

# From the ELCA's Draft Social Statement on Women and Justice

**NOTE: This document includes only the Core Convictions, Analysis of Patriarchy and Sexism, Resources for Resisting Patriarchy and Sexism, and the ELCA's Response and Our Commitment. The full Social Statement can be downloaded at <http://www.elca.org/womenandjustice>**

## I. Core Convictions

- 1) We believe God's intention revealed through the Scriptures is that all people flourish and have life abundantly.
- 2) We believe all people are created equally in the image of God. Every individual is dependent upon God, and all share in the God-given vocation to joyfully contribute their gifts to help all of creation flourish. As members of this society, we also affirm that all people are created equal and are endowed with certain inalienable rights.
- 3) We affirm that God's creation is wonderful in its variety. We believe God creates humanity in diversity, encompassing a wide variety of experiences, identities, and expressions, including sex and gender.
- 4) While we affirm that God's intention is equity and fullness of life for everyone, we confess that the sins of patriarchy and sexism, like all human sin, disrupt God's intention. We recognize that the struggle to achieve sex and gender equity is shaped and complicated by factors of race and ethnicity, nationality and immigration status, sexuality, gender identity, economic means, age, abilities, and education.
- 5) We confess that, as God's people, forgiven in Jesus Christ, we are at the same time liberated and sinful. **We are broken, and yet we are made new by grace through faith.** This good news is true even as we participate in cultures and societies that are broadly patriarchal and sexist.
- 6) **We confess that we are justified by God's grace through faith.** This promise frees us from trying to earn God's love or justify ourselves, so that we can do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God and our neighbors. A commitment to neighbor justice is key to our understanding of the ministry of Jesus Christ and to our reading of the Scriptures. God's act of redeeming love evokes love in us for others who need justice in all areas of their lives. This call to justice specifically means that we seek equity and justice for women and girls and others who experience oppression due to sexism and patriarchy.

7) We believe that, redeemed and made new, the Church is called to live as the Body of Christ in the world even while we struggle with the realities of patriarchy and sexism. As Lutherans, we recognize that acting justly within the home, the church, society, and civic life for the good of all is one of the vocations to which God calls all people.

## II. Analysis of Patriarchy and Sexism

8) We recognize patriarchy and sexism are “a mix of power, privilege, and prejudice;”<sup>18</sup> they prevent all human beings from living into the abundant life for which God created them. Patriarchy is a social system dominated by men, identified with men, and centered on men’s actions, voices, and authority. In patriarchal systems, men are typically viewed as better than women, given more power than women, and have more authority than women. This patriarchal worldview harms women and girls. Sexism is the reinforcement of male privilege. It promotes silencing, controlling, and devaluing women, girls, and gender non-conforming people. Everyone intentionally and unintentionally participates in a patriarchal system, and it affects individuals in different ways.

9) We recognize that when society and church have spoken about women and girls, the hidden assumption often has been that they are white and heterosexual. However, this statement’s references to women and girls are inclusive of all women—women of color and white women, lesbians, transgender women, women with disabilities, and immigrant women.

10) We believe that many individuals who suffer under the weight of patriarchy and sexism also experience intersecting burdens. In addition to sex or gender discrimination, they may also be treated in oppressive ways according to their race, ethnicity, economic status, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, or ability, or because of the language they speak.

11) **We reject patriarchy and sexism as sinful because they deny the truth that all people are created equally in God’s image.** Too often behaviors and decisions rooted in patriarchy and sexism cause overt harm, inequities, and degradations. Examples include gender-based violence (including physical and emotional violence and coercion), pay inequality, human trafficking, restricted access to health care and economic resources, inadequate research on health issues affecting women, denial of educational opportunities, objectifying portrayals of women in media, and failure to value and support elderly women, mothers, and children.

12) We recognize that the problems experienced by women and girls are vast. However, **patriarchal structures that reinforce and perpetuate rigid sex and gender expectations also harm men and boys, including gay and transgender men.** Men and boys are harmed when they are forced to conform to narrow gender stereotypes, such as those that tell men and boys not to have traits or roles that are like those associated with women and girls. People of all genders who do not conform to gender-based roles and stereotypes can be made invisible and oppressed.

