) by speaking it or reading it or living it.

At the United Nations, most of our work revolves around words. Some of these words fill binding legal conventions, resolutions and treaties; most of them do not. Instead, they fill recommendations, reports, press releases, statements and, perhaps most poignantly of all, real human stories of gender inequality, poverty, war, human rights violations, destruction and

death. It is because of these human stories that recommendations are made for national and international policy change. Without the words of real people, the words of policies would be empty.

It is because of these statements of public witness that platforms for action are created. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing, China, and over 36,000 women from around the world attended in order to make the lives and stories of women heard.<sup>29</sup> The result was the adoption by governments of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), which set forth critical areas of concern as a guide for improving the lives of women.<sup>30</sup>

The recommendations set forth in this document are full of critical and powerful words which reflect the lives and experiences of women from around the world. While the Platform “may not legally binding, we will make it politically binding,” urged Charlotte Bunch, director of the Center for Women’s Global Leadership, at a follow-up event. Joining her and many other organizations, Ecumenical Women advocates that the powerful words of the BPFA become action.

When engaging in advocacy efforts during UN meetings, it is important not to be shy, because

GENDER ENTITIES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

OSAGI – Office of the Special Advisor to the Secretary General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women

Based in the Secretariat, the Special Advisor advises the UN Secretary-General on integrating gender into the policy of the United Nations.

DAW – Division for the Advancement of Women

A division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, DAW substantively services the Commission on the Status of Women (a functional commission of ECOSOC), writes reports, and provides advisory services and technical cooperation to developing countries.

UNIFEM – United Nations Development Fund for Women

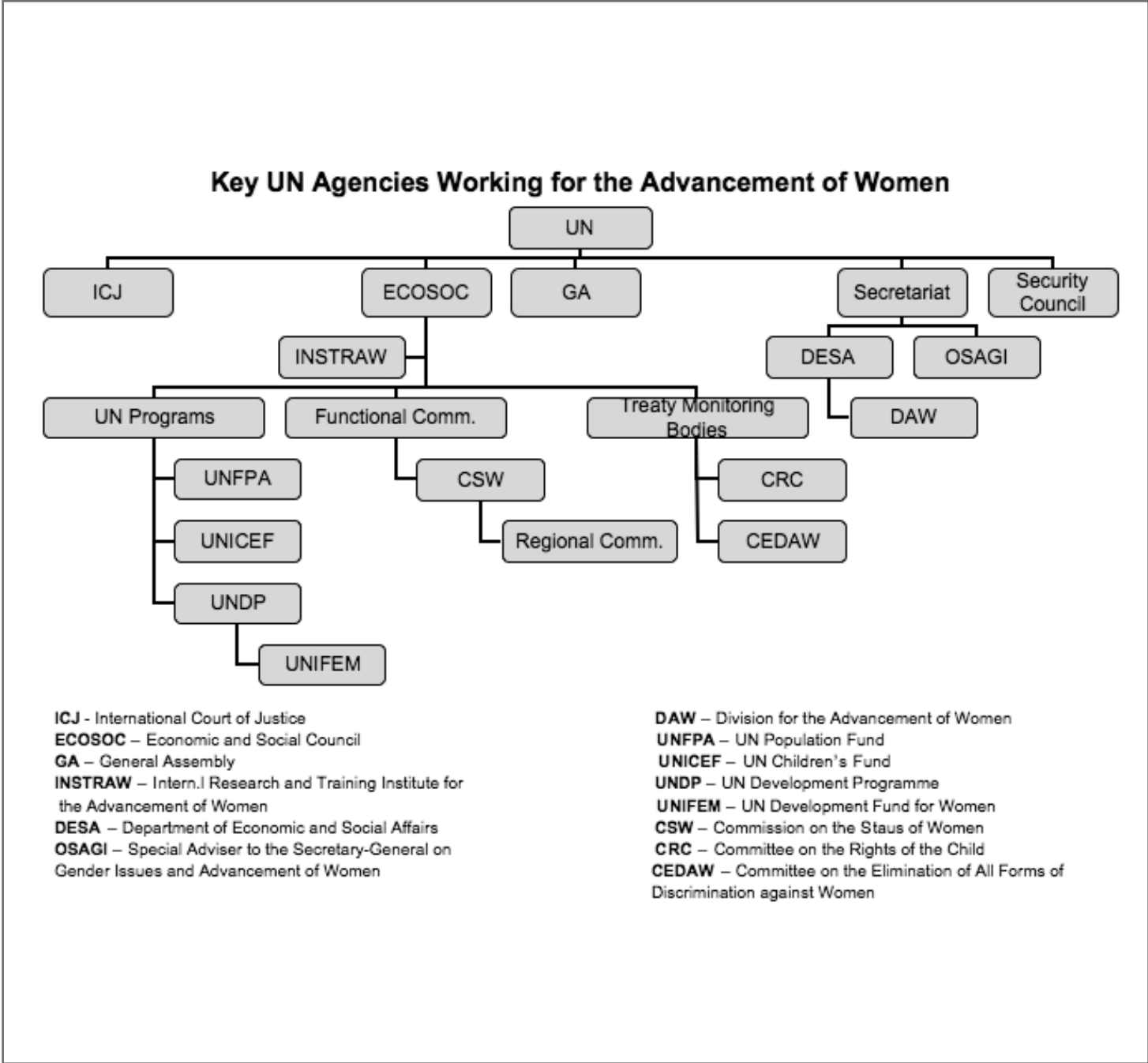
UNIFEM provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programs and strategies that promote and mainstream women’s human rights, political participation, and economic security.

INSTRAW – International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women

INSTRAW promotes and undertakes research and training to contribute to the advancement of women and gender equality worldwide.

Note: the UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund and UNICEF, the UN Fund for Children, work with women and development in many ways. While these are vital bodies for women’s rights and development, they each have their own independent boards and are therefore operate mostly outside of the UN political process.





governments should also hear from religious, moral, and ethical perspectives. Member states are generally very willing to meet with faith-based representatives, especially when the delegation represents a global perspective. There are even examples of meetings with missions that end in prayer, at the ambassador’s own suggestion!

**THE COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

Since its inception in 1946, the UN Commission on the Status of Women meets annually for a period of ten working days (usually in late February–early March) to “evaluate progress on gender equality,

identify challenges, set global standards and formulate concrete policies [recommendations] to promote gender equality and advancement of women worldwide.” The primary outcome of the Commission is a set of “agreed conclusions” which contain an analysis of the annual priority theme as well as concrete recommendations for governments, intergovernmental bodies, and civil society to implement at the international, national, regional, and local levels.

The first draft of the agreed conclusions is ready about one week before the meeting. The language and wording of the agreed conclusions are discussed, debated, and decided upon during the second week of the Commission. In total, Ecumenical Women and other civil society participants have ten days to suggest language (sentences, words, paragraphs, recommendations) for governments to propose for discussion and inclusion in the final document. There is much preparation and a few strategies involved in order for Ecumenical Women to effectively engage in this process.

**BEFORE CSW: PREPARING OUR ADVOCACY MESSAGE**

Each year, Ecumenical Women begins preparing for CSW at least six months in advance. Because the CSW priority theme is known, we can begin preparing our advocacy statement. The advocacy

THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION:  
12 CRITICAL AREAS

Women and Poverty  
Education and Training of Women  
Women and Health  
Violence against Women  
Women and Armed Conflict  
Women and the Economy  
Women in Power and Decision-making  
Institutional Mechanism for the Advancement of Women  
Human Rights of Women  
Women and the Media  
Women and the Environment  
The Girl-child

statement is a 2-3 page document that includes a short analysis of the theme and concrete policy recommendations. This statement is drafted and reflects policy statements of member denominations, church agencies, and organizations of Ecumenical Women.

In the process of researching and developing this statement, we are also able to analyze and compare the strengths and weaknesses of our own church policies. For example, after preparing a statement on caregiving and HIV and AIDS, members of Ecumenical Women might reconsider the recognition, roles, and treatment of caregivers in our own national church strategies.

Ecumenical Women’s advocacy statement pulls

the strongest points and experiences of all of the member organizations into one solid document that reflects the wide range of experiences and recommendations of churches (and women) from around the world. The advocacy statement is submitted to the United Nations as an official document for the meeting, and it is translated into the six official UN languages. With the recommendations in our advocacy statement, the representatives of Ecumenical Women prepare our list of policy recommendations during CSW.

