

2

What problems do women face, and what does justice require?



OPENING ACTIVITIES (UP TO 10 MINUTES)

Welcome! In this conversation we will explore more deeply both systemic problems and what justice might mean as a response to them. This conversation also takes up the hope and call to action that Christians cherish in light of God's promise of a new creation.

Opening prayer *(See Devotional Options.)

Conversation covenant and module objectives *(Review both briefly.)

Scripture reading

But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its
people as a delight. (Isaiah 65:18)

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn
assemblies. ... Take away from me the noise of your harps. But let
justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing
stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

Moment of silent reflection

I: WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS WOMEN CONFRONT? (20 MINUTES)

**(Note to leaders: Divide participants into small groups. Each group will read one of the following illustrations and use one or more of the questions as conversation starters.)*

What illustrates the problems?

Conversation starter questions:

1. Does this illustration surprise you? Why or why not?
2. What do you think the problem is in the case study you read?
3. What message does the case study you read tell you about social views of women's and girls' bodies?
4. Discuss any ways you see the personal experience in your case study being an instance of injustice or not.

In our time together we will:

1. look at some of the injustices suffered by women and girls in our society and church.
2. investigate characteristics of justice as a biblical and social value.
3. encounter the basis for a Lutheran theology grounded in hope.

Illustration 1: Marny and the high school dress code¹

"The dress code is unfairly enforced in my school. My friend was sent home because she violated the dress code. An administrator said her T-shirt was inappropriate and her shorts were too tight. Meanwhile the boys wear jeans below their waist, and once in a while you can see their 'butt cracks.' Jocks sometimes go shirtless or wear revealing shorts, and no one says anything. The administrators don't enforce the code equally, since boys are rarely sent home. Geeks (like myself), ethnic looking girls (like my friend who was sent home), 'plain looking' girls, and 'big girls' are singled out by administrators. This is not fair."

Illustration 2: June's pregnancy²

June and her husband were expecting their first child. At a party with friends, she could not help but share her anxieties about the impending birth. June felt anxious about the delivery and sought reassurance about how to deal with the pain associated with birthing, without having to resort to pharmaceuticals or epidurals. A well-intentioned friend commented, "Giving birth will come naturally to you as a woman since it is something women are designed to do. Your partner, on the other hand, has one important role to perform: to protect you and to provide for the baby once she/he is born."

Illustration 3: Hallie³

"As a college-aged student and member of the LGBTQ community who identifies as a lesbian, I am constantly asked why I am a lesbian. My mother frequently comments that I cannot be a lesbian because I am a female. My father says it is a phase, and that all I need to find is a good man. Guys at school make comments such as, 'You're too cute to be a lesbian.' Or, 'Would you and your girlfriend be up for a three-some?' Some men have even commented that a night with them will make me change my mind about liking women."

What is the root problem?

**(Note to leaders: Gather into the large group. Read the following information aloud.)*

Although there are many directions that conversation could take regarding the three illustrations we just discussed, we will concentrate on one central concern, the lived experience and needs of women.

These illustrations from women's real experiences suggest a big picture question: What is the root of female gender oppression? To many people who investigate these issues carefully, it is clear that what happens to individuals is just a symptom of a larger and more complicated problem. While the consequences of gender-based injustice are clear, they are informed by a harder-to-see sin in our social system: the problem of **PATRIARCHY**. But what is that?

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(Note to leaders: Invite participants to pair off for the following activities.) In **one minute or less, circle words or phrases in the definition below that stand out to you or strike you in some way.*

A patriarchal **SOCIAL SYSTEM** is dominated largely by the voice and authority of men. A patriarchal social system is centered on males; the world is portrayed with men as the main actors in life and reflects their ideas and values. Patriarchy is supported through means of power and control, such as sexual discrimination and gender inequality.

In *one minute each*, share your response with your partner: Why did you circle what you did? When the signal is given, move to the next question:

- In one minute, identify an experience or observation from your life that matches an element of this definition of patriarchy.
- Take two minutes each to share your experience or observation with your partner.

How does a social system work? Thinking about our families can help since they are an example of a micro-social system. They shape us as individuals, even as we as individuals shape families.

Working in groups of two, identify and share an example of a common and expected behavior in your family of origin, either "good" or "not so good." Use examples you are comfortable sharing with everyone. (2 minutes)

| Family supported behavior | How was behavior reinforced or supported? | What were the consequences for NOT following along? |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| | | |
| | | |

Discuss:

- What do you notice about the way a social system works to keep people acting in certain ways?

How does patriarchy get expressed in a social system?

