

World Communion of Reformed Churches
GENDER JUSTICE POLICY



This policy was written in response to Action 31 of the WCRC at the 2017 General Council. It was adopted at the 2021 meeting of the WCRC Executive Committee.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender justice includes just and right relationships, mutual respect and accountability, respect for creation and the rights of all people to live life in all its fullness. Gender justice addresses gender and economic injustice, gender-based violence, and a whole range of social issues that are rooted in unequal power relations. It is a fundamental building block for church and society.

Gender justice is not just a women's concern, but, instead, is an issue for everyone. It seeks to address and dismantle patriarchy, which controls women's labour, sexualities, and fertility. Patriarchy also stereotypes and marginalizes men, who have been socialized into deeply-held beliefs and values on what their roles should be. Patriarchy defines masculinity as showing bravery, virility, aggressiveness, dominance, competitiveness, and emotional repression. Men are often socialized into not dealing with their emotions, fears, and vulnerabilities. Men have a vested interest in changing these stereotypes so that they can become better sons, fathers, brothers, partners, lovers, and humans. Gender justice requires all genders to work together in partnership.

Gender justice is also integral to our spiritual growth and must be realized in our right relationship with God. Gender perspectives invite us to examine and unravel power relations across the breadth of gender identities, paying particular attention to those persons in the intersection of gender and race, colour, sexuality, class, disability, poverty, and caste.

The development of a gender justice policy for the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) is part of the journey for churches of the Reformed tradition. Beyond formal equality, we are challenged to examine the deeper questions of substantive equality, that is, of achieving equitable outcomes, and thus creating a true community for all. Our continuing concern and commitment to transformative gender justice is firmly rooted in the story and mission of the Church.

This Gender Justice Policy was created to transform who we are, what we do, and how we act. This policy has been





prayerfully worked on with the full recognition that there are places and contexts within the Communion that this will be difficult. It is hoped that this policy will be the space from which conversations on the policy will be opened up.

Although the term “gender” is widely used today, it is too often employed to mean “women” or “sex.” It is important to note that while “sex” refers to a person’s biological make-up, “gender” describes their social definition, that is the values and roles society assigns them. Gender is a social construct that is influenced by other forms of social, religious, cultural, economic, and political processes.

The Policy starts with a vision of who God wants us to be and the purpose and objectives of this new way of being. We acknowledge that there are many issues that must be addressed in all parts of the Communion. The principles of gender justice are based on Scripture and what the Reformed church has said it believes. Each of us is called to make the necessary changes before the vision of justice and equality can be achieved. We believe that God’s love and justice for all peoples and the earth is a core value of Reformed theology.

Grounded in respect for the body, this Gender Justice Policy fosters physical, emotional, and spiritual health and wholeness. God rejoices when we celebrate spirituality with holiness and integrity.

This Policy applies to the WCRC, its executive, staff, and member churches. It will be successful only if each of us takes responsibility for its implementation.

BACKGROUND

The 2017 General Council mandated the Executive Committee and General Secretariat of the WCRC to develop a Gender Justice Policy by 2019. It called on them to collaborate with the regional councils to foster and encourage the use of this policy as the practice of the whole communion of churches. It further recommended that this policy include an action plan for the implementation of the policy and accountability measures. Further to that mandate a committee was established to develop the Policy.¹

We begin by acknowledging our history and beliefs.

We live in a world where injustices thrive, where there is brokenness, and where persons are marginalized. There is a cry for justice, healing, and wholeness.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 7 guarantees that, “All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.”

The Reformed community has a long and established tradition of working towards a just and equitable world



order. It has acted by issuing declarations of faith that cry out for equality and justice for all persons.²

The values of the WCRC regarding equality and justice are clearly outlined in Article III – B of its constitution which states: “The World Communion of Reformed Churches in

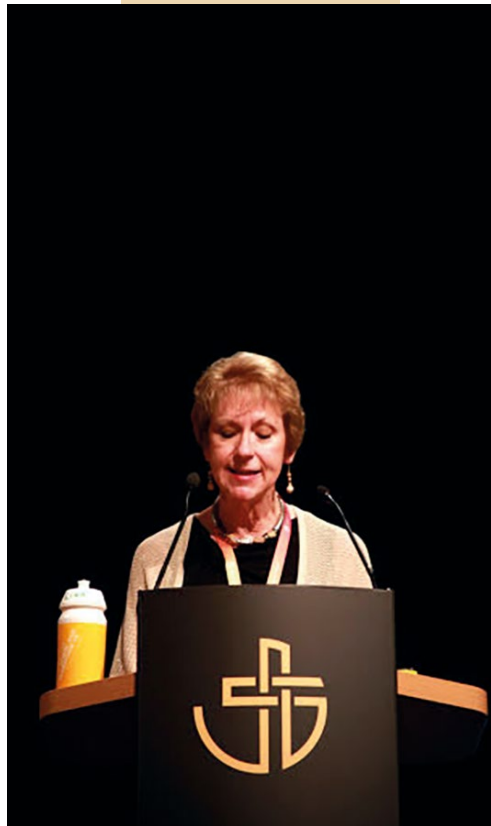
1 Patricia Sheerattan-Bisnauth (Chair), Peggy Kabonde, Un Hey Kim, Lungile Mpetsheni, Hannah North, Lesley Orr, and Beth Symes with staff support from Abigail Scarlett, Katalin Szalai, and Philip Vinod Peacock.

