

The Status of Women

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**NEW: The Status of Women: Toward Realizing Human Rights for All Women**

The Bible teaches us that both men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Further, the Bible teaches us that women are full members of the church of Christ: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The life of Jesus ancient cultural patterns and societal prejudices viewed women as inferior to men. Jesus was extraordinarily supportive of women’s full equality with men, and he charged women and men to use their talents in the cause of God’s kin-dom.

The central theme of Jesus’ teaching is love for God and neighbor. Christian love, as exemplified in the New Testament, requires that we relate to all as persons of worth. To regard another as inferior or to use power over them is to break the covenant of love. Denying equality demeans, perpetuates injustice, and falls short of the example of Jesus. The United Methodist Church has long supported the global movement to improve the status of women. There is increasing awareness that we cannot resolve world problems associated with economic globalization—unequal distribution of resources, governance, security, hunger, poverty, climate change, and war—so long as the talents and potential of half the world’s people are disregarded

and even repressed. Women's experience differs across class, ethnicity, race, national status, religion, sexual orientation, etc., with the poorest and most marginalized women experiencing the greatest inequality. Thus, efforts toward women's equality must specifically address these different realities.

The United Methodist Church affirms commitments made through four United Nations conferences on women articulated in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), a historic document affirmed by 189 nations 25 years ago that is still considered the most comprehensive strategy on women's rights. We also affirm UN Women in their initiative to reignite and reaffirm the urgency of the Beijing call in 2014 with the "Empowering Women, Empowering Humanity: Picture It" campaign (UN Women, 2019). The Beijing Platform recognized that women not only need equality with men but that economic policies need to be changed so that they benefit both women and men. Equality must go beyond access; it needs to include genuine development that delivers fundamental economic and social human rights. Recognizing how militarism, war, violent conflict, climate change, and volatile economic systems affect women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) affirm that equality, development, and peace are inseparable.

The following are some critical areas of concern for women's equality:

### **Economics**

Globally, women are substantially less likely than men to participate in the labor market, and once in the workforce, they are also less likely to find jobs than men. In addition, women still continue to receive less pay than men. Moreover, women's unpaid work as caregivers and

volunteers sustains economies and yet is not included in economic statistics. In times of economic crisis, women's unpaid labor fills gaps in education, health care, and other social services as governments cut budgets (Tobin, 2017).

### **Power and Decision-making**

In 1945, 31 countries allowed women to vote. Today, women have the right to vote in most nations, though they still may face societal barriers to participating fully in the political process in some countries. Many areas of discrimination, such as the inequality between men and women in power-sharing and decision-making, remain at all levels. In some nations, a woman is still considered to be her husband's property and holds very few rights with regard to family law, landholding, inheritance, and guardianship of children. Globally, women are still underrepresented in all branches of government.

### **Violence Against Women**

Gender-based violence has risen exponentially in recent decades. Sexual violence by state and non-state actors has become common as women and girls are raped, beaten, sold or trafficked, or forced to become child brides or victims of honor killings. This reality reflects the continuing belief that women and girls are property of men and are subservient to men and the lack of accountability for violence at all levels. States and broader society must work together to dismantle social, economic, and political structures that institutionalize and legitimize violence.

### **Education**

Levels of education are consistently linked with levels of socioeconomic development. The fact that two-thirds of the world's 774 million illiterate people are female is evidence of continuing disparity in society's preference to educate boys over girls (United Nations, 2015). This

proportion has remained unchanged for over two decades. Discriminatory, cultural, and social norms, cost of schooling, and school safety concerns inhibit girls' opportunities to gain knowledge and marketable skills needed for jobs that pay decent wages, as well as their ability to negotiate power in multiple relationships. Quality education is one of the principal ways to open doors for women's wider participation in society.

### **Health and Women's Rights in Reproductive Health**

Throughout the centuries, women have rarely been consulted or involved in the decisions regarding fertility-related laws and practices. Coercion, with the aim of either limiting or increasing births, is common today. Evidence now clearly shows that many poor women, particularly ethnic minorities, have been sterilized without their understanding of what was being done to them and without their informed consent. In many places, safe and legal abortion is unavailable, even in cases where the life of the pregnant woman is in danger and may be saved. In other cases, women are threatened with cuts to welfare payments or other aid programs if they proceed with a pregnancy. Such policies are clearly inconsistent with and violate women's reproductive and economic rights. Women need to be fully informed and fully involved in all decision-making regarding their reproductive health and fertility. Furthermore, issues such as HIV and AIDS faced by women and adolescent girls due to gender inequality and how they cope with these inequalities and injustices will determine their ability to protect themselves from HIV and AIDS or to access antiretroviral therapy.

### **Women and the Environment**

In terms of the environment, women around the world play distinct roles: in managing plants and animals in forests, dry lands, wetlands, and agriculture; in collecting water, fuel, and fodder for

domestic use and income generation; and in overseeing land and water resources. They contribute time, energy, and skills to family and community development, and their extensive experience makes them an invaluable source of knowledge and expertise on environmental management. Furthermore, when environmental changes take place, the most affected are women. Yet they have less access to land and productive resources.

### **Women and the Media**

Today's data collection, social media, and surveillance are part of a new digital world. Technology has brought with it the amazing ability for women to organize virtually both regionally and globally, to access archives and document their history, to research, to monitor government commitments and actions, and to make the concerns of women visible to the public. It has opened new opportunities for women in science and technology. Simultaneously, there is a massive concentration of corporate ownership of media at all levels, which shapes images and attitudes regarding women. There are concerns about the potential privatization of the Internet and the need for net neutrality. There continues to be a "digital divide" regarding access to the Internet where many women in the Global South and poor women are excluded. Limited access to computer and technology education also restricts women and girls' access to quality jobs. Despite important efforts, there is still a huge gap in education and jobs for women and girls in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields.

### **Women and Armed Conflict**

In the 21st century, armed conflict within states and between states, with warring parties including non-state actors, are increasingly related to battles over natural resources, aided and abetted by powerful nations and corporations seeking control over oil, land, water, and minerals

in poor, underdeveloped nations. Grave violations of women occur in conflict and post-conflict situations. These human rights violations include murder, torture, starvation, forced prostitution, systematic rape, forced pregnancy, and forced abortion. Yet when it comes to advocating and facilitating peace, women are underrepresented in the decision-making process. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) and subsequent resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security (2000) affirm that women's protection in armed conflict and participation in peace and decision-making are key to international peace and security.

### **Call to Action**

Since The United Methodist Church recognizes that equality between women and men in a just, sustainable society is a matter of biblical righteousness, the church is called to action in the following ways:

1. Take leadership in urging all remaining nations to ratify UN Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW, which was adopted by UN in December 1979, and advocate for the full implementation of CEDAW and Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.
2. Educate and advocate for policies that address the specific needs of women in all their diversity, including race, ethnicity, religion, class, age, sexual orientation, national origin and migration status, marital status, and other factors.

3. Urge governments to ratify the June 1998 Statute of the International Criminal Court that specifically addresses gender-based crimes and crimes against humanity such as rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, and enforced sterilization.
4. Support the need to enact specific legislation and develop policies to strengthen women's leadership and professional abilities including the right to manage their own businesses. To this end, governments and nongovernmental organizations should develop policies and projects that use local, national, and international networks to facilitate information, technology, credit, and training for women entrepreneurs as well as specific programs that aim to empower women and enhance women's social and economic well-being through quality education that leads to decent work.
5. Examine governmental policies and practices, including official development assistance, as to their impact on women's lives; work to ensure that policies upgrade the status of women and that women in all their diversity are included in decision-making regarding sustainable development goals and programs at all levels.
6. Examine the impact of transnational corporations on women's lives, including through the concentration of corporate power over democratic processes and decision-making; corporate bailouts that leave fewer resources for social spending; privatization of key government services; corporate influence over the multilateral system including the UN; corporate corruption and support of government corruption; corporate influence in resource wars and militarism; corporate violation of privacy through information technology; exploitative labor practices; and the promotion and selling of dangerous or inappropriate products and technologies.

7. Encourage steps that promote legal and economic literacy in the context of equal rights for men and women.
8. Engage men and boys in gender equality and women's empowerment work to change both societal attitudes and behaviors toward women and girls as well as power relations and structures of inequality.
9. Promote the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and related resolutions that support women in peacekeeping and decision-making in times of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. Implementation of Resolution 1325 is intimately connected to ending violence against women. When women are excluded from the peace process, they are left vulnerable to more violence, and the violence done to them during war is more likely to be dismissed as mere "collateral damage."
10. Monitor printed and audiovisual media as well as other means of communication on portrayals of the roles and nature of women and men and seek ways to eradicate narrow stereotypes that limit the possibilities of useful contributions by both genders. The church should encourage study of the impact of Western—particularly U.S.—television, radio, and other media on cultural patterns and national development around the world and draw public attention to cases where such influence is harmful to women and girls and destructive to their cultures.
11. Support programs providing information and access to resources in the area of family planning and contraception and involve women in the preparation and distribution of these resources. Particular attention should be given to ensuring access to safe, legal, and non-coercive contraception, providing accurate information regarding abortion and its

alternatives, requiring informed consent for sterilization procedures, and creating safe women's health care facilities. Oppose for-profit referral agencies that charge fees for providing information that is freely available elsewhere.

12. Examine the impact of judicial decisions at all levels on the daily lives of women in such areas as child custody, employment, civil rights, racial and sexual discrimination, credit practices, estate settlements, reproduction education, and socioeconomic status.
13. Encourage the church to initiate and support leadership education for women and other educational programs that upgrade the status of women. Ensure girls' equal access to and the completion of basic education. Reach out to adult women through massive literacy campaigns using all modern means available.

See Social Principles ¶162F.

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