**(Note to leaders: Divide participants into groups of five or six and ask each group to read one of the following. Have them circle words that stand out and then share responses within the small group.)*

(1) Where do gender and sexual identity come from?

Some people believe that **GENDER** is determined by our biology. They conclude that our gender and sexual attraction is either male or female and completely determined at birth. Others believe that gender is a completely social construct. Still others believe the reality is some combination of the two. Those who believe there is some degree of social construction point out that in our society the human body is sexualized by economic or market forces that are then socially reinforced. These definitions of gender—whatever their biological and social combination—function to encourage and, sometimes, to intimidate individuals into conforming **NORMATIVELY** to ethical standards of gender. Given market forces and social pressure, many people who study these matters argue that norms enforced by patriarchy are often unfair to women and **GENDER NON-CONFORMING** people. (See Module 3 for more on this.)

(2) What are some of the injustices faced by women?

Statistics show that women experience **INJUSTICE** as a common problem in such arenas as the workplace, the family and society. Economic social justice⁴ as one crucial form of justice is concerned with the problem of how society equitably distributes economic and social goods and burdens. Many see a connection between the root problem of patriarchy and the inequitable distribution of income and wealth experienced by women. Other forms of injustice connected to patriarchy include gender-based discrimination, objectification and stereotyping. Many people also believe that patriarchy in our society is associated with the loss of reproductive freedom, gender-based violence, or language practices. (See Modules 3-6 in this study for more on some of these.)

(3) In what way has the church perpetuated the sin of sexism and legitimated patriarchy?

The church is not exempt from the distorted power structure promoted by patriarchy. Many people point out how the church has also been responsible for sexist attitudes, as evident in debates on women's ordination. It is clear that the cultural systems of biblical times were highly patriarchal and those cultural aspects infected the teachings of the church. The suppression of women in the church often relies on particular interpretations of the Bible and on some of the theology of the early church.

For example, even though Scripture makes it clear that God does not have sex or gender, that is, is not male or female, the church has had a male-centered theology. This theology emphasizes an image and symbol of God as male and rarely appeals to the female metaphors in the Bible. Furthermore, patriarchal doctrines of God as male emphasize power, dominion and hierarchy. Many people believe these feed into practices and structures in the church that support and reinforce racism, sexism, poverty and fears about gays, transgendered people and others. (See Modules 6 and 7 for more on this.)

II. HOW ARE THESE PROBLEMS RELATED TO JUSTICE? (15 MINUTES)

**(Note to leaders: Gather the whole group and have individuals read aloud the following sections. If time is short, use only the "must read" passages. Invite participants to circle key words and underline key passages that caught their attention. After the passages are read, invite individuals to share those key words and write them on newsprint. In this way the group can see and discuss these ideas that caught their attention.)*

Whatever one's view about the depth and connections of the problems experienced by women in church and society, remedies must be focused on seeking justice. It obviously is important, then, to sketch what **JUSTICE** means and explore a bit about what our church teaches about it. We also will explore what is often overlooked, the relationship between justice and oppression.

Does justice matter?

Justice is one of the most important biblical values in the Old Testament, referenced over 200 times! The prophet Amos, whom we read at the beginning of this module, saw justice as an important ideal for the faithful. In the New Testament, the Greek word for justice appears more than 90 times. Christian theology, many other religions and most secular thinking consider justice necessary for the healthy operation of any human society. Justice matters!

What are the characteristics of justice?

For the purpose of this study, we will define justice as an underlying sense of fairness, right treatment and reciprocity.

Previous ELCA social statements identified four guiding principles concerning justice: We will use these to guide our discussion of social justice for women. (For more about other aspects of justice, see *Going Deeper* for this module.)

sufficiency: meeting the basic needs of all people

sustainability: maintaining an acceptable quality of life for all generations

solidarity: the interdependence of all of creation

participation: the right of all people to have a voice regarding activities and decisions that affect their lives

**(Note to leaders: Divide your group into four and assign each one of the principles. Give each group about five minutes to read their principle, discuss what it means and think of examples where that principle is being applied in society and where more needs to be done. Then re-gather the group and invite members to share and talk about what they have discussed.)*

Sufficiency

The principle of sufficiency advocates for our society to address the basic needs (physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual) of women. As implied in the Golden Rule, there is a right of every person to life, self-actualization, dignity and respect. These encourage the concern for a women's right to be safe from gender-based violence and the right to equal opportunity in education and employment. The concern for sufficiency supports not only acknowledgement and respect but also advocacy for women in matters of health care, immigration, domestic violence, sexual expression, human trafficking and the workplace. Sufficiency as a principle of justice means the basic needs of all women and those who depend on them should be met.

