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Inverting the Pyramid:
Exploring Where We Have Been and
Where We Are Now Regarding Pro-
blems of Violence, Racism, and
Xenophobia in the
Lives of Women

Introduction

Reviewing the history of this past year's celebration of the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Ecumenical Decade in Solidarity with Women is an assertion of where we have been and of where we are presently, at least on some level, regarding issues related to the lives of women. 1998 marks fifty years of WCC attention to women's concerns,[1] since in 1948 the very first WCC assembly "received a report on 'The Life and Work of Women in the Church'. . . .Each succeeding WCC Assembly has made specific reference to women's participation and called for special focus on [women's] concerns and struggles in church and soci-

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[1]See the World Council of Churches, "The Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church," in *The First Six Years 1948-1954* (Geneva: WCC, 1954), 53-57; David P. Gaines, *The World Council of Churches: A Study of Its Background and History* (Peterborough, NH: Richard R. Smith Publishers, 1966); and Susannah Herzel, *A Voice for Women: The Women's Department of the World Council of Churches*

ety."[2]

This focus has moved from the need of women to chal-
lenge the WCC for emphasis on women's presence and par-
ticipation to focus on cooperation between women and men,
to advocating "social and economic justice for women." By
the late 1970s emphasis on women's insights and experiences
related to theological reflection and biblical interpretation
paralleled similar reflection in society. This theoretical work
helped catalyze religious and secular women's movements.
However, as the WCC reviewed achievements of the United
Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) in which the WCC
participated, it became evident that few churches responded
to the UN focus. In 1987, the WCC Central Committee de-
termined to observe this Ecumenical Decade emphasizing four
themes: participation of women in the life of the church, and
affirmation of their contribution to the theological, spiritual
and administrative life of the churches; the global economic
crisis and its impact on women; the context of violence against
women in church and society; and the context of racism and
xenophobia and their impact on women.[3] This presentation
explores several historic and contemporary issues related to
themes three and four: the context of violence against women
in church and society and the context of racism and xenopho-
bia and their impact on women. In each case, relevant defini-
tions and an overview of the movement in traditional per-
spectives of the Christian Church are provided. This will be
done by first looking at what may be generalized as the his-

(Geneva: WCC, 1981).

[2]World Council of Churches, *Living Letters: A Report of Visits to
the Churches During the Ecumenical Decade—Churches in Solidarity
with Women* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), 13.

[3]National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, *A Call to
Celebrate*, a pamphlet (New York: The Council, n.d.), 2; *Living Letters*,
15.

toric circumstances of women and Christianity's original po-
sition in relationship to those conditions. Then divergent and
coincident contemporary perspectives about and circum-
stances of women will be explored. After this exploration,
the conclusion will identify challenges to visions for moving
forward relative to these two areas.

The Context of Violence against Women
in Church and Society

Defining Violence

By traditional definition violence usually has referred
to injury resulting from the use of physical force. However,
recent critiques of feminist/womanist and liberation analyses
have enlarged the general understanding of violence to in-
clude explorations of power and power inequalities. We are
now at the point of defining violence not only as physical
coercion, but also as unjust and abusive use of power as well
as the presence of "prior restraint that is coercive." Today
we assert that when persons constantly live in fear of physi-
cal harm, or with the threat of physical force, violence is oc-
curring. Moreover, when coercive restraint is a part of mun-
dane existence, based in formal and informal social conven-
tions related to gender, race, class, ability, etc., we now speak
of institutionalized violence.

Recent critiques also enlarge discussions of violence
related to sex, so our understanding of rape now involves not
only physically forcing some form of intercourse, but com-
pelling intercourse through various forms of coercion. Fur-
thermore, sexual violence is understood not only as forced
coitus but also as sexual violation, including child sexual

abuse, sexual harassment, and, of course, rape.[4] As a result of recent critiques and the subsequently expanded discourse and analysis, violence is today understood as "many types. . . related [to] and shading into each other—not only physical but also economic, social, structural/institutional, psychological and spiritual."[5]

Where Have We Been?