2 Such declarations can be *status confessionis* meaning “that a Christian, a group of Christians, a church or a group of churches judges that a situation

its order and actions is called to respect, defend, and advance the dignity of every person. In Jesus Christ all human differences must lose their power to divide. No one shall be disadvantaged for, among other reasons, race, ethnicity, or gender, and no individual or church may claim or exercise dominance over another.” This sentence from the constitution is rooted deep in the Reformed tradition and dates back to the Emden Synod of 1571.

In Ottawa the 1982 General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) issued a declaration of faith against apartheid, stating that its theological justification was a heresy.³

During the 1989 Seoul Council, WARC acknowledged that within many churches there had been a marked raising of consciousness for the full participation of women in the life and



ministry of the church. It also noted a growing awareness of the injustices faced by women in many societies and cultures of the world.

The 1997 Women’s Pre-Conference in Debrecen observed that the WARC still had the following issues: the failure to ordain women in some churches, violence against women, sexual harassment, and the failure to include women in church structures.⁴

The 2004 Accra General Council of WARC identified gender injustice as a form of brokenness which destroys right relations—gender, race, class, disability, or caste and must be addressed. The Accra Confession specifically stated, “Therefore we reject any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor. We reject any form of injustice which destroys right relations—gender, race,

has arisen, a moment of truth has come, in which nothing less than the gospel itself, their most basic confession concerning the Christian gospel, is at stake, so that they feel obliged to testify and act against that situation” Dirk Smit (Cloete & Smit 1985:22). The declaration of *status confessionis*, becomes necessary when the integrity of the proclamation of the gospel is at stake.

³ This arose from a discussion on the political situation in South Africa, whereby member churches concluded that “the promises of God for this world and for [God’s] church are in direct contradiction to apartheid ideals and practices.” They went further and stated that the churches who accepted and defended apartheid “contradict in doctrine and in action the promise which they profess to believe” and concluded “that this situation constitutes a *status confessionis* for our churches, which means that we regard this as an issue on which it is not possible to differ without seriously jeopardizing the integrity of our common confession as Reformed churches.”

⁴ Report of the Women’s Pre-Conference 6-7 August 1997, Debrecen, Hungary.

class, disability, or caste. We reject any theology which affirms that human interests dominate nature.”⁵

In 2010 the Uniting General Council in Grand Rapids said that gender justice was an ongoing journey of praying together, engaging, challenging, always seeking discernment on how God wants us to live.⁶

In 2017 the Leipzig General Council of WCRC adopted as a Declaration of Faith that all persons are called to participate in all the ministries of the church.⁷

Since Ottawa, human understandings of gender identity and human sexuality are evolving, to now include their full diversity. Each person is created in God’s image and this Policy recognizes all genders and sexualities, with an understanding that terms and definitions related to gender and sexuality are diverse and evolving.

We celebrate the ongoing work of the Spirit of God in the justice programmes carried out by the Reformed churches



in response to God’s call to be responsible bearers of the image of God. From Ottawa to Seoul to Debrecen to Accra to Grand Rapids to Leipzig and into the future, the spirit of God has been active in creating and sustaining gender justice initiatives.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or

⁵ The Accra Confession, Article 27, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Accra, Ghana, 2004.

⁶ “It involves finding and putting into practice new ways to express and live out the uniqueness of bearing the image of God, fulfilling our responsibility of building and nurturing right, just and equal relationships between women, men and the earth.” General Council, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Grand Rapids, USA, 2010.

⁷ General Council, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Leipzig, Germany, 2017.

OUR VISION FOR GENDER JUSTICE



free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. –Galatians 3:28

We seek a world in which all persons of diverse genders and sexualities live together in dignity, safety, mutual respect, balance, and justice; in an enabling and flourishing environment in which all are able to achieve their full potential, in full enjoyment of life; where there is no gender

discrimination in decision-making to shape economic, political, social, and cultural development, in determining the values that guide and sustain such development and enjoying its benefits.

When the Communion embraces and lives out this vision, we will have reformed who we are, what we do, and how we act.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the Gender Justice Policy is to advance WCRC's vision of living out our "call to communion and commitment to justice,"⁸ enabling and inviting churches to participate in God's transformative mission of gender justice and partnership.