Sustainability

The principle of sustainability compels society to provide an acceptable quality of life for all generations of women. Although this principle applies to emotional and material aspects of life, we will focus the discussion here on the intersectionality of gender, class and economy. On the one hand, women in our society are too often relegated to menial work and lower-paying jobs with little or no opportunity for promotion, advancement and leadership. This is especially evident among women of color. Further, the work of homemakers is undervalued and dismissed and often disrespected. Women who are economically vulnerable, who are forced to seek public assistance or welfare for the support of their family, are marginalized even further. They can be forced into dependency

Think about it:

"If you want to live in a community, you must share the community's burdens, dangers, and injuries, even though not you, but your neighbor has caused them. You must do this in the same way that you enjoy the peace, profit, protection, wealth, freedom, and security of the community, even though you have not won them or brought them into being."

Martin Luther,
(LW 46:78)]

through their subjection to an arbitrary and invasive bureaucracy and suffer a loss of rights including privacy, respect and choice as they navigate the process.

Solidarity

The principle of solidarity compels respect for the lived experience of women and encourages all people to share not only in their suffering but also to participate in their liberation. This liberation affects all people of whatever sex or gender. Sexism harms not just women but also men by celebrating rigid understandings of male roles, sometimes described as “hyper-masculine.” This hyper-masculine and narrow mentality targets gender-nonconforming men and women for discrimination and harassment. It also harms heterosexual males by discouraging them from forming meaningful relationships with men, women or LGBTQ people. The principle of solidarity encourages an end to women’s oppression and would benefit us all.

Participation

The principle of participation advocates for women to participate actively in the decisions that affect their lives. It should be no surprise that many women have little or no power in their household, workplace and elsewhere. This influences what decisions are made on matters that affect them. For example, in matters of sexual expression and reproduction, the range of decisions available to women about their bodies is generally determined by men (for example, legislatures with a majority of male representatives). In our society, a paternalistic attitude undermines the moral and legal agency of women.

How are we to deal with injustice?

Considering the gravity and enormity of the problem of injustice to women, what can we hope to accomplish? Ideally, we would have a society in which everyone is treated equally, in which each individual, family, community and nation lives in harmony and in which violence in all forms is non-existent. But sin – individual sin and the sinful systems in which we participate – undermines this ideal.

Nevertheless, Christians believe that God is at work in society to bring greater justice, and we are called to be God’s hands in doing the same. That means society should strive to respect the needs, rights and responsibilities of all people. These include equality of access in many matters, such as health care, personal safety, public and ecclesial leadership, education and financial well-being. Over the long-term, these changes must be structural and substantive, not cosmetic and superficial. Changes are needed in mindsets that oppress women and in institutions that foster and promote sexism.

While full justice may not be possible because of sin (a very Lutheran view), the principles of sufficiency, sustainability, solidarity and participation insist that there should be a common concern for justice. Sin is the ultimate problem and can lead to despair, but we serve a God of promise and justice.

III. A GOD OF PROMISE (10 MINUTES)

*(Note to leaders: Invite participants to work in pairs. Assign pairs to read at least one of the five components below silently and to discuss the following questions briefly. In the final few minutes, invite sharing from the pairs with the whole group.)

Questions for discussion:

- Where do you see or hear this component of hope in your congregation or your life?
- Name one way this component applies to the problems of women and justice.

While the church's past teaching contributes to today's problems, it also contains resources to draw upon. A *Lutheran theology grounded in hope* is a key example. We will examine five components of this Lutheran theology of hope that can empower us to respond to the suffering of all people. All five of these components are prophetic declarations of solidarity and community to strive toward a common good.

The **first** component of a theology grounded in hope is *reliance on the promises of God*. Isaiah 65, cited above, reminds us of God's great promise of a new creation, one in which the current order passes away and the much-anticipated reign of God is ushered in. This reign became real in Jesus as a promise but is not fully realized. The promised reign is a vision or assurance of God's future that encourages us to yearn for harmony and justice now, even if it is anticipatory and partial.

Secondly, as people of the promise, we are *embodiments of a community* living out a vision of hope that challenges the destructive patterns and ideologies that surround us. As a living embodiment of hope, we are not to tolerate the destructive beliefs and practices that belittle, demean and degrade women and girls.

Thirdly, when we receive the sacraments, we are reminded of God's *ongoing creative work*. This is expressed in baptism through which we are sealed and marked with the promise of the cross forever. Through the Eucharist we are reminded that we are partaking in an anticipatory meal that celebrates the new creation promised by Isaiah. The sacraments stand in stark contrast to the sexism and patriarchy that surrounds us since Christ is truly present among us.