**DURING THE CSW: INFLUENCING THE AGREED CONCLUSIONS**

Since the year 2000, Ecumenical Women has had a delegation of women and men from around the world who participate in CSW. In the past few years, this delegation has numbered

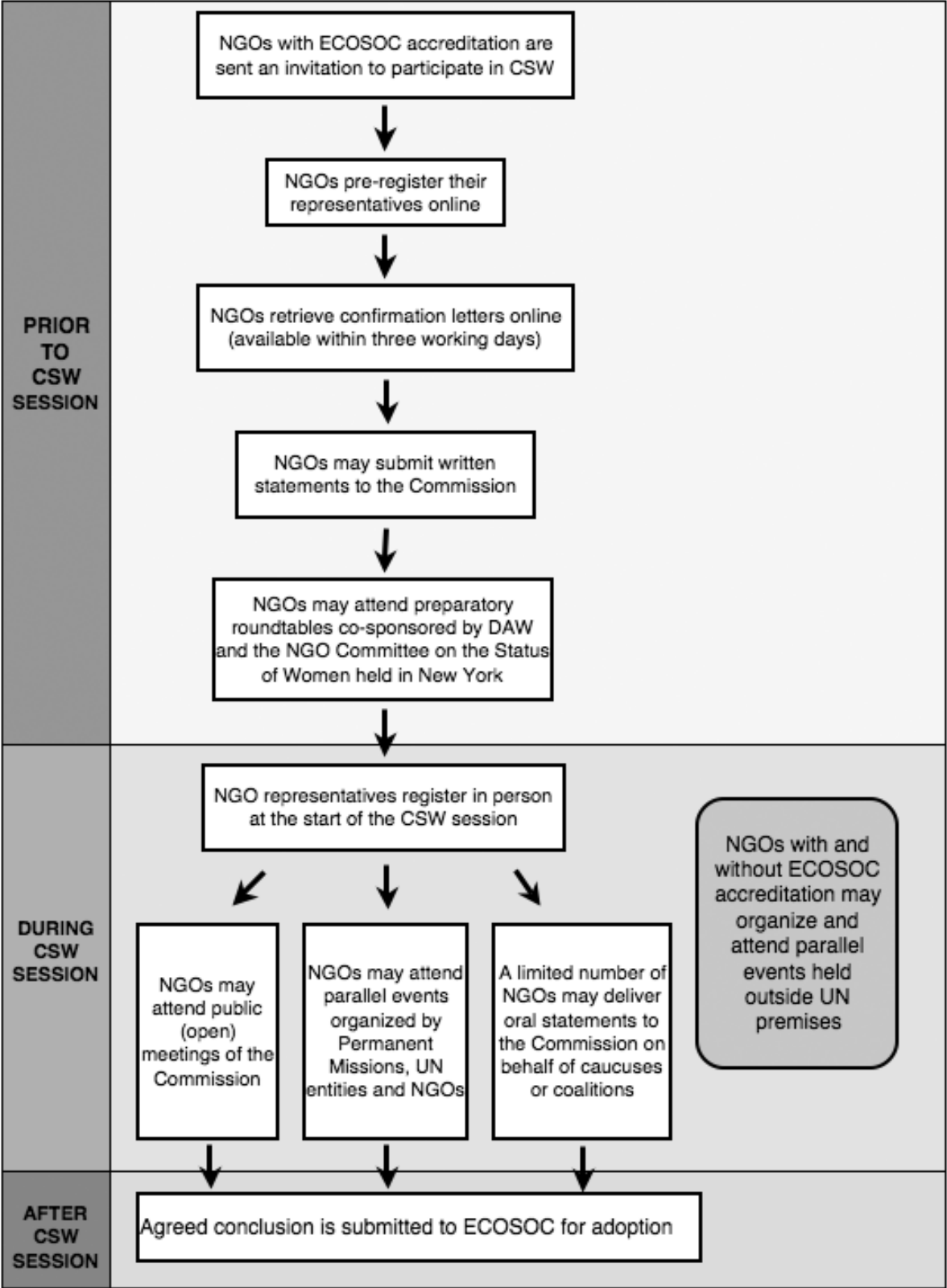


Chart adapted from the UN Division for the Advancement of Women

more than 150 people! Typically, the delegation is made up of women and men who are in leadership positions within their denominations as well as a strong contingent of youth. Often, it is the first and only time for delegates to attend a UN meeting; others are experienced with these types of international meetings.

On the Saturday before the CSW begins, Ecumenical Women organizes an orientation and advocacy training for all delegates. There are three main ways we engage in advocacy: meeting with delegates, working in coalitions, and writing and submitting our preferred language for the agreed conclusions.

**1.Meeting with government delegates**

Ambassadors are governmental representatives attending the CSW meeting. Most of them are men, but there are a good number of women present, especially during CSW. Sometimes governments send ministers such as the Minister of Gender and Development or a Minister of Health, depending on the CSW priority theme. All of them are representatives of the government and receive their

“orders” or decisions about policies from their capitals before and during the meeting. This is an important point to remember, as the advocacy of Ecumenical Women can only be as effective as our work in the capitals of our countries. The global reach of churches, rooted in the local but connected to the global, provides an incredible opportunity for a concerted and coordinated ecumenical approach to advocacy not only at the United Nations but in capitals in nearly every country in the world.

CSW participants have ample opportunities to meet with representatives of their own governments or any country, for that matter. Some are very receptive and friendly, a few are not; some are new to CSW, some are not; most likely, all are overworked and very, very busy. Because of this, it’s important that you are prepared with what you want to say; this is called having talking points. Ecumenical Women works to provide delegates with the top five points to recommend and has copies of our recommended language for delegates to share with ambassadors.

**Advocacy: The act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy.**



**Things to remember when you approach representative of any government:**

- Don’t interrupt an official meeting.
- If possible, speak with the government representative in her or his own language.
- Speak slowly and confidently; always be polite and friendly.
- Introduce yourself and Ecumenical Women.
- Share a copy of our policy recommendations.
- Bring up the talking points.
- Ask if a further meeting would be helpful (even back in the country, following CSW).
- Ask for her or his business card.

- Thank them for their time. Finally, do know that it can be a bit nerve-wracking the first time, but it does get easier and more comfortable!

**There are also things to listen for when you hear a government representative give a statement. Try to get a sense of the country’s position:**

- Does the representative bring up similar points to the Ecumenical Women advocacy statement?
- Does the representative seem adverse to or in alignment with some of our policy recommendations?



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# CSW can be very overwhelming, pace yourself, know your priorities, and be sure to take time to have coffee with a new friend.

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- Does the representative mention successes or failures?
- Does the representative mention faith-based organizations?

Unlike many of the NGOs attending CSW, Ecumenical Women represents a broad and diverse constituency made up of every continent (although our Asian and Pacific representatives usually number very few). Because of this, we have the possibility of reaching all 192 member states with our message. It really is an opportunity to affect the outcome of this meeting and to ensure that the voices of our sisters (and brothers) are heard through policy recommendations.

## 2. Working with civil society coalitions

Caucuses form and meet throughout the CSW meeting. Some of the caucuses are based on region, as in the Latin American caucus, and others are based on theme, as in the Youth Caucus. These are groups of women and men who represent diverse organizations and interests that come together to provide policy

recommendations. The Asian caucus would work on recommendations particular to their region, for example, and then meet with every government possible in that region. The Youth Caucus would work on recommendations to ensure the inclusion of youth and then meet with other caucuses and even governments to ensure that a youth perspective is included.

Most caucuses are open for attendance by any civil society representative, but some are closed partnerships of organizations. Ecumenical Women is a delegation so large that we generally form our own caucus, strategizing together and meeting with governments and caucuses. Our delegation works to ensure that the message of Ecumenical Women is included in the recommendations of *all* of the public caucuses.

Often, a caucus will organize a meeting with a specific government. When this happens, it is very important to center the discussion on the policy recommendations for the priority

theme of CSW. Before the meeting, be sure to research the country's position and laws; come prepared. If the representative says that they can do nothing, that their "orders" come from the capital, be sure to ask who to speak with in the capital and for their contact information. If possible, ask colleagues and friends at home to contact that person with a specific request about the CSW meeting. The possibilities are endless!

