Reaching the Champions of Social Justice

Blind Spots in the Ecumenical Racial and Gender Response

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Abstract

Since the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948, the ecumenical voice against social injustice in the church and society has been strengthening. As one expression of unity among the fellowship, the WCC embarked in 2013 on a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace to work, pray, and walk together for life-affirming economies, climate change, nonviolent peace building, and reconciliation and human dignity. Champions of these issues exist within the ecumenical movement. Yet one also finds that champions of one theme are pushing back on another theme. Sometimes it is due to diversity of contexts and biblical and theological interpretations. At other times it is due to unconscious bias about the holistic nature of God's mission of justice for all God's people and creation. This paper grapples with this question: Why are people who are so alive to economic and ecological injustice sometimes blind to racial and gender injustice? To answer this, I explore the existence of conscious and unconscious bias despite the many powerful ecumenical statements that have been issued on racial justice.

Keywords

racism, gender, social justice, ecumenical movement, intersectionality

In recent times, the world has exploded with white supremacy and privilege in the name of protecting national identity. The increase of migration of people around the world has awoken an unashamed display of racism, gender injustice, and classism. At times,
champions of social justice have also been caught up in actions that can be interpreted as racist, sexist, and classist.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has a long history of playing a prominent role in protesting against social injustice. Racism and sexism are just two of the many social injustices the WCC has struggled against since its formation in 1948. The struggle to resist racism and sexism has often taken place in silos, however. At times, ecumenical groups of experts in a specific issue will have an approach that does not include analysis of how their issue intersects as one struggle with the struggle against racism and sexism. A common approach is to resist racism or sexism separately, and often champions of one are blind to the injustices of the other.

Various publications about the WCC have made several accusations. One is that “alleged white superiority continues to be at the root of the most pertinent forms of racism today”¹ and that it exists even inside the ecumenical movement. A second argument is that racism has in no way been eradicated; this means that the ecumenical commitment to the promotion of justice and human rights – wherever people are excluded because of race, gender, sexual orientation, class and ethnicity, nation or belief, and denied their dignity as persons created in the image of God – cannot waver.² A third statement is that in the struggle to eradicate racism, there is a need to deal with both overt and covert forms of racism.

It is in the context of such statements that this paper argues it is human nature to see injustice in one issue while remaining completely blind to another issue of injustice. That is why it is possible to have champions of climate change, freedom of religion and belief, and so on who overtly or covertly do not support the struggle against racism or gender injustice. Unconscious bias³ and unintentional racism and sexism are realities that need to be recognized, especially by all champions of social justice.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section describes how my own background has been a journey in examining issues of racism and sexism in an integrated way. Second, it draws lessons from the methodology of the WCC’s Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) and the report of the Sheffield conference on The Community of Women and Men in the Church. Third, it concludes by arguing for a programme on racism that is intersectional in approach: that is, one that will interact with issues of truth and trauma, land and displacement, and gender justice.

² Ibid., 347.
My Context, My Story

My own conscious and subconscious responses to racism and gender injustice are framed by my culture, faith, education, and the countries in which I have lived. This includes the history of a people targeted by the Swahili Arab slave trade; conversion to Presbyterianism introduced by the Church of Scotland and the Dutch Reformed Church from South Africa; and exposure to South African Black theology, African theology, African women’s theology, and ecumenical theology.

The Swahili Arab slave trade

In most studies on racism, the focus is on European racism. Very little has been published on Arab racism. Africa has experienced both European and Arab racism. The people from the East coast of Africa more often experienced Arab racism. I am a descendant of survivors of Swahili Arab slave-trade raids in Central Africa in the 19th century. My first awareness of Swahili Arab slavery came through my primary education in Malawi. As part of our history curriculum, I learned through songs and textbooks that the 19th-century Chewa people of the Maravi kingdom were constantly raided by the Swahili Arab traders and Yao chiefs. The Swahili Arab slave trade primarily targeted the women of East Africa to serve as domestic slaves, wet nannies and sex-slaves in the infamous harems. This trade trickled over millennia is estimated to have taken more than 10 million Africans via the Swahili coast to India, Saudi Arabia, China, and Turkey, and also via the Trans-Saharan route to North Africa and the Mediterranean, where in slave markets such as Ceuta, Morocco, Africans were purchased to work as domestic servants in Spain, Portugal, and other Western European countries.

The male slaves were put to work “as field workers, teachers or harem guards, which is why the castration of male slaves was common practice.” Since castration was common, this helps explain why there were no African communities of slaves on the East Coast of Africa or in North Africa. The use of rape as a weapon of war was practised on the Central and East Africa slave routes and in their markets. The women slaves experienced rape not only at the homes where they worked, but also at the slave-holding

4 The Maravi kingdom was at its greatest extent in the 17th century. Maravi straddled the current borders of Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia in the 16th century. The present-day name “Malawi” is said to derive from the Chichewa word malawi, which means “flames” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malawi).