The **fourth** component of the promise is the realization that in being sealed and marked by God in baptism, and in partaking of the Eucharist, a powerful *unitive bond* is created that challenges boundaries of gender, race, nationality, class or social status. This means that we are connected one to another as we strive for dignity, respect and justice for all people.

The **fifth** and final component is a corollary to the fourth one. Living as a community of promise with shared concerns allows us to live in *right relationship*, not only with God but with all of those who are our neighbors. This allows us to live

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out responsibly the ethical demands of sufficiency, sustainability, solidarity and participation. Right relationship with God gives us power to challenge collective, sinful and divisive proclivities to injustice.

The Christian message of hope presents us an assurance of a future that in faithful commitment to one another seeks to envision, create, share and celebrate a society that is just and respects all people regardless of difference. We must be honest with ourselves and recognize that the struggle is not easy, that change will not occur overnight. Regardless, we know that God's promises will not fail, that change is possible, and that Christians are free in God's love to take active roles in changing our society for the better. The Bible is clear; God is a God of justice who desires that "*justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*" (Amos 5:21-24).

IN CLOSING (5 MINUTES)

**(Note to leaders: The leader should gather the group and read the following summary, guide the closing prayer, and point participants to the out-the-door activities.)*

What have we learned?

Our conversation today has explored a number of issues that reflect challenges women and girls face in the home, society and the church. The problems run deep, but God's promise of a new creation runs deeper and calls the Christian community to yearn for and act for change. A better understanding of justice as a response to oppression is an important start for seeking remedies.

Closing prayer **(See Devotional Options.)*

Out the door

1. **Complete the response form** (found on page 125 or online at <https://surveys.elca.org/scripts/rws5.pl?FORM=wjss2>).
2. Use this module's **Going Deeper** found below.
3. **This week notice** places where there is a need for practices of neighbor justice around sexism and ask the questions: What is my prayer right there? What action should I take on behalf of the neighbor?
4. **Learn and reflect:** Watch your local evening news and make a note of the number of stories about sexual harassment, economic issues related to women, instances of gender-based violence, the hardships faced by undocumented immigrant women, or women who are suppressed or

exploited. After a week of observation, discuss your findings with one of the participants of the study. What did you discover?

5. **Learn and advocate:** Learn about what legal advocates for women, domestic violence workers, immigration advocacy organizations, community organizers or women's business groups do. Find out the ways you can volunteer in the areas discussed above. Identify women-owned businesses in your area and support them. Also, encourage others to shop there.
6. **Learn and discuss:** Watch an hour of television, ideally with a few other people. Pay attention to how gender and sex are portrayed, giving particular attention to the advertisements. What behaviors and physical attributes are valued for males and for females? How are consumer products marketed to attain these desired attributes? Talk about what you see. Compare what seems to be valued in the media to your understanding of how we are valued as beloved children of God.

GOING DEEPER FOR MODULE 2

*(Note: After each topic, there is a question or two for further reflection or journaling.)

If you want to know a bit more about the development of gender identity: In Module 3 of this study the conversation will explore how gender is interpreted through the lens of biology. It will explore the argument posed by some theorists that gender is the product of social construction. The key concern is that the human body is a product of social forces. In this materialistic society, most of our choices are influenced by market forces. This means that market-based influences are responsible for significantly influencing our gender identities. (As we observed in the opening exercise, gender identity underlies all of the illustrations presented.)

To explain this point let's take a look at how our society views the female body. The female body is consistently objectified through the lens of the consumer market, most prominently in the media. Standards of beauty are given economic value and marketed. These standards of beauty often become the ideals prescribed for women and girls. Finally, femininity (as well as masculinity) is defined in terms of these prevailing market-generated standards of beauty. For a fuller explanation of gender identity, see: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*; and Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Gender Inequality*. For a fuller discussion of economy and the social construction of gender see Alison Phipps, *The Politics of the Body*.

Can you think of other ways in which market forces influence the way we interpret the world?

If you want to know a bit more about remedying the social and economic injustices faced by women: How one thinks about the problem of inequality is related to debates about competing views of justice. In order to simplify for the sake of presenting basic ideas, some thinkers emphasize the importance of equity while others emphasize the importance of market freedom. Regardless of how the problem of injustice is viewed, one fact remains: Unequal distribution is evident in our economic practices. In our present context, women are usually most harmed by the current system of distribution. This problem affects the kind of society we aspire to be, and the kind of life women will enjoy as providers and citizens. For a fuller discussion of the injustices faced by women and potential remedies see: Rosalyn Muraskin, *Women and Justice: It's a Crime*.