13) We celebrate that humans are relational beings and that we live in social systems. The dynamics and powers in these systems are greater than any one individual, government, culture, or religion

community, even though personal responsibility is involved. Most instances of patriarchal harm flow from and into commonly held beliefs and customs and can be found in specific laws, policies, and practices within secular and church institutions. Our church's commitment to neighbor justice compels us to expose how patriarchy and sexism are woven into all aspects of individual, social, and religious life, causing harm to all of humanity.

### III. Resources for Resisting Patriarchy and Sexism

14) **The Scriptures** show us a rich texture of justice that is central to God's intention for human flourishing.<sup>23</sup> This church has identified sufficiency, sustainability, solidarity, and participation as the key principles of justice. Social structures and institutions, including the ELCA as a human institution, must be assessed and guided by these principles.

15) In faith, this church is **empowered to confess** that Christianity in certain beliefs, practices, and aspects of its history is complicit in the sins of patriarchy and sexism. At the same time, we believe God provides resources within the Christian faith and the Lutheran tradition and is at work in human community to bring forth new ways of living that challenge the harmful beliefs and effects of patriarchy and sexism.

16) While God's Word of Law and Gospel speaks through the Scriptures, there are words and images, social patterns, and moral beliefs in them that **reflect the patriarchal values** of the cultures and societies in which they arose. Their continued misuse contributes to maintaining hierarchies and patterns of inequity and harm.

17) The Christian theological tradition also bears this dual character. In particular, some doctrines affect our understanding about humanity and God more than others. These **teachings affect our use of language**. The teachings about the image of God, the Body of Christ, and the Trinity have sometimes been misused to support patriarchal beliefs, attitudes, church practices, behaviors, and structures. At the same time, these doctrines also provide liberating resources for healing the effects of the sins of patriarchy and sexism.

18) The central Lutheran belief that we are justified by grace through faith empowers this church to challenge the structures of patriarchy and sexism that ascribe value based on human standards.

19) We recognize that significant progress has been made in society against patriarchy and sexism; however, evidence demonstrates that more attention is needed. Cultural and religious beliefs, practices, policies, and laws continue to promote inequality and inequity and continue to degrade, lessen, and harm people. We believe that Christians, together with many other partners, are able to understand and advance equity. This happens through beliefs and ideas that are gender just and through laws and policies that support an equitable common good.

#### **IV. Response to God's Work: Call to Action and New Commitments in Society**

20) This church teaches that the God who justifies expects all people to seek justice in earthly structures and systems. Human reason and knowledge are necessary here, and this church does not presume to have quick or easy solutions for the deeply rooted and complex problems of patriarchy and sexism that have permeated these structures. Our commitments, however, express this church's firm hope that social relations can be ordered in better ways so that all people may experience greater equity and justice.

#### **The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commits to:**

21) Seek, support, and advocate that diverse, gendered bodies be respected, rather than objectified, abused, denigrated, or marginalized. First steps toward this goal are laws that do not deprive anyone of their human and civil rights.

22) Seek, support, and advocate for the eradication of gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault, by acknowledging both personal responsibility and the systemic aspects of such violence.

*(See the ELCA's social messages "Gender-based Violence" and "Commercial Sexual Exploitation.")*

23) **Seek, support, and advocate for portrayals of people in entertainment, media, and advertising that do not objectify or stereotype but rather show all people as capable of the wide variety of human characteristics and roles.**

The power of entertainment and media to shape individual thought and cultural beliefs is immense and often underestimated. This church expects that entertainment and media should seek to be gender just. Far too often, what is available on screen and in print, whether in film, advertisements, or social media, continues to be centered on men and boys. Furthermore, entertainment and media often devalue or degrade females, often through unrealistic physical expectations.