## 3. Contributing suggested language

During each CSW, Ecumenical Women targets specific governments to focus our advocacy message. We prepare a letter for these governments and include our specific policy recommendations. This "package" is then faxed to the Mission of the Government and addressed to the Ambassador (or other appropriate representative). It is a lot of work to send even 20 of these messages much less addressing 192 countries. Each requires individualized letters and follow-up phone calls. Generally, a team forms within Ecumenical Women to manage the faxing and conduct follow-up calls. We hope you will consider joining the experience!

In addition, Ecumenical Women delegates are strongly encouraged to meet with government representatives throughout CSW. This means in the hallways, during your coffee break, and even during receptions. With the pointers

included earlier, you can be prepared to engage in a conversation and provide our specific recommendations in person.

## MAKING THE MOST OF THE CSW: PLANNING YOUR DAY

Whether it is your first time or your fifth CSW, every participant experiences an overload of the senses. It would be easy to spend all of your time running from discussion to discussion, but it's also good to think about which ones will be effective and will allow for networking. For instance, Ecumenical Women compiles a list of all of the faith-based parallel events taking place so our coalition members can attend. Morning worship is highly energizing and a good time to touch base with the Ecumenical Women advocacy

*For example, in 2008, Ecumenical Women submitted the following language to the Agreed Conclusions.*

Eliminate conditionalities in debt relief and **cancellation** initiatives and debt financing measures that lead to the perpetuation or exacerbation of gender inequalities, and **introduce gender-responsive** budgeting to earmark **liberated** resources to address specific targets and benchmarks agreed upon in the Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals; (E.CN.6/2008/2, para. 88(k))

team. If there is an event that really interests you, show up early; seats fill up quickly.

OFFICIAL AGENDA

The official sessions of the CSW, held daily from 10-1 and 3-6, are filled with everything from expert presentations, to “general discussion” including speeches from member states and

NGOs, to administrative reports and closed-door negotiations. You can find the official agenda or “proposed organization of work” on the DAW website. We recommend attending the high-level round tables because this is where the experts on the theme give presentations, which then frame government discussion. You might also consider sitting in on some of the general discussions in order to get a sense of what governments’ positions are, but this is not always the most interesting part of the CSW. Copies of every government statement are generally placed on the side tables in the conference room; make sure to find and read the one from your government.

PARALLEL EVENTS

During the first week of CSW, there are around 30 NGO sponsored parallel events *each day*; they are held mainly in the Church Center for the United Nations. In addition, there are also UN agency and government-sponsored parallel events; they occur mostly in UN conference rooms. The calendar of all of these events is in a book received during UN registration and on the DAW website. Be sure you get a handbook as it lists the times for various caucuses as well. If your government is leading or participating in a parallel event discussion, it would be an excellent opportunity to meet your ambassador and to learn more about your country’s position or initiatives.

CAUCUSES

The task of deciding which parallel events to attend can be daunting, but be sure to involve yourself in events as more than just a passive listener. The NGO caucuses can be an excellent opportunity to participate, learn about and engage in advocacy. The *Linkage Caucus* is led by some of the NGOs listed in the next paragraph; if you are focusing on advocacy, it is highly recommended to attend this caucus. In addition, the regional caucuses are good and can even be led by you. At CSW 2008, faith-based women were actively involved in leadership positions in many regional caucuses.

MORNING BRIEFINGS

Every morning (9:00 am) and evening (5:00 pm) of every day of CSW, there are NGO briefings, led by the NGO Committee on the Status of Women. These are excellent places to learn more



about what is happening specifically with the negotiations process of the agreed conclusions and to hear how you can join with others who are organizing to influence them.



TIP

If you’re interested in advocacy or specific issue, ask someone from a leading NGO. Typically the following groups have strong leadership at the CSW:

- Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL)
- Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)
- Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID)

**MORNING WORSHIP**

Morning worship (8:00 am), held in the chapel of the Church Center for the UN, is highly energizing and a good time to touch base with the Ecumenical Women advocacy team. Each day a different organization leads the worship.

**MEETING OUTCOME, TAKING ADVOCACY HOME**

While advocacy is a form of accompaniment which is rooted in faith and is people-centered, it does not start in the corridors of power but with people at the local level, and with their daily struggle for life, rights, equality and justice. The skills and information learned during an experience at the Commission on the Status of Women should be multiplied; share them with your community. Find your church’s policy and analyze it for strengths and weaknesses; maybe consider even making suggestions. Advocate

with members of your government for stronger policies based on the recommendations and experiences during CSW. Join coalitions working on the theme, and – just like a caucus – make recommendations and attend meetings with government representatives.

Through our ongoing work and commitment at the national level, Ecumenical Women will be able to make the recommendations put forth in the final CSW agreed conclusions and even the Beijing Platform for Action politically binding. This process is slow, but it must continue. The recommendations of your church, of Ecumenical Women, and of the CSW agreed conclusions are all tools to incorporate in your work.

***For strategies on taking advocacy home, check out the next section of the guide.***



<sup>1</sup>For more information about role of the churches in shaping the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, see *For All Peoples and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights*, by John Nurser.

<sup>2</sup>Jael Silliman and Joan D. Winship, *Bringing Beijing Back: Local Actions and Global Strategies* (The Stanley Foundation, November 1995) 5.

<sup>3</sup>Read the Beijing Platform for Action in Part IV, “Taking It Home,” of this guide.

<sup>4</sup>About the CSW: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/index.html#about>



# PART III

CONSIDER IT! ONGOING ACTION STRATEGIES

“We talk religion in a world that worships the bread but does not distribute it, that practices ritual rather than righteousness, that confesses but does not repent.”

*~Joan Chittister*

TAKING IT HOME: LOCAL ADVOCACY AFTER CSW

*Hopefully CSW has inspired you to take action and raise awareness for gender equality in your own community. Here are a few ideas to for local activities.*

SHARE

Bring CSW home to your local community. Meet with local schools, scouts, community groups, gender-based NGO networks, or other agencies that might have an interest in learning about what you experienced at CSW.

Advocate! Meet with you local representative, member of parliament, or government official. Tell them what you believe they should do to promote gender equality, and educate them about the CSW.

Bring CSW home to your church family. In discussion with your congregation and church leaders, identify unique and creative ways to integrate gender perspectives in your church.

CONNECT

Read and share updates on the Ecumenical Women website, use the Internet to exchange information with other activist women of faith. Check out the Circle for Concerned Women Theologians in Africa and consider connecting or creating your own circle.

Involve and teach men and boys at all levels about the importance of gender equality and human rights. There are many curriculums available online or create your own.

Start planning a local or regional event celebrating the fifteen year review of the Beijing Platform for Action in 2010.

Hold an annual prayer service for the World Day of Prayer on March 8, International Women’s Day.

BE AN ACTIVIST

Hold voter registration drives for women. Support and vote for candidates who address women’s concerns. Tell women leaders you know that they should run for office. (For a US example, see Whitehouse Project.)

Work to get the Beijing Platform for Action incorporated into electoral politics and government agencies at local, state, national and international levels. Talk to your church partners and denominational leaders to explore some of the ways that churches are implementing (or might implement) the Beijing Platform for Action.

LEARN MORE

Find out how much money in your national budget is allocated specifically for the concerns of women.

Take advantage of other United Nations agencies like UNIFEM and UNFPA. Find out if there are UNIFEM projects in your country. In the US, there are local UNIFEM chapters where you can be involved. Visit [www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org) to find out more. UNIFEM provides financial and technical assistance to innovative program and strategies that promote and mainstream women’s human rights, political participation and economic security.

Find out the topics for future themes of CSW and how you might contribute your expertise at the national or international level.

Find out when your country is being reviewed under the terms of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) – you can find this out by clicking links on the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) website: <http://un.org/womenwatch>. Countries that have signed and ratified the convention are reviewed every four years. When this happens, NGOs submit “shadow reports” about the status of women in their country, which influence the proceedings



and keep governments accountable. Contact a UN-based advocacy office for assistance in submitting your report, or read sample reports at International Women’s Rights Action Watch

TAKING IT HOME: BRINGING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE TO THE CHURCH

A gender perspective within the church means constantly asking, “Where are the women?” Everyone can do a self-assessment of their own congregation and community. To bring gender to the church, it will take women and men constantly raising the issue, again and again and again. Here are some questions to get you started:

LEADERSHIP

Who serves on the committees; are women represented on all committees or only some? Are women on the public or outward facing committees of the church? Are there women represented as ecumenical officers, and chairpersons?