7 “The History of Arab Slavery in Africa.”
houses. We hear similar stories about African women who were kept at Elmina Castle in present-day Ghana. The difference is that on the East Coast of Africa, the slave women were raped by the Muslim Swahili Arabs, whereas on the West Coast of Africa it was by Christian European slave traders. In both of these slave holdings, places of worship were erected for the slave traders. Elmina Castle has a chapel above the dungeons where slaves were kept. Many primary school textbooks contained pictures of Arab men as the slave masters. Bridglal Pachai adds that a mosque was built at the headquarters of Chief Jumbe, a slave trader. This mosque was not for the slaves but for the traders. Thus, already as a child in primary school, I became aware of the intersectionality of the slave trade, Swahili Arabs, and Islam. I understood how my ancestors were displaced from their original homes and moved to settle where they felt safe from the constant Swahili Arab raids within the dying Maravi empire.

In the 21st century, BBC and CNN documentaries on modern-day slavery have shown that human trafficking, migration, xenophobia, and displacement of people, especially youth, continue much as they did during the Swahili Arab slave trade of the 19th century. A recent presentation and publication by Dr Hrayr Jebejian, general secretary of the Gulf Bible Society, confirms that the mistreatment of migrant workers from Asia and Africa, who are mostly women, is modern-day slavery and that churches must take a role in ending it. Thus, any ecumenical response to racism that intersects with sexism needs to address the issues of the modern-day slavery of African people in the Middle East.

**Christianity, colonialism, postcolonialism, resistance of racism, and gender injustice**

On the one hand, Christianity was received by the Chewa people of the Maravi kingdom as salvation from being enslaved by Swahili Arabs. On the other, Christianity introduced a new form of bondage for Chewa women, who had to abandon the spiritual leadership that traditional religion accorded them and accept a Christian faith that did not allow the participation of women in leadership.

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Dr David Livingstone, the Scottish explorer and missionary who came to Central Africa in 1859, exposed the evils of the slave trade as practised by the Swahili Arabs and Muslim chiefs. He has gone down in history as the Scottish man who liberated the African people in Central Africa from slavery. He visited the chiefs involved in the slave trade and signed agreements with them to end the trade in slaves. In his vision, the Chewa would be safe under the British colonial rule, British-led commerce, and the Christian religion. Although he did not live long enough to see his vision come to pass, his call led to the arrival of missionaries along the slave trade routes. Nyasaland was created as a British Protectorate in 1891, and the British African Lakes Company was established to service the growing white community there. Many British companies bought land and established estates growing tea, coffee, and tobacco; most of these are still in the hands of British companies. The intersectionality of British rule, capitalist economy, and the Christian religion is very clear.

The Cape Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) followed the vision of David Livingstone by introducing Christianity to my people in 1889. Church of Scotland and Free Church of Scotland missionaries were already settled. The DRCM introduced education to the Chewa people. However, unlike the Scottish Presbyterian missions in the south and north of Nyasaland who were planning to establish colleges and universities by 1904, the DRCM missionaries argued strongly that African Christians should be offered only primary education to teach them to read the Bible in their local languages. Such arguments can only come from a position of racism, which was protested against in a letter written by the executive committee of the Nkhoma Synod Teachers’ Association to all European and African ministers of the Nkhoma Synod in 1960. The situation was worse for women, who were only admitted to school if they had written permission from a parent or guardian. This was not a requirement for boys. Moreover, the content of their primary education was linked to domestic work.

The Pan-African movement of the 1960s, which rejected colonial rule in Africa, saw many African countries gain independence from colonial rule and missionary-controlled churches. This movement was a rejection of racism. Nyasaland became independent in 1964 and changed its name to Malawi. In the church, the DRCM handed over power to the local people in 1962. Currently, many of the ministers from the Nkhoma Synod have

13 The letter stated, “The aged Christians were taught to read and write Nyanja so that they could read the Bible only in Nyanja. They were taught against English and to hate a person who knows or speaks English. The motive is self-evidently to narrow the outlook of the African and keep him in darkness.” See Isabel Apawo Phiri, Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious Experience of Chewa Women in Central Africa (Blantyre: CLAIM, 2000), 52.
received doctorates from Stellenbosch University in South Africa and are in senior positions in the church; however, the participation of women in church leadership has not changed. In 2011, the Nkhoma Synod passed a resolution to accept women as church elders. This was revoked in 2013 on the basis that the synod had been theologically misled. They still believe it is a sin to accept women in church leadership positions, but they are also strongly against racism. In the meantime, the Dutch Reformed Church renounced racism, started accepting the ordination of women, and in 2019 its general synod approved that their 12 synods have the right to accept same-sex relationships if they wish. I see that in their zeal for the Lord, the Nkhoma Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Central Africa rejected racism in the DRCM but imposed its own oppression by maintaining a patriarchal theology, which, up to the present, has pushed women to the periphery of church administration and meaningful participation.