The objectives of the Gender Justice Policy include:

1. Transformation of churches and communities so that God's desire for gender justice is realized and that human dignity is ensured for all;
2. Articulation and re-construction of our theology of gender justice built on Reformed principles of theological reflection;
3. Transformed structures to ensure the full, just, and equitable participation of all persons in all aspects of church life; and
4. Creation of safe environments to end marginalization and the abuse of persons by implementing policies and oversight mechanisms that address gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

The Communion has made positive strides in gender justice towards eliminating discrimination and achieving equality.

⁸ World Communion of Reformed Churches, About Us.



But we acknowledge that:

- We have failed to acknowledge and use the diverse gifts of each person in our communities of faith.
- We have failed to hear the voices of women and other marginalized persons in our churches.
- We have failed to honour the body and sexuality of each person. We have distorted the wholeness of each person and the relationship between their sexuality, spirituality, and morality.



- We have failed to respect a woman's right to control her body and her right to choose.
- We have failed to recognize and address the additional challenges persons in the intersection of gender and race, sexualities, class, disability, and caste face, including racialized women, women with disabilities, women of different castes, Indigenous women, and women living with poverty.
- We have failed to include all genders as leaders, including lay and ordained leadership, in worship, sermons, liturgy, and the work of our churches.
- We have undervalued and do not pay equitably for the contributions of women and other marginalized persons in our churches.

- We have abused the power and authority of leadership, which includes sexual abuse and harassment and results in physical, emotional, and spiritual harm and the shaming and exclusion of marginalized persons.
- We have failed to keep all persons safe, and engage in gender-based violence, including family violence and abuse of children. We have taken no action and have remained silent when we are called to speak out and to act in order to stop the violence.
- We have failed to allocate sufficient money and resources in the budgeting processes of our churches to address the issues of gender inequality.
- We have failed to speak up, to advocate, and to champion the rights and dignity of women and other marginalized persons in our faith communities and in the world.

And what does the Lord require of us? To do justice, to love kindness and to walk in God's way (Micah 6:8). In Accra (2004) we were called to reject any form of injustice which destroys right relations—gender, race, class, disability, caste, or poverty.⁹ This has been and will continue to be a challenging commitment. Only through the radical transformation of who we are, what we do, and how we act, will we begin to address gender inequalities in our Communion.

⁹ The Accra Confession, 2004, Article 27.

PRINCIPLES OF GENDER JUSTICE POLICY



We are each made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and together, as Church, we are the Body of Christ (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12 & 27):

- we are each created, gifted, and loved by God;
- we are each loved and valued for the beauty and totality of our being and the diversity of our bodies;
- our sexuality is a gift from God and a source of life;
- we are all needed to serve the church, without discrimination;
- service includes both lay and ordained leadership, in the priesthood of all believers; every type of leadership is needed and equally valued;
- no one is excluded in the basis of their gender, sexuality, race, class, disability, poverty, or caste; and
- leadership must be exercised through the Spirit of God, with respect for all.



The Body of Christ, our Church, will begin to heal when:

- the voices of women and other marginalized persons begin to be heard in our Communion;
- the sexuality of each person is honoured, including the right to control one's body;
- women and other marginalized persons are encouraged and supported to take on leadership roles in our churches, including ordination;
- the contributions of women and other marginalized persons are fairly valued, without discrimination on the basis of gender;

- churches no longer tolerate gender-based violence including sexual abuse and sexual harassment by persons in positions of power and leadership, but instead discipline persons for abuse of their power;
- churches become welcoming and safe spaces for women and marginalized persons;
- as churches and as a Communion, we speak up, advocate, and champion the rights and dignity of women and other marginalized persons in our churches and in the world; and
- churches allocate sufficient time, money, and resources in their budgeting process to continue the challenging work of gender justice.

CALL TO ACTION



We are called to go out into the world, transforming ourselves, our churches, and our Communion as agents for positive change for women and other marginalized persons, respecting the dignity and worth of all.

For the World Communion of Reformed Churches

The WCRC, its general secretariat, and the Executive Committee shall be responsible for the implementation of the Gender Justice Policy. To do so, the Communion shall:

- lead by example in ensuring that its executive and administrative staff reflect gender equality through an equitable representation of all genders at all levels of the organization;
- ensure that member churches have equitable representation of women and other marginalized persons at all the General Councils;
- encourage and support member churches to have equitable representation of women and other marginalized persons at all levels of their organizations; and



- invest sufficient time, money, and resources for the successful implementation of the Gender Justice Policy throughout all the regions.