Are women sent as church representatives to the national and global forums and conferences? If they go, when they come back, are they given a public forum to share their views?

Be aware. Are women called as pastors to serve in churches in your area? If a woman pastor is not called to serve, do people know this is occurring in their community? Find out if there is a difference between how women and men in your church are being paid. If women are discriminated in region, by pay, or as pastors by not receiving a call, can you publicly name this?

How many women pastors are in your district? How many women are studying theology? If there are few women doing this, how do you support them (e.g. scholarships, food, family support)?

Does your church provide leadership opportunities for young women? In what ways – just helping with clean up and cooking or in more substantive ways?

MONEY

How does gender impact the budget? Is there money for programs that impact and involve women? Are programs that benefit women and families a priority?

What is the source of income for your church? What percentage comes from women, fundraisers, or grants established by women?

Who makes the decisions of how the church’s money is allocated and spent? Are women included in this process?

Do an audit. Are women who work for the church paid equally to men?

THEOLOGY

Do your Bible studies include the women of the Bible? These stories offer richness for study and reflection, as well as address situations of domes-

tic violence, rape, and trafficking through stories like the rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-19) and Dinah (Genesis 34).

What is the gender of the language used in the pulpit? Humankind or mankind? Chairman or chairperson? What images and language are used in naming God? Can a discussion be held about this in your church?

PUBLIC CHURCH

Do you think of yourself as a public church? Churches are actors in societies like nongovernmental organizations, nonprofits, governments, or social service organizations. If you are providing community services, you are a public church. You may already be taking action as a public church, but do you think of yourself as having a public voice? Host a congregational discussion on this theme to see how you view yourselves.

Does your church leader speak out about issues facing the community, be it violence, environmental degradation, immigration, poverty, or AIDS? When was the last time you asked your pastor, bishop, or youth group to engage on an issue important to you?

Can you write an opinion article, using a faith voice and gender perspective, for the local paper?

Does your church or organization have a national or international advocacy office? Are you receiving their newsletter? Are you in communication with them to tell them about your priorities?

GENDER ANALYSIS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Where are the women in my church? At the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (ELCSA) a diplomatic church leader would say that they are there in the Women’s League, and through the Women’s Fellowship. The fundamental question, though, is how effective are these church organizations? Whose interests do they really serve?

For instance, you have the Men’s League where most of the critical leadership of our church is drawn from. The reality of the situation is that the Men’s League is a joke compared to the Women’s League. Men are few in numbers and they do not have the same financial profile as women. Many men are outside the church. The question is, why do women continue to allow men to take up leadership responsibilities? Yes, women in my church guard their sacred space jealously. They have found ways of being themselves and doing what they want to do without male interference.

The Youth and the Young Adult League are not very significant in terms of influence in my church. This raises another question as well. How does gender relate to youth? Can youth be included or incorporated into gender discourse? Should we not expose the extent to which gender inequality/injustice affect youth as well?

Solomuzi Mabuza is an ordained Lutheran pastor in South Africa and the Advocacy and Leadership Development Coordinator within the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research at the Institute for the study of the Bible at KwaZuluNatal University. The institute promotes contextual Bible study for restoring dignity and wellbeing to the sufferers of sexual violence and their families. The campaign is based on the story of incest and rape of Tamar by her half-brother (2 Samuel 13).

# PART IV

TRANSFORMING THEOLOGY FOR THE SAKE OF WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT: EIGHT ESSAYS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

GARDENS OF ABUNDANCE

“If you have the faith of a mustard seed ... ”

There is probably no more visible, transformative, faithful act than growing a garden. Take an empty lot and add a little compost of garbage and manure and seeds.

Mix sweat and labor and the transformation of tepid, bare space miraculously happens. What refreshment it gives to sit in a small garden. Gardens in the desert, rooftop, in backyards, or in our homes – wherever we go, gardens are symbols of God’s gracious, sacrificing, incredibly undeserved, loving abundance.

The eight essays contained within this section are from women and men from around the world who are wrestling with both patriarchal notions of God and society found within religious bodies and also with how those notions continue to influence the normative inequality of women found everywhere around the world. The authors of these essays are each from a unique garden of thought and bring a unique style. We’re all seeking an understanding of what needs to happen for that garden where each and every sister around the world is able to grow and thrive so that her seeding and her growth will be prolific for future gardeners.

We dig and hoe and sweat and plant, watch and wait. We water and weed, we prop up the delicate stems, and prune the unnecessary branches. We turn over the soil again and again and put last year’s refuse into the compost heap.

We add some manure. Our sweat waters the earth, mingled with the tears of a God who we know also wants that Garden to grow, whoever She is, whoever we are, and wherever we are. We do whatever it takes because we know it is with a faithful eye that the mustard seed grows. We know that the amaryllis grows, that the lily grows, that the violet grows. We’re tending a world of flowers that we have faith will grow. I hope you find richness for your own garden in these essays.

*Theology in process: digging, composting, planting and transforming the world, revealing possibilities – the garden grows.*

*If you have faith of a mustard seed . . . .*

— Rev. Kathleen Stone, Chaplain, Church Center for the United Nations

*Ecumenical Women liaison*

PERSPECTIVE: GENDER ANALYSIS FOR EACH CONTEXT



*About the author: Dr. Fulata Lusungu Moyo is the World Council of Churches’ Program Executive for Women and a systematic theologian whose PhD work is in gender and sexual ethics. She is a national of Malawi currently working in Switzerland.*

Gender refers to the social construction of female and male identity. It includes the ways in which gender differences, whether real or perceived, have been valued, used and relied upon to classify women and men and to assign roles and expectations to them. The significance of this is that the lives and experiences of women and men, including their experience of religious systems, occur within complex sets of differing social and cultural expectations.

According to Susan Frank Parsons, gender is not only an aesthetic avenue through which expressions of the human self are made, but also a path through which human relations are exposed and “dilemmas of human living revealed.”<sup>1</sup> Our gender also contributes to the way each experiences God. That is why it is important to always use gender analysis, especially when dealing with questions of people’s concerns and how such can be addressed. Gender analysis aims



to achieve equity, rather than equality. Gender equity takes into consideration the differences in women’s and men’s lives and recognizes that different approaches may be needed to produce outcomes that are equitable.

**Gender analysis recognizes that:**

- Women’s and men’s lives and therefore experiences, needs, issues, and priorities are different
- Women’s lives are not all the same; the interests that women have in common may be determined as much by their social position or their ethnic identity as by the fact they are women
- Women’s life experiences, needs, issues, and priorities are different for different ethnic groups
- Life experiences, needs, issues, and priorities vary for different groups of women (dependent on age, ethnicity, disability, income levels, employment status, marital status, sexual orientation, and whether they have dependants)
- Different strategies may be necessary to achieve equitable outcomes for women and men and different groups of women

**Concerns as we move forward:**

For the sake of policy development and service delivery, there is a need to examine the differences in women’s and men’s lives, including those

which lead to social, religious, and economic inequity for women. Research and practice have shown that there are still many women who die during child birth because they have been denied their sexual and reproductive health and rights. In the context of HIV and AIDS, the burden of caregiving, in most cases, exclusively rests on the shoulders of women. Relating this to the realities of the economic inequalities, as the second concern, most of these women are at the bottom of the economic pyramid, often living in extreme poverty and unable to afford health services.

Since 2007, World Council of Churches’ (WCC) Agape<sup>2</sup> annual women’s hearings on Poverty, Wealth, and Ecology have affirmed that most women do not have possibilities of creating wealth because of certain gender stereotyping that confines them to positions of easy exploitation. For example, patriarchal realities sometimes foreshadow women turning over financial resources to their male relations: husband/boyfriend, father, brothers, or uncles.

Inexplicably, most of this patriarchal hegemony is rooted in a biased interpretation of existing religious teachings. For example, some churches still use biblical texts that subjugate women to roles of submission and subservience to their heterosexual partners (Galatians 5:22).