However, this church encourages entertainment that portrays gender diversity and demonstrates that all kinds of people are capable of the widest variety of human characteristics and status. Guided by a concern for gender equality, we will ask searching questions about available entertainment and media such as:

- a. Who is portrayed in what ways and by whom? What are the predominant messages being delivered about gender roles?
- b. In what ways are other forms of identity interwoven with gender? Are these represented in life-giving and positive ways?
- c. How often are some genders or types of people portrayed as "good and strong" and others as "bad and weak"?
- d. Do those who create the predominant images and messages represent gender diversity and are they committed to edifying art?

- e. In what ways do we all participate in media representation?
- f. In what ways can our participation be consistent with our faith-based values?

**24) Seek, support, and advocate for medical research, health care delivery, and access to health care services, including reproductive health care**, that recognize how bodies differ and that eliminate discrimination due to gender or sexuality.

**25) Seek, support, and advocate for economic policies, regulations, and practices that enhance equity and equality for women and girls**, with special concern for raising up women who experience intersecting forms of oppression.

**26) Seek, support, and advocate for services and legal reforms** that attend to the particular needs of women, girls, and boys who are physically and economically vulnerable due to migration and immigration. (See the ELCA’s social message “Immigration.”)

**27) Seek, support, and advocate for multi-faceted understandings of social and economic roles so that our human traits** (such as courage or care) **or callings** (such as business leader or stay-at-home parent) **are not prescribed by gender or sex**. Encourage and empower all people to use their gifts for the sake of the social good, whether in the home, at work, or in the public sphere.

**28) Seek, support, and advocate for resources for families and communities that empower parents, whether single or coupled**, to nurture, protect, and provide for their household in ways that do not reinforce gender-based stereotypes. In particular, advocate for men to participate in all family roles associated with the home, caregiving, parenting, and nurturing.

**29) Seek, support, and advocate for an increase in women’s participation** in local, state, and national politics, with special attention to raising up women who experience intersecting forms of oppression.

#### **V. Response to God’s Work: Call to Action and New Commitments Regarding the Church**

**30)** This church recognizes that the Body of Christ is called to honor and support women, girls, and people with diverse gender identities in ways more consistent with life-giving theology and faith practices. Therefore, as a church, **we commit ourselves to celebrating and affirming the gifts and insights that women and girls bring to congregations, institutions, and the church as a whole.**

**The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commits to:**

**31) Promote scriptural translation and interpretation that support gender justice**, acknowledge the patriarchal context in which the Scriptures were written, and reject the misuse of Scripture to support sexist attitudes and patriarchal structures.

**32) Promote theological reflection that is attentive to the gender-based needs of the neighbor.** Theologians need to be honest about how church teachings have been misused to support patriarchy and sexism. All teachers of the faith should express God's desire that all persons may thrive.

**33) Use inclusive language for humankind and inclusive and expansive language for God.** Encourage the use of language for God that expands rather than limits our understanding of God's goodness and mystery. In particular, we support developing liturgies, hymns, prayers, and educational materials that broaden our language beyond primarily male images. This practice follows the Scripture's witness that God is wholly other and transcends human categories of sex and gender. Therefore, metaphors and images for God should be drawn from the lives of women and men, from nature, and from humanity in all its diversity to speak of the fullness and beauty of God.

**34) Develop and support more extensive policies and practices within the ELCA that promote the authority and leadership of all women within this church** in all its expressions.

**35) Promote changes that are economically just**, including equal pay, for women in all ELCA institutions and organizations, with special attention to the situations of people affected by intersecting forms of discrimination.

**36) Seek and encourage faithful discernment and, where possible, joint action with other members of the Body of Christ and inter-religious and secular partners on issues of patriarchy and sexism.** This includes the affirmation of the Lutheran World Federation's Gender Justice Policy and continued dialogue with national and global ecumenical and inter-faith partners.

## **DEFINITIONS**

**Sexism:** That which promotes and perpetuates male privilege.

**Patriarchy:** The social, institutional, legal, political, educational, economic, religious and interpersonal systems of society that benefit men and the interests of men with status and power. While all people within a patriarchal system participate in it, the system functions with men at the center. This means that, sometimes unconsciously, people participate in systems that control and oppress people who do not fit society's ideas of maleness and masculinity.