For Member Churches

We invite member churches to share custodianship and the responsibility for implementing the Gender Justice Policy and call upon them to act by:

- affirming that gender justice is an issue of justice for their communities of faith;

- conducting critical theological reflections of what it means to live out that each person reflects the image of God;
- promoting the inclusivity of all persons and condemning the marginalization of anyone on the grounds of gender or sexuality;
- affirming the conviction that God calls all persons, including women and other marginalized persons to serve;
- welcoming women and other marginalized persons into ordained ministry, so that they may fulfil their baptismal vows;
- developing mentorship programmes for women and other marginalized persons;
- facilitating engagements, dialogues, and discussions that seek to promote the dignity of all persons, including women and other marginalized persons;
- Commit to a process of study and discernment over the issues of sexuality, sexual pleasure, fertility, reproductive rights, and the right to choose;
- condemning all forms of violence whether psychological, physical, emotional, or spiritual both in churches and the wider community;
- creating safe spaces in communities of faith where women and other marginalized persons are not sexually abused or harassed; and

- creating space in communities of faith where men can live and work in harmony with women and other marginalized persons;
- nurturing responsible young men who will not fall into the trap of using their masculinity to abuse women; and
- enacting sexual misconduct policies with clear guidelines that will deal effectively with all forms of sexual misconduct of ordained and other leaders, ensuring that disciplinary action addresses the issue of power imbalance and ensuring the safety of everyone in the communities of faith.

The Ecumenical Movement

- We call on the ecumenical movement to pay serious and considerable attention to the questions of gender justice;
- that all ecumenical gatherings will be safe spaces for persons of all genders; and
- that gender justice and equity be incorporated into every initiative of the ecumenical movement.

We can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).





GLOSSARY

Accra Confession

The Accra Confession was adopted by the delegates of the WARC 24th General Council in Accra, Ghana (2004), based on the theological conviction that the economic and environmental injustices of today's global economy require the Reformed family to respond as a matter of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. See warc.ch/accra

Apartheid

“Racial segregation; specifically: a former policy of segregation and political and economic discrimination against non-European groups in the Republic of South Africa.” –*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

Discrimination

Various types of social prejudices (i.e., racism, sexism, classism) are contained within and enacted from positions of power, within society, against the offended groups.

Gender

Socially constructed (and often unequal) roles, responsibilities, and expectations culturally and socio-politically assigned to women and men and the institutional structures that support them. Unlike biological sex, gender is learned and can be transformed. Throughout history gender roles and expectations have been changing.

Gender Analysis

A tool that seeks to understand social, religious, and cultural processes that create and maintain gender differences in

order to design informed responses of equitable options. It involves examining the different roles women and men play in society and the differential impacts of policies related to politics, economy, social relations, and religion on these roles. Extending from the idea that gender differences are based more on social, cultural, and religious defined values than on biology, this type of analysis recognizes and challenges the value systems which are responsible for the different (and unequal) impacts and benefits experienced by women and men of any given society.

Gender-based violence

An umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially-ascribed (i.e., gender) differences between males and females.





Gender Discrimination

“...All the norms that we have nurtured about the roles and places of women and men in family, society and church, which have resulted in exclusionary practices that pain the heart of God and fracture relationships” and “systemic exclusion of women from positions of leadership in the church.” –Uniting General Council

Gender Inequality

“Gender inequality is a characteristic of most societies, with males on average better positioned in social, economic, and political hierarchies.” –UNDP

Gender Justice

“Gender justice is an ongoing journey of praying together, engaging, challenging, always seeking discernment on how God wants us to live as women and men. It involves finding and putting into practice new ways to express and live out the uniqueness of bearing the image of God, fulfilling our responsibility of building and nurturing right, just and equal relationships between women, men and the earth.” –Uniting General Council

Heresy

“(The act of having) an opinion or belief that is the opposite of or against what is the official or popular opinion, or an action that shows that you have no respect for the official opinion.” –*Cambridge English Dictionary*

Marginalization

Social process of becoming or being made marginal; to relegate or confine to a lower social standing or outer limit or edge, as of social standing.

Marginalized persons

Those who are denied, or have very limited access to, privileges enjoyed by the wider society. –USAID

Masculinity

Pertaining to men; it is used to speak of the roles and



behaviour that are traditionally assigned to men and sometimes of the properties or characteristics of men.

Patriarchy

The control of women's labour, sexualities, and fertility. – *Gender Policy*.

“The situation where women's stories and thereby, their experiences, have been ignored, forgotten, misinterpreted, and devalued, while stories about men and thereby their experiences have been elevated, remembered, emphasized and overvalued. Patriarchy also refers to systemic societal structures that institutionalize male physical, political, economic, and social power over women.” –*In God's Image: From Hierarchy to Partnership*

Sex

Biologically determined and physical differences between women and men.

Sexual Harassment

Any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.



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