**Methodologies for moving forward:**

- **Challenge existing social, economic and religious systems that encourage gender inequity.**
- **Use gender analysis to interrogate** certain social, religious and economic beliefs and practices that disadvantage women.
- **Create a safe space for girls and women** to be holistically empowered through awareness-raising, education in wealth creation, and sexual and reproductive health and wholeness. These will help girls and women to be able to make informed choices about when and with whom to be married and when to be involved in motherhood. They will also be protected from maternal deaths

and sexual exploitation.

- **Read sacred scriptures with gender justice lenses using hermeneutics of suspicion.**
- Since most of the inequalities suffered by women are directly connected to men, there is urgent need to **develop gender awareness training from both female and male perspectives** so as to address both women and men in order to maximize the anticipated positive change for women. World Council of Churches (WCC) and World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) initiatives aimed at involving men in the process of “men as partners: promoting positive masculinities” should be encouraged through collaboration and networking.





## PERSPECTIVE: A WOMAN OF FAITH DEFINED BY DIVERSITY



*About the author: Dr. Azza M. Karam<sup>3</sup> is the Senior Policy Research Advisor of the United Nations Development Program and Coordinator for the UN Arab Human Development Report. She has previously worked at Religions for Peace as the Director of the Women's Desk, and has wide experience with religious women and men from around the world.*

*"Please, please don't say anything negative or critical about Islam. It is your faith!"* Such were the words of my late mother, with whom my relationship was never the easiest, as I decided to embark upon the journey of my doctoral studies of the tensions in my part of the world – the Middle East – between religion, governance and women's rights. These three issues were structuring the dynamics of our lives through local and international politics, social issues, and even economics. Whether it was our micro family or within the entire region, religion, in this case Islam, was it. Having worked on and with nongovernmental organizations dealing with the extremely tricky subject of human rights for several years, I felt it was inevitable that at one stage I had to critically examine why it was that religious arguments seemed to be the ones that all protagonists — whether those governing or

those in opposition — were bandying about, and why it was that women were so symbolic a terrain of contention between all of these players who were by and large males.

To my mother's plea (more like a command) I would in the beginning roll my eyes in mock anguish, "Really mother, why ever would that be the issue in the first place," I would retort. After several years and further study, it became clearer to me that it is not about faith at all. It is about a group of men – politicians, religious leaders, even notable NGO activists – dancing around with religion as nothing more than a tool. And it is a macabre ritual ultimately defaming our faith. Who says it belongs to them anyway? Is God not mine too?!<sup>5</sup>

In the end my mother's warnings informed me more than any argument, books or even life experiences could or did. She was right of course, in her own way, because none of what was going on in the domain of politics or development is really about faith itself; instead, it concerns the fundamentals of religious politics.

I realized that some academics, particularly Western ones dealing with the Middle East, were far more comfortable lumping people and ways of thinking into certain simplistic categories, such as "fundamentalism" (e.g., "Islamic fundamentalism"

as part of religious fundamentalism). Some of my activist colleagues, on the other hand, were equally attracted by this simple process of categorization – or naming – which made "the enemy" easier to label and distinguish. The resulting thought process goes thus: religious fundamentalism is anti-democratic and anti-women → religious fundamentalists are enemies of democracy and women's rights → anyone arguing about/for religion is against democracy and women's rights. So the solution is to not engage with religion, at all. Such people, as "nondemocrats," cannot be engaged

in the struggle for democracy. The solution to all the world's ills was: if you must have religion, then keep it personal.

Something inside me revolted against both logic and rhetoric. I believe that politics is part of everyday life. Who says that the higher price of a loaf of bread, determined because global markets were allowed by legislators/policy makers to become greedy without any limits, is not a politi-

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**And it is a macabre ritual ultimately defaming our faith. Who says it belongs to them anyway? Is God not mine too?**

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cal issue? And when it came to faith, why is that “just” personal? By rendering faith nonpolitical, I was also allowing those who spoke in the name of religion to be the sole spokespersons for the entire faith. For how could I challenge what I believe my faith means to me in my life, if I was to be silent? In addition, those who speak in the name of religion do not do so “personally;” they create entire agendas of governance, economics, culture and social interaction based on their understanding of what is religious. Millions are swayed by these agendas: indeed, millions vote on the basis of such “religious agendas.” Surely that voting is an act of democracy, so how can I

afford not to engage? Do I become a nondemocrat and exclude these millions and what sways them, in the name of fighting for democracy?

To detractors, my response is usually, if you believe in God, you must also believe that God alone is the judge of each and all of us. And I go back to my own religion here, Islam, to argue that surely, to believe is also to appreciate the verse in the Holy Qur’an that indicates that God created us in all of our diversity, not that we should sit in judgment of each other, but that we should know one another – i.e., know oneself. Again, I think, surely to be a Muslim is to also read and learn that the term “Muslim” is used

Religious feminism is not merely a concept, but a reality born of the joint struggles of women of faith for their rights — with their faith as part of the armor.

in the Holy Qur’an to reference people who existed even before the advent of Islam as we know it today; indeed, it is used to refer to Abraham, consecutive prophets, and believers.

At best, our faith is about tremendous inclusiveness of and humility towards each other. At worst, it should make us realize that nothing is so clear cut for our judgment, but everything bespeaks an ambiguity that in itself is a miracle of our creation and existence. To me, to have faith is to believe that human avarice, cruelty, judgmentalism, exclusion, and pain encountered in different parts of the world are not the norm. Indeed, to believe in God is to realize that there is a countervailing force which also provides the selfsame humans with empathy, kindness, and the most healing of all powers, love. To me, to be a Muslim is to realize that diversity (within and outside of us) is part of the wonder of being. I could not be all that I am without my faith. This continues to be demonstrated to me in my life through my father and through another remarkable woman who had herself encountered, in her own society, many forms of exclusion and discrimination. This is Mia Berden, my Dutch Christian mentor. Literally and figuratively, they have held my hands through rough times and show me how it

is that faith is the art of love, the bearer of courage, and the means of survival through connectedness with other people of faith.

I came to the United States in the winter of 2000

specifically to work with multiple communities of faith. I believe it was God’s guidance that enabled me to come to a country which I have held in such fascination for many, many years, and one which, ironically, despite finding its foreign policy at times confusing, I was nevertheless deeply attracted to. Why? Because it represents precisely the diversity that I find so “Islamic.” After living in the US nearly the same amount of years as I have lived in several other Western European countries, I am not finding my multiple identities problematic. Nor indeed am I finding that being a woman of faith is leading to painful processes of othering. I believe that being a society built on diversity, the capacity for acceptance (or at least for a “live and let live” attitude) for people of faith and of multiple identities is not only a potential but a reality in the US.

Through studying many works of women of faith representing different religious traditions<sup>6</sup> and working with communities of faith, several realities became apparent to me. Not only

are women of faith the bulwark of faith-based services — forming, in some instances, over 90% of basic service providers in religious communities<sup>7</sup> — but whether Traditional African or Chinese, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Baha’i, these women of faith see a huge difference between the spirit of their faith and the practices done in the name of their religion. Many of these women, through their remarkable intellectual endeavors and activism in both public and private domains, seek to reclaim their religious heritage and reinterpret the understandings of religion such that the faith becomes central to practice, rather than the current paradigm, where the religious institution is the focus of the practice and its sole interpreter. Part of the significance of this work is the affirmation of the fact that far from being solely a tool of women’s oppression, religion is a fundamental aspect of the struggle for human emancipation, and with it, for women’s rights. There is no way that this process of reclaiming the religious can take place by ignoring religion and castigating or alienating those who would speak in its name, or indeed, assuming that only the religious institutions represent the “religious.”

My life in the Middle East taught me that to be a believer in human rights, in democracy, and in feminism (which encompasses both and

much else), I had to reclaim the domain of the religious as part of my struggle to understand myself and my society — an understanding that no politician, caught in the web of fighting for political power, in the midst of conflicting ideals, would be able to explain. My life in the West thus far has taught me that I must reclaim faith to appreciate the diversity I am in the midst of, as part of the wonder of my own religious tradition — which includes the wonders of any religious faith — a wonder that no religious clergy, experienced in fighting for a specific domain of power in a specific context at a certain moment of time, would be able to articulate. Both experiences have also brought me to the realization that one can be religious and a feminist at the same time. Religious feminism is not merely a concept, but a reality born of the joint struggles of women of faith for their rights — with their faith as part of the armor.