Because of recent critiques, we are able to speak with more precision about where we have been as related to the context of violence against women in church and society. In the private sector, we have been at the place of all women: being chattel, being objectified, thought to be not fully human, to be morally and spiritually weak and deserving of physical abuse. We have also attested to women internalizing all of these perspectives. "For centuries," writes Felisa Elizondo, "domestic subjection and submission [of women] and the accompanying humiliation" were considered natural. Language, especially in connection with marriage, "reproduced the model of master-slave, owner-property, command-obedience, leader-follower."[6] For example, the fifteenth century Spanish humanist Luis Vives

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[4]Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Institutionalized Violence," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies,* ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1966), 307; Marie M. Fortune, "Sexual Violence," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies,* 309.

[5]*Living Letters*, 23.

[6]Felisa Elizondo, "Violence Against Women: Strategies of Resistance and Sources of Healing in Christianity," in *Violence Against Women*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Shawn Copeland (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 102.

(holding a position coincident with that of many Christian theologians)[7] wrote the following:

> If he [your husband] lays hands on you for some fault of yours or in a fit of madness, imagine that it is God who is punishing you, and that this is happening because of your sins, and that in this way you are doing penance for them. You are fortunate if, with a little suffering in this life, you gain the remission of the torments of the next. In fact, very few good and prudent women are beaten by their husbands, however bad and mad they may be. Swallow your pain at home and do not prattle outside or to others about your complaints against your husbands. . . .Shut domestic squabbles within the walls of your house, and do not let them escape into the street or run around the town. In this way your restraint will make your husband more restrained, whereas your complaints and offensive chatter would merely make him more and more incensed.[8]

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[7]See *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: John B. Alden Publisher, 1889), IX. 9. 265, for example, where Augustine observes his mother's relationship to her husband and asserts her responsibility not to "cross him" and to remember her subordinate status: "She served him as her lord and tried to win him for you. . . .She put up with the insult of his infidelities, and never had the slightest quarrel with him over this, but waited for your mercy to come over him. . . .When many matrons who had milder husbands than hers appeared with marks of beatings on their faces, and began to complain about their husband's behavior in their chats, she. . .would tell them seriously. . .that. . .they should remember their status and not have thoughts of insubordination against their lords."

[8]Juan Luis Vives, *Instrucción de la Mujer Cristiana*, Book 2, chap. IX, *Obras Completas* (Madrid: [n. p.], 1947), 1099-1100; quoted in Fiorenza, *Violence Against Women*, 102.

The quote conveys what were once quite universal admonitions to women about domestic violence: put up with it; do not talk about it; God is working in it; you deserve it. This sentiment of the fifteenth century is not ancient since many twentieth-century writings also have promoted a "humiliating submission and degrading dependence" of women and "often purvey[ed] the idea that constant service, forgetful of self to the point of abasement [was] a vocation inherent to a woman's life, while no such considerations [were] applied to men."[9]

A slogan of feminism, "the personal is political," reminds us that perspectives about the private sphere share a reciprocal relationship with attitudes in the public sector. Reviewing the history of social life, we are able to see that formal polity and informal conventions have been used to sustain such perspectives about women in the public sphere, and that they supported the perspectives and practices related to them in private life. Public policies which prevented the universal franchise, which failed to provide women recourse in cases of spousal abuse or spousal rape, which legislated enslavement, and which supported forced prostitution are all examples of public sphere practices which assert that women should be dependent, submissive, and humiliated. Insofar as these were formal policies of public structures, they also are examples of institutionalized violence. Informal public sphere conventions which accompanied these policies included an array of practices by which severe male domination of women was reproduced. These informal conventions ranged from generalized practices in professions which denied or frustrated women's participation and advancement, e.g., excluding women from unofficial meeting and negotiation sites and

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[9]Fiorenza, *Violence Against Women*, 105, 104.

unofficially penalizing women for maternity, to practices among laborers which hampered women's participation through intimidation, harassment, and violence, e.g., collaborative threatening, various lewd behaviors, and actual violence. Historically, in the lives of darker women, violence resulting from this general perspective of men about women's subjection has been amplified because of racism and xenophobia. This point will be discussed presently.

