

Theological Basis For Ecumenical Women's Engagement In The 52nd Session Of The UN CSW And Its Focus On Financing For Gender Equality And Development

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The imperative to act on gender equality and development is an integral part of the mission of God. God's mission and vision for humanity is one of peace, prosperity and justice. We believe that because women and men are made equally in the image of God they are equal players and equal beneficiaries in God's bounty. This is the new life as God intended it to be, a life of equality which is spelt out in Galatians 3:28, "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for all are one in Christ Jesus". It is therefore a calling on each one of us as women to be involved in the fight for liberation from all forms of oppression and marginalization. We can only do that if we are united and collectively speak out. As women of faith we have been silent for a long time and now is the time to raise our voices together and join hands in working towards a better tomorrow. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye said,

As a woman who feels the weight of sexism I cannot go again and again to the stories of the exodus, exile and to other biblical motifs in which the "least" are recognized and affirmed, are saved or held up as beloved by God or at least are empowered to gnaw at the fundamentals of the structures of injustice until these fundamentals cave in on themselves".

There is, therefore, need for women to address these issues together so that the powers that be need to understand. The national governments have to be persuaded to share the progress dividend of our nations with equity. Equity requires a preferential share for women. This requires direct involvement of and engagement by women in lobbying and addressing matters of financing for gender equity.

To be involved allows us to bring to the debate aspects of the plight of women from different perspectives in the world which men cannot

articulate. We have inside knowledge and experience. A case in point is when cotton wool was out of stock in the entire country of Zimbabwe. It was a complete disaster as they resort to using newspapers in place of menstrual pad. Many developed diseases that could have been avoided had the government acted accordingly. A simple point but a very serious one which highlights the point of women's input. So, together we can lobby for policies that prioritize budgetary allocations towards women empowerment and equality against excessive military expenditures and investments for arms production and acquisition. These are often financed at the expense of resources for social services especially medical care.

Gender inequality has adversely affected the health of African women in a number of ways. One example that highlights the plight of women is the fact that in Malawi the most significant driver of HIV/AIDS is gender inequality. Males initiate sex in most relationships but women and girls have no power to refuse or negotiate for safer sex. The burden of care and its implications for women is enormous.

Although 70% of fulltime farmers in Malawi are women both in matrilineal and patrilineal societies their access to credit is very low but they feed the nation.

Although women are major contributors of food through farming they have been affected through:

- Weakened participation in decision making
- Diminished access to productive resources and services
- Erosion of food sovereignty
 - Declining wages and destruction of livelihood (through mining)
 - Violation of economic, social and cultural rights (e.g. the right to avail health and education services); and
 - Intensification of socially-ascribed reproductive or caring responsibilities especially in light of the HIV-AIDS pandemic (e.g. caring for the ill, and fetching water and fuel

(African Women's Statement on Poverty, Wealth and Ecology November 2007, Dar es Salaam Tanzania)

Linked to gender inequality is poverty. Women have less access to education, employment and credit and are extremely vulnerable when their husbands die or if their marriages split up. Cultural expectations encourage women to suffer in silence. It is believed that one should not reveal what goes on in a marriage because that would bring shame and ridicule.

Male Religious and political leaders have been speaking on our behalf for a long time. When women spoke it was from our secular feminist sisters. It is as though, as women of faith we have no word to the situation. But now our involvement as women of faith means that we have to take charge of our own destiny and fight for liberation not with weapons of mass destruction but through the theology of involvement and engagement.

As women of faith we realize that, the significance of Jesus Christ lies in His example of struggling for the poor and the outcast. The Incarnation is reinterpreted to represent God's total immersion into the history of human struggle and oppression. By His words and actions, Jesus showed us how to become true daughters of God. He is involved on behalf of the poor and downtrodden. And because God stands against oppression and exploitation, as His followers we are compelled to follow his example. As Musimbi Kanyoyo notes, "The Bible is a message of liberation for women much as it is used to despise us". Let us together reclaim our rights and stand for the truth that sets us free.

Our engagement and involvement brings in the much needed influence in decisions that shape our lives and those of our children. This has to be enhanced through participation because as women together we are catalysts for change. By challenging and defying discriminating attitudes women's groups can advance the rights of girls and women for generations to come.

Again the Ecumenical African Women's statement though referring especially to African women speaks for all of us. I therefore end with some of its words:

As African women of faith because:

- We are nurturers of life and we see, hear and feel the sufferings wrought by deprivation, hunger and disease besieging Africa's people;
- We are endowed with creative and intellectual gifts;
- We come with a strong commitment to community;
- We bring resources of enduring hope and resilience; and

We are ever seeking justice in line with our biblical mandate (Luke 4: 18-19).