Faith is like life, it has its ambiguities and its certainties, and depending on where one stands, one sees the specific dimensions one wishes to acknowledge. As with life, faith will continue to baffle and illuminate, thwart and enable, mystify and empower. But like life, it is unavoidable ... and necessary.

## PERSPECTIVE: FROM INDIA: DECONSTRUCTING POWER AND GENDER, SEEKING EQUILIBRIUM



*About the author: Shanthi Mathai is currently a General Committee Member, Asian Church Women's Conference (2006-2010), and has worked with and studied women's organizations. She works extensively with women, children, and faith communities in her native India.*

Gender inequality and gender-based violence are realities around the world. Historically, a variety of socio-political and cultural factors contributed to this inequality, but the core factor – gender relations – that works behind all of these formulations and outcomes has an ideological imperative. While this is evident even in the global North where women are still excluded and unrepresented in the ministry and administrative settings of the Church, the situation in the global South is even more pathetic.

How do sex and the dictated gender roles contribute to this state of affairs? What is the role of theology? What is the scope of a redemptive interpretation from a genuine and truly theological gender perspective?

### WHAT IS GENDER?

“Gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman; the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles.”<sup>8</sup>

It is the everyday experience of expected masculine and feminine roles in a particular culture. Sex is biological, but gender is acquired or perceived through thought and behavioral patterns during the socialization process. Hence gender roles, gender relations and gender differences are culturally and socially constructed. For example, the household works of cooking, cleaning, and child rearing are considered to be women's work; the roles of decision-making, breadwinning, involvement in politics, etc., are considered to be man's work. In the same way, humility, kindness, patience, and obedience are thought and taught as feminine qualities; strength, dominance, anger, and leadership are thought of and taught as masculine.

### POWER RELATIONS AND GENDER

Power is embodied in man-woman relationship. Male members of the society enjoy a historical experience of superiority and power, while female populations encounter a historically bitter experience of subordination, powerlessness, and violence against them. From childhood, boys and girls are tainted with superior/inferior complexes respectively as well as associated power and pride in boys and guilt and shame in girls. To maintain the status quo of the subordination of women,

the structures of oppression work through the systems and institutions in society— family, educational, political, religious, law – to require that women conform to their traditional gender roles. The perceived gender roles and identities shape the vision and action in all spheres of life. Men as heads of households, husbands, and fathers, and as religious-political-social leaders, gain the power to control woman's body, her psychology, wealth and property, and space of existence. With their patriarchal structure and gender-biased reflections and interpretation of Scriptures, religions play a vital role in the process of maintaining and transmitting this gender imbalance.

### TRADITIONAL THEOLOGY AND GENDER

Culture, tradition, and religion work hand-in-hand in constructing the molds of gender roles. For centuries, the Scripture has been interpreted with a patriarchal perspective that subordinated and alienated women. Scripture has been used to enforce institutionalized discrimination against women. The ideological bias against women silenced the voice of women in Church and religious organizations and subsequently sidelined them from important and visible roles. The roles of dignity and respect were reserved for men. The



implications of this bias are explicit in the power relations in families and other social institutions.

The “God-experience” of people has a gender dimension created out of the perceived patriarchal ideologies and social constructions. Some of the traditional theological interpretations that have deep-rooted impacts on the gender roles in Church include God as male — hence male as the norm<sup>9</sup>, male as superior to female, men as heads of households and heads and masters of wives, women as lesser humans than men, women as property of men with which they can do anything. Not to mention the purity-pollution laws associated with the body of women and their biological functions, which negate the importance and higher value of bringing life to this world. These and other traditional mainstream interpretations are intertwined in the faith and practices of the Church and the social life of the people.

**BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

Only a methodology that views relationships of domination as a gender construction that is not natural or God-given can challenge the theological interpretations that support the maintenance of the status quo. Hence this question of women’s inequality should be read along with the existential questions and struggles of the poor, oppressed,

and marginalized communities in the world.

**THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF HERMENEUTICS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE<sup>10</sup>**

The concepts of wholeness and integrity in creation, life in its fullness, and abundant life promised by Jesus to all, serve as a framework. Theological interpretation must be based upon the following theological methodologies:

- Questioning the theological interpretations of stereotyped gender roles as God-given. They are man-made and can be changed.
- Bringing forth the power relations in Theological production and admitting that “subjectivity is part of the production of knowledge.” Both the selection/omission of stories and experiences, discussion/no discussion, names/no names, silence/cry, etc., are valuable for interpretation.
- Dealing with the relationship between theology, gender, and feminism.
- Inserting theology in a holistic, systematic, and ecological paradigm.
- Calling for the transformation of “talking theology” to “doing theology.”
- Calling for gender sensitivity and moving toward the use of inclusive theological language.

**DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION<sup>11</sup>**

In addition to doing theology in such a way, transformation of oppressive structures with which we live and breathe will only be accom-

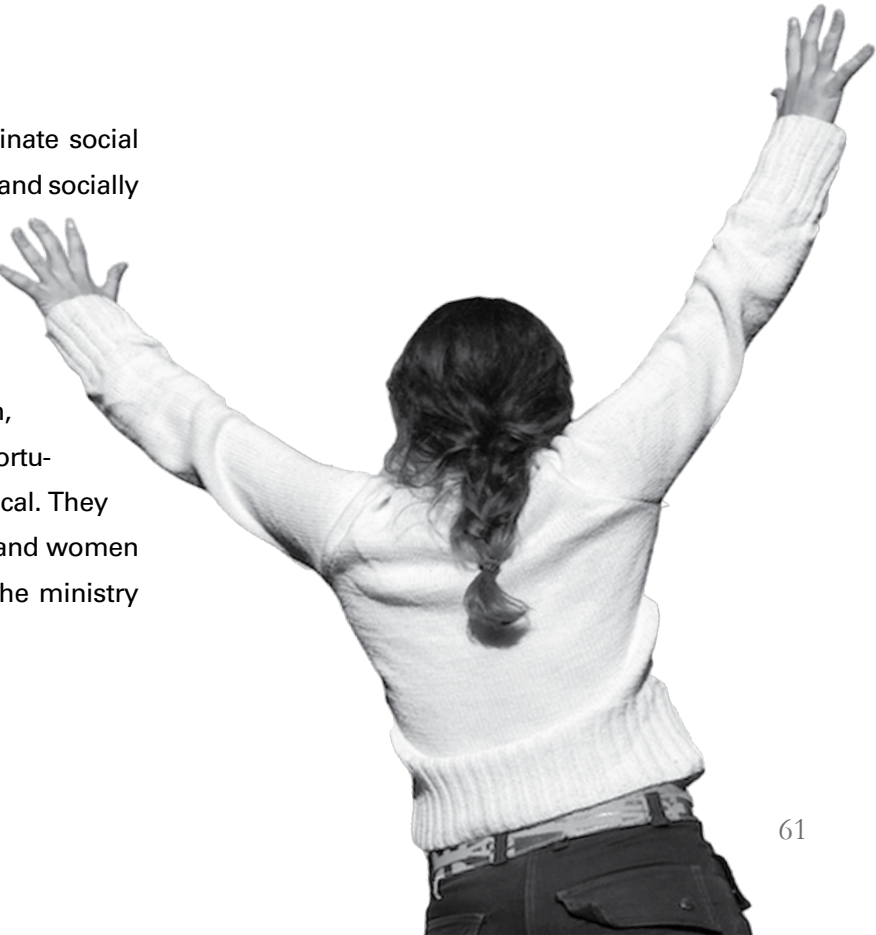
plished through:

1. Deconstruction is the critical evaluation of the anti-women bias of mainstream theology where we unlearn the values and attitudes of inequality and then seek transformation of unjust and oppressive practices.
2. Reconstruction is the reformulation of theological concepts, attributes, and symbols (i.e., instead of the concept of a male God, we begin to imagine a God concept beyond gender with masculine and feminine qualities). Reconstruction helps to develop a right and responsible relationship with God and with ourselves, among men and women and among peoples as well as with earth and creation.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the inferior and subordinate social status of women in society is culturally and socially determined. The systematic creation of oppressive structures that function through all social institutions, including Church, and the unequal power relations between men and women, deny women their right to equal opportunities, both socio-economic and political. They deny the healthy participation of men and women together in worshipping God and in the ministry and administration of the Church.