Where Are We Now?

Unfortunately, the attitudes, expectations, and socialization embedded in these perspectives persist among men and women around the globe. Moreover, there are accumulated issues in women's lives which devolve directly from these perspectives. The World Council of Churches' recently released *Living Letters: A Report of Visits to the Churches During the Ecumenical Decade—Churches in Solidarity with Women* found a general failure of churches and church leaders to be open and to envision differently possibilities for women's lives and women's participation. WCC visitors to various locations around the globe still found these "three issues of deep concern to women in all regions: violence against women, even within the 'safe womb' of family and church, the impact of increasing racism and xenophobia, and the effect of the global economic crisis on women's lives."[10] The report states, "All teams noted women's lack of or limited access to decision making processes—and thus to power —in their churches. . . . This situation both reflects and promotes a similar imbalance of power in society."[11] *Living*

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[10]*Living Letters*, 22.
[11]Ibid., 34.

Letters further asserts that at many places in discussions about "theological justifications of violence against women and mis-interpretations of man-woman relationships in the Bible, [s]ome men . . . tried to justify physical violence as a way of helping women achieve 'salvation.'" In view of such persisting perspectives about theology and scripture, it is not surprising that in Aotearoa, New Zealand, for example, "[m]any women are leaving churches because of what they experience as spiritual violence. They feel attacked by a 'violent theology' of 'God as demanding atonement' and 'violent images of salvation.'" [12] The movement, womanchurch, seeking to develop a new ecclesiology, is a current trend across Christendom by which many women explore other less repressive possibilities for church.

In spite of these persisting realities, it is possible to say that there are at least three significant changes which indicate where we are now relative to the context of violence. First, against the persistence of these attitudes, women are much more frequently criticizing, opposing, questioning, and, perhaps most importantly, reporting various forms of violence. The WCC Report states, "We are convinced that violence against women is . . . being more openly reported, at least by women." Unfortunately, this violence "also is escalating."[13] The increased reporting suggests women re-imagining and re-valuing ourselves.

While some women are repudiating the traditional position and developing new ways of envisioning women's status and roles in church and society, many others continue to endorse the subordination of women. In some cases this position of women reflects women's anxieties over reprisals

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[12]Ibid., 27.
[13]Ibid., 23.

for their speaking out. In other cases, this view by women reflects internalization of a perspective which has been a part of human socialization for centuries. In still other instances, fear and internalized oppression are both operative in women's acceptance of violence against women.[14] As a consequence, increased opposition to violence against women by women also means opposing these attitudes of women. Second, then, in addition to greater reporting of and opposition to violence against women, we are now at the point of not only identifying these attitudes among men, but also the attendant internalized subjugation among women.[15] Sometimes this movement forward has been painful as the insight about issues and attitudes revealed contradictions and often heightened tensions between women. Finally, with reference to women of color, more complex analysis of women and race enhances contemporary discourses about violence against women. Therefore, it has become difficult for persons to assert liberative perspectives about women's lives without also minimally analyzing the categories of race and class in addition to gender.

Beyond women's resistance to these persisting points of view, there is evidence of some changing attitudes in diverse regions of the globe. "Today" in marriage, Elizondo writes, "anything that seems to detract from the fundamental equality and reciprocity of the couple is viewed with suspicion."[16] Furthermore, in theological discourse, especially

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[14]Ibid., 27-28,

[15]See Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Woman's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), for a discussion of sin as sensuality.

[16]Felisa Elizondo, "Strategies of Resistance," in *Violence Against Women*, 104.

among women theologians, there has developed an ever deepening critique of the culture of violence. This primarily is revealed as sharply questioning the doctrine of atonement which these theologians assert has been used to support self-sacrifice by some persons more than others. Biblical scholar Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza observes the following:

> [N]ot only traditional theological discourses but also Christian scriptural texts theologize and christologize. . . suffering and victimization. . . . Such admonitions are not isolated aberrations, but go to the heart of Christian faith: trust in God, the Father, and belief in redemption through the suffering and death of Christ. Feminist theology has underscored the perniciousness of such theological and christological discourses which stress that God sacrificed his son for our sins. If one extols the silent and freely chosen suffering of Christ who was 'obedient to death' (Phil. 2.8) as an example to be imitated by all those victimized by patriarchal oppression, especially by those suffering from domestic and sexual abuse, one does not just legitimate but enables violence against women and children.[17]

Similarly, but with particular reference to Black women, Womanist theologian Delores Williams writes:

> Humankind is . . . redeemed through Jesus' **ministerial** vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross. God does not intend black women's surrogacy experience. Neither can Christian faith affirm such an idea. Jesus did not come

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[17]Fiorenza, "Introduction," in *Violence Against Women*, xv.

to be a surrogate. Jesus came for life, to show humans a perfect vision of ministerial relation [of which] humans had very little knowledge. As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement.[18]

Let us now examine the context of racism and xenophobia and their effect on women.

The Context of Racism and Xenophobia and Their Impact on Women

Defining Racism and Xenophobia

Although racism has a persistent and pervasive pernicious effect in many people's lives, its definition remains a quagmire, not only, but especially because of the debate about whether racism reflects the results of personal attitudinal issues or social power dynamics. A deeply significant point to understanding the definition of racism is recognizing that the term implies more than attitudes of persons as individuals, but names the power relations that form social and political institutions of distinct societies, and, in the contemporary context, around the globe. Understanding racism as an attitudinal problem of individual persons neglects the many ways unreflected, mundane, taken-for-granted practices collaborate to sustain formal and informal social conventions. This presenter concurs with the definition of racism as the systemic means by which one race initiates and "maintains supremacy

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[18]Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 167.

over another race through. . .attitudes, behaviors, social structures, and ideologies."[19]

Despite the common tendency to use the two interchangeably, it is important to note that racism and ethnocentrism are not the same. In a formal sense, and for purposes of this discussion, race is a broader category and is rooted in connections of persons to land, as understood continentally; ethnicity is a subcategory of race and is rooted in the clan concept, wherein persons trace descent from a common ancestry. Of course, human groups are not absolutely distinct from each other, and the case in the contemporary world is that "race is more political than descriptive."

Nevertheless, division of the discussion about race "is basically [as] the discourse between people of European descent, who see themselves as 'white people,' and those who would influence them about who people of European descent are in relation to other human beings and to the earth."[20] Moreover, ancillary gradations and degradations based on color and class have evolved through which there are assertions of racism by various groups against others. Xenophobia, the fear of or contempt for strangers or foreigners, is not the same as racism, but has obvious relationship in its social implications. Its basis may be racial or ethnic. Often xenophobia is rooted in the simple fear of the unknown. Beyond this, however, often is a fear and insecurity caused by economic changes.

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[19]Nancy D. Richardson, "Racism," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 234.

[20]Donna Bivens, "Race," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, 233.

Where Have We Been?

Two dyads demonstrating extreme representations of effects of exclusion indicate the background of where we have been with reference to the context of racism and xenophobia and their impact on women. These dyads, colonialism and the war, on one hand, and slavery and forced prostitution, on the other hand, are extreme representations because experiences of women of color seem most traumatic during these periods; and because they serve as reference points for the legacy of some less obdurate (but nonetheless negative) realities in the lives of women on the basis of race, ethnicity, and nationality. As reviewed earlier, the historic view of all women has been that they are not fully human and that theirs is a subordinate status in civil society. Women of color, generally, have been viewed as sub-human and the historic perspective has been that they have no status of significance in Western civil society. The issue, and often a hotly debated question, has been whether or not darker peoples were humans or beasts.[21] The view of darker peoples as sub-human undergirded many traumas which were part of daily life for many non-European women as a social group. During the ante-colonial and colonial periods, various abuse of and violence against darker women was the order of the day. A few examples serve to illustrate this point. As slaves in the Americas, Black women completely lost physical autonomy and integrity.

During [slavery's public] sales, black women were often stripped to the waist so that their breasts could be examined and other parts of their bodies could be viewed

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[21]Delores Williams, "African-American Women in Three Contexts of Domestic Violence," in *Violence Against Women*, 40.

by potential buyers in order to speculate about the child-
bearing capacity of female slaves. . . . There were also
public places where recalcitrant slaves were taken and
beaten if their masters deemed a beating necessary but
did not want to do it themselves. Black women were
not exempt from this kind of treatment.[22]

Furthermore, Delores Williams writes, "because
[s]lave women had no control over their bodies; . . .they were
[sexually] violated at will by their white male slave owners."
This violation was compounded in some instances by slave
owners' wives who "stigmatized slave women for sexual mis-
conduct with their husbands."[23]

Native American women suffered similarly in the
colonial era. During European occupation of Brazil, Zilda
Fernandes Ribeiro writes,

[f]or the Indians the situation was desperate. . .[due
to] the occupation of their land, the break-up of their
families, with the men dispersed and the women seized
. . . ['A]t the height of the rubber boom, [there was] a
veritable traffic in fallen women. They were enticed by
traders. . . and dispatched to the rubber plantations with
an invoice for price and transport costs like any other
commodity.' What happened in that period can be imag-
ined from what happens today in that same region.
[Y]oung girls descended from the same indigenous
women . . . are heirs to the same misfortunes . . . girls of
eleven to fifteen, thrown on to the streets by poverty
since the age of eight, for the same reasons as in the

[22]Ibid., 35.
[23]Ibid., 37.

colonial period, the same enslavement and poverty. . . .
Just as their ancestors were 'invoiced and despatched'
[*sic*] for the use of their purchasers, to satisfy these ap-
petites, these girls are worn out at age eighteen, riddled
with disease.[24]

In wartime, many women are subject to violent abuses.
Historically, however, racism and xenophobia have intensi-
fied this suffering for particular women because of their ra-
cial and ethnic backgrounds. During World War II, for ex-
ample, when the Japanese army was widely dispersed for long
periods of fighting,

the thinking of many military psychologists [was] that
the stress and fatigue of combat could be relieved through
sexual activity. . . .[T]he Japanese army began the cre-
ation of 'Comfort Stations'. . . highly organized houses
of prostitution. The. . .women who 'serviced' the troops.
. .were forced into their prostitution through violence,
deception, extortion, and kidnaping. They were mere
children, mostly in their teens, from neighboring areas
who were torn from their homes and families and forced
to have sex with sometimes ten men every day. . . .Dis-
ease and violence were rampant.[25]

This trauma exacerbated as "[w]ritten records were
burned, and many remaining 'comfort women' were murdered

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[24]Zilda Fernandes Ribeiro, "Prostitution and Rape in the Colonial
Period," in *Violence Against Women*, 17.

[25]"The Comfort Women: A History and Impact of Japanese Sexual
Slavery;" accessed 21 September 1998; available from http://
kizuna.cwru.edu/asia110/projects/Qing3/quirg3.html; Internet.

in order to keep the secret buried with the dead." Although not exclusively so, primarily these women were taken from Korea.[26] The abusive treatment of Asian women by United States troops provide other examples of such violence against women of color. The culture in and around U.S. military bases both supported and exploited prostitution, and in some instances undergirded rape.[27]

Recently, we have seen that xenophobia as well as racism causes such abuse. The fate of women on the basis of ethnicity during events in Eastern Europe and Rwanda evidences this. In the former, Yugoslovia reports in

> mid-1992 disclosed evidence that rape of women was used systematically as an instrument of war. Human rights activists determined that victims [were] from all ethnic groups, and that rape had been perpetrated by all sides. But the vast majority of rapes have been committed with impunity by Bosnian Serb forces against Muslim and Croat women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a method of 'ethnic cleansing' rape [was] condoned, encouraged, and even ordered by local commanders.[28]

In Rwanda, "the International Criminal Tribunal on

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[26]Ibid.

[27]See Rita Nakashima Brock and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Casting Stones: Prostitution and Liberation in Asia and the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) and Lisa Law, "Dancing on the Bar: Sex, Money and the Uneasy Politics of Third Space," in *Geographies of Resistance*, ed. Steve Pile and Michael Keith (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[28]"81% Faces of Rape;" accessed 21 September 1998: available from http://www.i3tele.com/photoperspectives/facesofsorrow/html/rape.html; Internet.

Rwanda [reported not only that] nearly one million Tutsi were slaughtered in 100 days [but also that there] was the mass rape and sexual mutilation of women and girls."[29] There, as in Eastern Europe, during war between the Tutsis and Hutus, ethnic cleansing was the goal of the military offensive.

Where Are We Now?

Today there is less unmitigated trafficking in the bodies of women of color, but the perspective about darker people which has undergirded the varied abuses of non-European and ethnic European women continues. Furthermore, with the initiation and steadily increasing institutionalization of a "new world order," the *de facto* status of darker women remains of little to no significance in civil society as defined by that new order.

The "new world order," a term popularized by former U.S. President George Bush, has come to symbolize unipolar military and political domination, the collapse of communism, the continuing demise of colonialism, and, especially, the new economic structuring pursuant to recent international economic cooperative trade agreements. The trade agreements include a refined European Community (EC), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the World Trade Association/General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (WTA/GATT), and the older structures of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. These international economic changes affect local economies. They have height-

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[29]"NGO Coalition on Woman's Rights in Conflict Situations," International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda; accessed 21 September 1998; available from http://www.ichrdd.ca/PublicationsE/womenPub.html; Internet.

ened racial, ethnic, religious, and other divisions around the globe so that anti-immigrant bias has increased internationally. More and more people are uprooted because of poverty and violence, and more countries are creating barriers to prevent immigration.[30]

Some observers maintain that this economic structuring is a new means by which former Western colonizers are seeking to continue their domination of persons and resources, especially those in the South. The WCC report *Living Letters* asserts "[t]he global market economy (or 'New World Order') is widening the gap between the haves and have-nots. Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia suffer from harsh structural adjustment policies."[31] Mandatory structural adjustments marshal local economies to accommodate practices of the World Bank and IMF. These two institutions were initiated in 1940 by Western allies to ensure stability of Western economies. Western states continue to control World Bank and IMF policies since the G-7 nations (Canada, the United States, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, and England) are still dominated by Western influence.[32] This marginalizes other economies, particularly those of non-European nations.

The "increased marginalization of Africa and other Third World economies in the light of developments in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union" continues the "role of Africa and other Third World economies as the proverbial

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[30]Elizabeth Ferris, "Building Hospitable Communities" (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ, 1996), videotaped interview; *Living Letters,* 23.

[31]*Living Letters*, 23.

[32]Edmund Dooque, "World Bank to Invite Religions to Summit," *Ecumenical News International* (October 31, 1996), accessed 21 September 1998; available from http://www.umr.org/HTngongo.html; Internet.

'hewers of wood and drawers of water' in the context of the international division of labor. . . ."[33] Women of color bear the larger burden of shouldering these changes. As Gloria Thomas-Emeagwali writes, "For [African] women, life after adoption of a structural adjustment program is even worse than before, because they have to spend more time and energy in search of fewer commodities and less time is left for social activities in the community."[34] Already, these women live daily with literal issues of survival.

The historic poverty and the current structural adjustment problems of women in "two-thirds world" nations is causally related to the quality of life of women (and men) in Euro-Atlantic countries. Thomas-Emeagwali goes on to say, "the structural adjustment offensive deployed by the twin institutions of the IMF and World Bank is being embarked on primarily in the context of the refusal of Western economies to adjust to a slow down in the global economy and excess capacity."[35] This refusal of Western economies to slow down, with its severe environmental consequences, reflects the excessive consumerism and elaborate living privileges of the West. By and large, these are race privileges.

However, this is a complex situation in a number of ways. Women of color in Euro-Atlantic countries generally partake of a higher standard of living than their cohorts in Asia and the Southern hemisphere. But the hierarchy of pigmentation of races complicates the blanket assertion of this

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[33]Gloria Thomas-Emeagwali, "Introductory Perspectives: Monetairists, Liberals and Radicals: Contrasting Perspectives on Gender and Structural Adjustment in Africa," in *Women Pay the Price: Structural Adjustment in Africa and the Caribbean*, ed. Gloria Thomas-Emeagwali (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1995), 9-10.

[34]Ibid., 3.

[35]Ibid., 4-5.

difference. The pyramid-like ranking of people by color and the fine-tuning of this ranking which places Europeans at the top (differentiating even to place blue-eyed and blonde-haired Europeans above all) and which places Africans at the bottom mitigates differences in the status of women of color who live in the West and those who live in the East and South. As German Catholic theologian Beatrix Schiele observes "white women everywhere, even if they largely suffer under the predominant sexism, profit from contempt of black men and black women, who are right at the bottom of the hierarchy of respect, regardless of the fact that some black people and people of color have achieved the ascent into higher realms."[36] Delores Williams agrees with this assessment and labels as demonarchy, that aspect of patriarchy in which white women participate for advantage at the expense of black women and other women of color.[37]

Conclusion: What Do We Envision For the Future?

In view of the foregoing assessment about the status of women relative to the context of violence and the context of racism and xenophobia, what can we envision about the future? This question is answered by raising one or two others, noting challenges which may impact the movement towards all women's flourishing and equality.

In many ways, realization of substantive changes which would make religious and social institutions more re-

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[36]Beatrix Schiele, "Violence and Justice," in *Violence Against Women,* 25.

[37]Delores Williams, "The Color of Feminism: Or Speaking the Black Women's Tongue," *Journal of Religious Thought* 43 (Summer-Spring 1986): 52.

sponsive to our common humanity depends on the presence and perspective of women in these structures. Although there are continuing attitudes in church and society that women should be led by men, women have entered high levels of various institutions and have called attention to problems in human flourishing resulting from subordination of women. The continuing participation of women in significant decision-making positions provides hope for further and substantive change. Yet this hope is quite fragile and vulnerable. It depends significantly on women's solidarity with each other and on the solidarity of some men with women. Both of these could help those who reach positions of power to persist in working against norms which separate and destroy human life. This hope also depends on responses to the challenge for women who attain positions of power to maintain solidarity with women's causes. The challenge may be framed by this question: how do women who succeed within present institutional configurations avoid assimilating into the violent "old boys'" network or developing an exclusive "old girls'" proxy for it?

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes, "while many issues bring women into solidarity with each other, racism [and xenophobia] fragments that solidarity."[38] Another great challenge before women is the same as that challenge for all humanity—to invert the pyramid. A major difficulty of this challenge is the hard work of convincing us who live within reasonable measure of the average Western standard of living *and* those who ultimately determine the parameters of this standard, that we need much fewer commodities and conveniences than we have. For women working toward this inversion, Fiorenza helps summarize the point precisely:

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[38]Fiorenza, "Introduction," in *Violence Against Women*, x-xi.

"Only if feminist discourses [and work] focus on the women at the bottom of the. . . pyramid will they be able to explore and comprehend all dimensions of the death-dealing violence against [and other negative circumstances of all] women."[39]

This is the task before all women, and before the church, in the next decade and beyond.

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[39]Ibid.