In post-colonial Malawi, my family migrated to South Africa: first for education and later for economic reasons in 1990, when Nelson Mandela had just come out of 27 years of imprisonment for fighting against the apartheid regime and for the dignity of the black people in South Africa. Through my studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT), a historically white university, I learned that theological reflection goes hand in hand with activism and the importance of taking an intersectionality approach in the fight against social injustice. This means that when a theologian is in the context of struggle for social justice, being prophetic also means being involved in activism. Analysis of the realities of people, theological reflection, accompaniment of the wounded, and advocacy with them becomes a spiral process, in which these actions feed on each other.

I was mentored by John de Gruchy, an internationally renowned theologian and an ecumenical activist who resisted apartheid in his theology and in action. I was also privileged to study feminist theology under Denise M. Ackerman, a feminist theologian of praxis. Then there was Gabriel Molehe Setiloane, an ecumenist and one of the pioneers of African theology. Toward the end of my studies at UCT, I was joined by Barney Pityana while he was still director of the WCC’s PCR in Geneva. I learned from them how to use the frameworks of feminist theology, ecumenism, and an African theology to resist racism and sexism.

14 Administratively, the Church of Scotland Mission (established in 1875) became the Blantyre Synod. The Free Church of Scotland (established in 1876) became the Livingstone Synod. The two synods joined to form the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in 1924. The Dutch Reformed Church Mission (established in 1889) became the Nkhoma Synod and joined the CCAP in 1926. Blantyre Synod and Livingstone Synod have overcome racism and sexism over time.

The 20 years that I studied and worked in South Africa were periods of growth in awareness of the web of oppression – the intersectionality of racism, sexism, trauma, truth, and the displacement of people from their land – and the role of the churches in all this. I interpret the 2019 explosion of xenophobic attacks and the escalation of extreme gender-based violence in South Africa to be a result of the postcolonial and global failure to deal holistically with the damage caused by colonialism and its white supremacy. The xenophobic attacks have the potential to destabilize the majority of the countries in Africa. It is not for South Africa alone to sort out. The African Union, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and other religious groups must come together to find solutions to deal with issues of governance, patriarchy, poverty, inequality, unemployed youth, and the presence of China on the African continent.

**Lessons Learned from the WCC’s Programme to Combat Racism**

As the WCC reflects again on how to respond to the manifestation of racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia today, it draws on lessons learned from its successful programmatic response of the 1960s to the 1990s through the PCR.

One of the key elements of the PCR was a hugely successful mobilization of church members to work together to raise awareness about the existence of racism in their own lives, in the churches, and in society, and for the churches to work together to eradicate it. Now, more than then, we must recognize that being a champion in resisting racism requires becoming aware of possible personal and institutional blind spots of racism that are embedded in our histories and that influence our cultural, religious, and social perception of racism or sexism. Deliberate steps need to be taken to raise awareness at personal and institutional levels.

The second lesson is that in the PCR, we have learned that the WCC took a risk as it mobilized the churches to resist racism. When they made the decision to establish the PCR, not all WCC member churches were convinced of the sinful nature of racism. In the 1960s, some WCC member churches justified racism from a biblical and theological perspective. Other WCC member churches have contributed to writing Kairos documents also using biblical and theological arguments. Despite the divisive nature of discussions and actions on racism taken by the WCC and some of the member churches, and although some of the

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churches left the fellowship, the majority of the churches decided to stay. Those that resisted racism did so because they were convinced that it is not possible to defend racism from biblical and theological perspectives, because all humanity is created in the image of God. As a fellowship, the WCC Nairobi assembly of 1975 named racism as a heresy and a sin against humanity. This theological reflection on racism has remained valid within the ecumenical movement. It is the basis for any future programmatic work of the WCC.

The third lesson from the PCR is about the diversity of theological approaches to the discourse and action around racism. In the 1970s, already accepted within the ecumenical movement were the ideas that no single universal theology guides the work of the council and that all theologies are contextual. The lesson learned here is to continue being open to varieties of theologies of the people visited on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. These theologies are the result of lived experiences. The fact that the PCR used social analysis and interdisciplinary dialogue with the social sciences meant that its theology was located within liberation theologies. Within liberation theology, PCR embraced analysis on political, social, cultural, and economic developments and how they have marginalized some people, but it also embraced social psychology, cultural anthropology, and micro-economics to deepen aspects of Christian theology. The advantage of this approach was that it acknowledged a web of oppression and the need to address racism holistically, as it was then manifested in different contexts.