Addressing theology with a gender perspective helps discern and denounce the oppressive structures. Biblical hermeneutics with a gender perspective provides us with a rationale for speaking about gender equality that affirms a holistic, systematic, and ecological paradigm and provides alternative interpretations that help in the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction – in the reformulation of theological concepts and symbols.



## PERSPECTIVE: FROM THE UNITED STATES: IS THEOLOGY RELEVANT?



*About the author: A citizen of the United States of America, Christine Housel is the Global Project Manager of the World Student Christian Federation in Switzerland.*

***I will answer: “Why theology which emphasizes women’s equality is absolutely essential to real progress in the status of women around the world.”***

It seems to me that there is a question implicit within our question that we must address to answer it meaningfully.

It is the question of theology altogether. To many in this day and age, theology does not seem relevant to our real, daily lives. An online definition says theology is “*the rational and systematic study of religion and its influences and of the nature of religious truth a particular system or school of religious beliefs and teachings.*”<sup>12</sup> Even this definition creates a feeling of distance. Theology can easily seem like something abstract and unrelated to us at best, or like a set of systems and beliefs that restrict and oppress at worst.

Does theology, in fact, have some relevance to my real life and concerns, and help move them forward?

Only when we see that it actually does will the original question itself matter to us—the question as to why it is important to do something historically different in theology in a consistent, intentional way, that is, to ensure that our theology does not diminish but rather empowers women.

The World Student Christian Federation, where I work, has a 114-year history of grappling with the political, economic, and social issues of our day within a theological framework. A conviction that God is real and seeks to partner with us in transforming injustice into just peace and fear into love motivates the students and alumni of the Federation. Therefore, theology is at the core of the spiral of analysis, action, and praxis for these leaders around the world. How do we develop our prayer and our reflection on God in such a way as to motivate us to be continually transformed as individuals and as communities be a prophetic witness in church and society? *This* is theology.

I watched the film *The Women* the other day. It is a story told about and from the perspective of a group of women friends and has an all-woman cast. After watching it and then learning about the evolution of the film through the director’s notes at the end, I was surprised that I hadn’t even noticed the fact of its all-woman cast.

We are not used to hearing things and seeing things from women’s perspectives. Men are not used to it, and women are not used to it. It took *The Women* over 10 years to get off the ground, partially because many people thought an all-female cast would not be successful with the public.

I have become aware in my journey as a woman in the church and in society how deep is the imbalance that favors male perspectives and experiences, and I have wrestled to know myself within these structures and then to be a full participant — in my distinctiveness as a woman. That I simply enjoyed the movie as a movie, only reflecting on the all-woman cast later, signified to me that I have made some progress.

We need intentional actions and vehicles, like this movie, to bring women and women’s ways into public life and thought and to create a new situation of balance and equity; this balance will contribute to the lives of all, women and men. Theology should be at the forefront of this needed change because we believe in a God who created men and women, in equity.

I am reading a book called *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*, by Charles Marsh, where he studies the way in



which faith and theology inspired the vision that motivated Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders in the United States — the theological vision of the “beloved community” of forgiveness, reconciliation, and love. I haven’t reached the end, but he discusses just the topic we are working on together here: why is theology essential to our work? We are faced with as profound a challenge today regarding the ongoing struggle for gender equity as the civil rights movement faced in the 1960s. We have evidence that theological grounding and theological tools may and in fact must reach, challenge, and influence the hearts of individuals around us and the corridors of power (from local village councils to consultations with parliamentarians and the highest seats of the United Nations).

Lamentably, much of Christian theology in the last 2,000 years has sidelined or diminished women. Augustine, a theologian from the 400s CE, had tremendous influence on church and society today as we know it. One short but telling quote from Augustine is, *“Women should not be enlightened or educated in any way. They should, in fact, be segregated as they are the cause of hideous and involuntary erections in holy men.”* It is humorous in a way, but really, this quote is tragic because it reflects a body of thought

that has done lasting damage to women, to the relationships between women and men, and to the gospel, including giving church structures and men in power justification for blaming and punishing women for their own struggles. We know that Augustine was a product of a time when the social subordination of women was taken for granted and that his limitation and error in this area do not deny the beauty of what he says on other topics. But compare Augustine to Jesus, who lived 400 years prior, also in a society whose social definitions limited women. Jesus challenged the assumptions of this context and raised the honor and status of women by the way he engaged them and the position he gave them. Mary and Martha were his close friends, along with their brother Lazarus, and Mary sat with him as a student disciple. Imagine what might have happened if the theologians of the early church, and theology since, had followed this trajectory! There are veins within theology that have affirmed and empowered women, but much of it has done damage instead of providing the radical vision of equality and partnership between women and men that is its calling.

For theology to empower women, women must see themselves reflected in the theology. For this to happen, women must be writers of theology,

and women and men together must examine and critique theologies of the past for their errors and rethink old assumptions. And all of this must be communicated in action to the world. (Here we must take a moment to acknowledge the many dedicated professional and lay women theologians, and the men in solidarity with them, who have moved us so far forward already.)

At the General Assembly of the World Student Christian Federation in August 2008, one of the clear messages that came through was that this generation of our students, from all around the world, again affirmed

that they are motivated by the hope that God is at work in history. They have a desire to grapple with what this means for their lives and contexts by doing theological reflection alongside study and analysis of social, cultural, and political processes so that they may collaborate with the Spirit to effect change. In addition, the WSCF has had a longstanding commitment to being proactive in supporting the development and inclusion of women at all levels of leadership and participation,

and to encourage women and men to learn how to interact and work together in ways that reflect our commitment to gender equity. It is not always clear how to motivate people for this change, but it is clear to our community that working with and from theological foundations is absolutely necessary for us to find the ways forward.

Ecumenical Women has come to the same conclusion. We are all grappling with just what our theology is and how it connects to our action. This process of learning is a central part of our work, along with the advocacy actions that we undertake. Our effectiveness in the

one, I suspect, will somehow lead to greater effectiveness in the other. Just how to understand what this means is an unfolding process. At the same time, we have a common understanding that our theology must continue to evolve and continue to be shaped in part by our experiences and context. Our theology must be developed in collaboration and community. The empowerment of women and gender equality are not tangential to this exercise and very definition, but core.

**We are all grappling with just what our theology is and how it connects to our action. This process of learning is a central part of our work.**

PERSPECTIVE: FROM KENYA: A THEOLOGY THAT EMPOWERS WOMEN



*About the author: Christine Mangale, from Kenya, is currently serving as an intern within the Lutheran Office for World Community. Her extensive work with youth of the Lutheran Communion in Central and Eastern Africa is invaluable to her understanding and motivates her mission.*

Religion is a powerful and important aspect for Africans regardless of their form of worship. Across African languages, the title given to a clergyman is “teacher.” With such a title, people who spread the word of God are held in high esteem – second to that of King. Therefore, with such power, theologians can change and direct attitudes of people in the parish and beyond.

Armed with legitimacy and acceptance, bishops, pastors, and evangelists have a unique opportunity to help their parishes improve the lives of women and expose the critical role a woman plays in raising a village. Because women are mothers of all genders and in many cases remain the backbone of the family, they should be treated as equals in every aspect of life. The more an African woman is empowered, the more she can do for her children who, as a collective, are the future of every society.

Spiritual leaders are highly respected, and their word is seldom questioned, while the statements of politicians are often disregarded. Because religious leaders are generally humble and listen to their parish, the average common African person cherishes their guidance and wisdom. As a result, theology that emphasizes equality is imperative for African societies.

As Africa embraces the dictates of modern life, women still remain the most marginalized, often because laws in many countries do not put women on the same footing as men. In many countries women cannot inherit from their husbands, and in some a widow is not an independent person (for she is forced to become a wife of her dead husband’s brother). In many villages, girls are denied education and are placed into arranged marriages to bear children for all their reproductive lives. Theology that resists these notions is essential for the well-being of the African woman.