Have you ever encountered an injustice of the types discussed above?

If you want to know a bit more about sexism and patriarchy: The definition of patriarchy is a description of a complex array of social relations, habits, laws, ideas and beliefs in which everyone participates in varying measures. Everyone contributes. Though there has been much social progress toward gender equity in the United States, patriarchy is still the dominant social system in the United States and within Christianity. For a fuller discussion of sexism and patriarchy see Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot*, 3rd ed.; and Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*.

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1. Write down three areas where you have seen or experienced patriarchy.
2. How does patriarchy distort the ways we understand men and women and their roles in our society?
3. How does patriarchy distort our ideas about God?

If you want to know a bit more about the church's role in perpetuating and supporting patriarchy: The debate over the domination of women in the church and society has been influenced by a reading of Genesis 2. Augustine of Hippo's (354-430) reading of Genesis 2:23 was influenced by the misogyny of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Augustine concluded that men possess the image of God primarily, while women – because the first woman was created from Adam – possess the image of God secondarily. This reading has historically legitimated the subordination of women to men. For a fuller discussion of sexism and patriarchy in the church, see a classic on this, for example: Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk*.

What do you think about the evidence given here that the church has perpetuated patriarchy?

If you want to know a bit more about oppression and injustice: As suggested above, gender oppression is a symptom of patriarchy. Oppression can take individual and structural forms. As a structural problem, oppression is perpetuated through social institutions and practices that privilege one group over another. Men in positions of leadership, for example, are rarely chastised for being “pushy or bossy,” while many women in leadership report that they struggle with these valuations repeatedly. Their disadvantage is thus reflected consciously or subconsciously through the privileging of gender.

The feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young identified five facets of oppression in her book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, which are pertinent to justice. These include: *exploitation*, *marginalization*, *powerlessness*, *cultural imperialism* and *violence*. Some women as individuals and women as a group suffer from *exploitation* in a variety of ways; this can occur in the household as well as in society. For example, if women are restricted solely or *primarily* to reproduction and child rearing, men can advance in the workplace at their expense. The second facet, *marginalization*, dismisses the importance and contributions of women by relegating them to the margins of society. The third facet applicable to women is *powerlessness*. If socially and in the household women have little voice or no power in decision-making processes, it affects them directly in matters such as reproduction, finances, health care and immigration. The fourth facet, *cultural imperialism*, is expressed in matters of culture where social practices prescribe norms of behavior that privilege men. The fifth facet deals with the disproportionate amount of *violence* (both verbal and physical) suffered by women in our society.

Write down at least one of these facets of oppression. Do you agree it is pertinent to justice? Why or why not?

ENDNOTES

¹ This illustration is based on an actual incident involving members of the task force. Names have been altered for the sake of anonymity.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Social justice is committed to the values of respect, dignity, quality, concern and reconciliation for all people. As an agenda, it seeks to create a culture of solidarity and equality for all people. This includes: equal rights, gender equality, freedom from exploitation, the rejection of a dehumanizing materialism, and the equal distribution of societal goods and responsibilities. It actively promotes compensatory and distributive justice.

⁵ Historically, justice is considered one of the Cardinal Virtues. (They are prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice.) Those in turn were added to the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity to complete the Seven Christian Virtues.

⁶ Several ELCA statements use and develop these principles. Visit ELCA.org/socialstatements to read the relevant sections in *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice*; *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, and *Genetics, Faith and Responsibility*.

⁷ Social justice includes many dimensions, such as economic justice, retributive justice, distributive justice, commutative justice, structural justice and restorative justice.

RESPONSE FORM

What problems do women face, and what does justice require?

1. What is the name of your congregation, school, group or organization?

2. What is the ZIP code?

3. Is this response from an individual or group?

- Individual
- Group: how many people are in the group?
 - 2 – 5
 - 6 – 10
 - 11 – 20
 - 21 or more

4. How valuable did you find Module 2: What problems do women face and what does justice require?

| | Not valuable | A little valuable | Moderately valuable | Valuable | Very valuable |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| I. What are the problems women confront? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| II. How are these problems related to justice? | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| III. A God of promise | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

5. As a result of participating in this module, what did you learn?

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6. What do you see as the greatest strength of this module on justice?

7. What do you see as the greatest weakness of this module on justice?

8. Based on your conversations during this module, what would you like our church (the ELCA) as part of Christ's body to say and do?

The form is complete – thank you!

Please send the completed form to:
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