The fourth lesson learned was about being focused on specific contexts. Baldwin Sjollema, the first director of the PCR, has argued for a focused approach in any future WCC programme on racism. This is because during his leadership, the focus was mainly on ending apartheid in South Africa. The PCR’s analysis of the manifestation of white racism drew heavily from US and Southern black theology in order to understand the black experience of African Americans and the blacks in Southern Africa. John Pobee and Tinyiko Maluleke’s perceptions of blackness are insightful. Blackness is an experience not pigmentation of the skin; an experience,

out of which the reflection of God’s word emerges. The black experience in practical terms has been synonymous with poverty, ignorance, terror, insults, exploitation, by others, relegation to the

17 “Racism is a sin against God and against fellow human beings . . . When practised by Christians it denies the very faith we profess and undoes the credibility of the Church and its witness to Jesus Christ. Therefore we condemn racism in all its forms both inside and outside the Church.” David M. Paton, ed., Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975: The Official Report of the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (London: SPCK, 1976), 109–10; see McCullum, “Racism and Ethnicity,” 357.


periphery of humankind. By contrast “white” is the symbol of lordship, mastery of history and of the gospel, power, being automatic heirs of the chief seats in the great parliament of humanity. The difference between white and black experience is that of epistemological relevance. Unlike black experience, white experience has been accommodated to, if not co-opted by the white power structures and ideology with its hall marks of racism, capitalism, and white nationalism.

This means that the legal systems are built to protect white power. At the same time, while the WCC endorsed the focus on South Africa as a priority country, it gradually became clear that there were blind spots in this approach. Combating racism cannot mean resisting white supremacy and privilege at the expense of turning a blind eye to the intersection of racism with other forms of oppression. The WCC has also named the discrimination against and oppression of Indigenous Peoples, the Dalits, and ethnic minorities and women as equally sinful. Taking an intersectional approach in the work of PCR meant taking into account the sensitive issue of the doctrine of ecclesiology and anthropology of some WCC members, which is still the case. Creation of specific projects on Indigenous people, minorities, and women was one way of addressing the blind spots in our work on racism.

Lessons Learned from the WCC’s Community of Women and Men Study

In recent times, there has been an explosion of pushback against the discourse on gender justice both in the church and in society, which makes recognizing the web of oppression even more important. This is happening at the same time that people have become very open about racist speeches and laws, especially in relation to migrants. This rapid trend is happening in all continents, though with different intensity. There is also an increase in disasters connected to climate change and the migration of people, as the majority of migrants are escaping the economic devastation caused by climate change. There has also been a growth in the gap between the rich and poor within the same countries and from one country to the other.

Drawing from the report of the WCC’s Sheffield conference on the Community of Women and Men in the Church (1981), we find many lessons that can help champions of social justice to address the issues in a holistic manner.

The first of these lessons, and one that is central to this paper, is the argument that the struggle for change is one struggle. The report states: “Racism, sexism and classism and all other forms of domination, rejection and marginalization are linked together in a

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The evils of our time – sexism, racism and class conflicts – cannot be explained only by reference to cultural and economic factors or to social and political structures. While each of these plays an important role in human life, the roots of our struggles are primarily illumined by the biblical concept of sin.” This quotation carries within it the key to treating the blind spots of the champions of social justice. It points out the importance of unpacking individual and collective manifestations of sin and solutions. It explains well the biblical and theological truth that when one body of Christ suffers, the whole body of Christ suffers, too. When reading the signs of our times, the ecumenical movement should be thinking of responding in ways that protect all people who belong to the body of Christ as well as all people, because they are created in the image of God. Racism, sexism, and classism make the body of Christ suffer. The ecumenical response to one form of suffering should also lead to responding to other forms of suffering.

The second important lesson coming from the Sheffield report is that concepts of sin, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and reparation are the theologies that undergird our theological reflection about the web of oppressions. These themes should cut across all issues of social justice.

The Way Forward

I propose that addressing the blind spots in approaching issues of social justice requires efforts on two fronts.

First, we must challenge the current global pushback on racial and gender justice gains in the church and in society by encouraging and creating spaces for conversations. This will require conversations that are intergenerational and that cut across issues, confessions, and regions. Within the conversations, we must encourage people to make listening a key element, so that we go to the space for conversation not to convert the other but rather to learn why a particular issue is important to a particular group, and how one’s own issue of expertise can be enriched in dialogue with the other’s issue of expertise. In so doing, champions of social justice increase their awareness of other issues and develop empathy and a holistic approach to addressing issues.

Second, the proposed programme on racism following the next WCC assembly in 2021 should have a component on raising consciousness about the intersectionality approach.


22 Ibid., 146.
Experts are needed to provide courses for staff, governing bodies, commissioners, reference groups, and other members, as well as interested churches and ecumenical partners. These courses should be designed to help us recognize racial, sexist, and classist blind spots at personal and institutional levels. Some churches are already offering such courses to their members and staff.