While some churches have remained conservative in their own internal dealings and in which women are not ordained, there is still merit in prescribing

theology that emphasizes the equality of women to men. Empowered with such a theology, clergymen from these sorts of churches would still preach the prescribed equality of men and women. In its absence, the clergymen remain ignorant of the value of bringing women to the same status as men.

Theology with an emphasis on gender equality can have a tremendous impact on violence against women – such a theology would empower the poor woman who even after farming all day to sustain her family lacks financial security and possibilities to overcome her abusive church husband, because of the cultural norms that prevent women from

becoming financially independent.

The “selective” theology that has been and is still being planted in our children’s minds every Sunday needs to be revised. Women need to be equipped with positive equality theology at an early age so that young women grow up feeling as worthy and equal as their male peers. The mantra that must be instilled is: “educating a girl is educating a nation, a nation that can overcome any barriers.”

Women need to be equipped with positive equality theology at an early age so that young women grow up feeling as worthy and equal as their male peers.

## PERSPECTIVE: FROM PERU: A FEMINIST VISION OF SPIRIT, POLITICS, AND PARTNERSHIP



*About the author: Mag. Luzmila Casilda Quezada Barreto is a pastor from the Wesleyan Pilgrim Church in Peru, and a founding member of the Kairos Process in Peru. She received her PhD in History and Theology from the School of Advanced Theological Studies (EST) in Brazil.*

***I will answer: “Why theology which emphasizes women’s equality is absolutely essential to real progress in the status of women around the world.”***

*Because our world needs a spiritual theology and policies of liberation which encourage the struggle for life and justice and inspire our passions, dreams, and utopia visions, while maintaining our commitment to seek inclusive societies that accept and value diversity..*

*Because this spirituality is based on a concept of ethics that are theological, ecological and interreligious, which rise from the daily struggles that we see, feel, hear and practice in favor of human dignity in image and semblance of God. We oppose all dehumanizing forces of violence and injustice to women in our countries.*

*Because God chooses to protect the rights and citizenship of those who are excluded. This is acknowledged by the faith based in the blood, sweat, and tears of those who live with the reality of oppression and exclusion.*

*Because this theological reflection is not just directed at women, but seeks to become an integral human theology, one that demystifies andocentric thought and patriarchy and prompts other ways to see, feel, create, explain, and think about the world and human relations, so that things are not exclusively classified as male, and so that we can start creating female and male identities in our society.*

*Because women were delegated to an inferior status, justifying male domination and creating an aftermath of pain and suffering. Churches and communities cannot be silenced any more and continue acting as accomplices. Religion cannot maintain a value system that oppresses women; instead, it must promote changes through struggles, liberation, and resistance. It is time to unmask patriarchal systems in educational institutions, churches, and society so that we can change religious and civil structures accordingly.*

*Because as women start to see themselves as political actors, carrying out civil and religious duties, defending our rights to access power in decision-making processes in social and religious spaces, and as we start to own our own bodies and sexuality, we will establish a society that provides justice and equity among all human beings. This citizenship involves elections, participation, and social, ethical and legal acknowledgment of our role in society.*

Because this theological reflection is based on the notion of a plentiful Life, within the limits of our existence and human mortality. By nourishing our hopes, dreams and visions for human wholeness we transform our communities. Our whole life is a wonderful gift prompted by God’s generosity.

Because it is time for all women and men, solidarity networks, churches and international organizations to join forces and form strategies that empower women. Feminism has provided us a new vision for society where we must establish partnerships so that human rights for women become universal.



PERSPECTIVE: FROM KOREA: MY DAILY LIFE AS A THEOLOGIAN



About the author: Rev. Hea Sun Kim is the Director of Scranton Women’s Leadership Center, in Seoul, Korea. She is employed with the Women’s Division of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church.

Protestant Christianity has been in Korea for about 125 years. Korea has witnessed fast church growth in the last few decades, probably one of the fastest in the world. In Asia, next to the Philippines which is predominantly Catholic, Korea has the largest number of Christians – a little over 20% Protestants and a little over 10% Catholics among the entire population. In the early years of Christian mission, women readily and whole-heartedly welcomed the new Western religion. Without naming it theology, women theologized the gospel message as a liberating message that freed them from the oppression of the cultural, social, and religious “norm” of their times. Women were the carriers of this liberating gospel to all corners of the country. They made up the majority of Christian converts, and missionaries focused on empowering women through education and leadership training.

During the Japanese occupation of Korea, again, theology was about liberation. Any message that had to do with liberation and justice was

the living message that made the church powerful – powerful enough for the Japanese authorities to fear the church, which led to severe persecution of Christians. The persecution of the Christians continued to the Korean War, during which time the Communists became the oppressors of Christians. Korean Christians knew how to theologize the biblical text to resist the oppressive and unjust powers.

For people seeking justice and liberation, theology is not an academic discipline. Theology is not a study. Theologizing is what people do daily, living out their faith in all circumstances. Oppressed people know clearly who God is for them. God is the only source of their power in order that they may live. Otherwise, there is no need for a God.

Today, with vast church growth in Korea, women are in a different place. Women still occupy the majority of church membership, but now there are the rich women and the poor women, the powerful women and the powerless women. In spite of this division of economic class, most women share the common experience of “women’s place” in the church dominated by male leadership.

Theology is not a study. Theologizing is what people do daily, living out their faith in all circumstances.

4.5%. The entire membership of women is around 60%. The majority of lay women do not favor women’s pastoral leadership in the church. This is not an issue that can be solved with personal dialogue or even with legislative change.

“Women do not qualify to be leaders in the church,”  
“Women are heirs of Eve, the tempter,”  
“Women cannot stand at the pulpit,”  
“Women should be submissive to church authority.”

These statements are all too common within the church. So sometimes the women have become their own enemies. Many women believe what they are taught by the church hierarchy, but there are also powerful resistance movements among women who challenge the oppressive nature of the church structure.

What is the most powerful tool for those that are committed to bringing about change for

The status of women in the church is clear when one looks at the statistics of the church. In one major denomination in Korea, women pastors comprise 5.4%; women lay elders are 8.4%; and women delegates to the general assembly are





justice and fairness in the church structure? It is theology. It's the best tool women can use to educate themselves and others: Bible studies taught from women's perspective; reinterpreting what the gospel says about women, about church hierarchy, about power, and about resistance; knowing which text to use from the Bible for the message of liberation and justice; knowing who God is for them ... these are all works of theology.

All persons of faith are one's own theologian. The Gospel message is to free us from all forms of oppression, internal and external. If we realize that theologizing is not an option for faith, and that we actually are theologizing all the time, we will be empowered to choose theologies that free us. Women need to learn the methods of theologizing, for it is the most powerful tool for one's own empowerment and for the transformation of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Susan Frank Parsons, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) 2.

<sup>2</sup> <http://intranet.wcc-coe.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect any institution, organization, board, or staff members.

<sup>4</sup> I see an important distinction to be made between religion (in Arabic, my language and the one I communicated with my mother in, it is *din*) and faith (in Arabic *iman*). When referring to religion, I am including institutionalized religion in all its forms (whether state ministries, religious bodies, religious schools, etc.) in addition to the clergy and other social and political actors who speak in its name.

<sup>5</sup> I see an important distinction to be made between religion (in Arabic, my language and the one I communicated with my mother in, it is *din*) and faith (in Arabic *iman*). When referring to religion, I am including institutionalized religion in all its forms (whether state ministries, religious bodies, religious schools, etc.) in addition to the clergy and other social and political actors who speak in its name.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Azza Karam (Editor), *A Woman's Place: Religious Women as Public Actors* (New York: World Conference of Religions for Peace, 2000); and Isabel Apawo Phiri et. al. (editors), *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> This figure is based on my own research after several years of culling information from various religious organizations around the world and actual field observations from numerous communities in the United States, South and South East Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

<sup>8</sup> Kamla Bhasin, *Understanding Gender* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000) 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ana Maria Tepedino, *Gender and New(Re-newed) Images of the Divine in Global Voices for Gender Justice* (Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001) 85-90.

<sup>10</sup> Silvia Regina de Lima Silva, *Latin American Feminist Theology and Gender Theories in Global Voices for Gender Justice* (Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001) 67-70.

<sup>11</sup> Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, *Introduction to Asian Feminist Theologies* (Malaysia: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 2005) 31.

<sup>12</sup> [wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn).