

# Decolonizing and Decentralizing Epistemology and Methodology with Pan African Women of Faith

A Reflection on the Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network 2013– 2021

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## Abstract

*The article seeks to reflect critically on the ecumenical work of a programme of the World Council of Churches—Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE), the Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN), from 2013 to 2021. In so doing, the aim is to identify conceptual learning and recommendations for the further evolution of a renewed and relevant global model for ecumenical theological education in the future. The major finding from the work of PAWEEN ETE 2013–21 is that the priorities in future approaches for dealing with ecumenical theological education should be to decolonize and decentralize epistemology and methodology and to create a theological education that is relevant today and in the future. Such an approach should include a Pan-African women's lens of faith within and outside the churches.*

## Keywords

*ecumenical theological education, Pan African Women of Faith, decolonizing approaches, Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, World Council of Churches*

This article seeks to reflect critically on the ecumenical work of a programme of the World Council of Churches (WCC)-Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE), the Pan African Women's Ecumenical Empowerment Network (PAWEEN), from 2013 to 2021.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, the aim is to identify conceptual learning and recommendations for the further evolution of a renewed and relevant global model for ecumenical theological education.

The WCC's work on ETE has its roots in the Theological Education Fund, created in 1958, and its successor from 1977, the Programme on Theological Education. ETE has supported a range of different activities, including contextual reflection in curriculum development, training of theological educators and intra- and interregional exchange.<sup>2</sup> Since the WCC's assembly in Busan in 2013, the work on ETE has come under the auspices of the WCC's Commission on Ecumenical Education and Formation (EEF).

The major finding from the 2013–2021 work of PAWEEN is that the priorities in future approaches dealing with ecumenical theological education should be that of decolonizing and decentralizing epistemology and methodology and creating a theological education that is relevant today and in the future. Such an approach should be inclusive of a Pan-African women's lens of faith within and outside of the churches. While Pan African Women of Faith (PAW) – the advocacy side of PAWEEN's work – offers a particular lens for this approach, such a lens also invites specific perspectives of other intercultural communities that have historically been marginalized or made invisible to the structures, pedagogies, praxis, and practices not only of conventional approaches to ecumenical theological education but of theological education in general. In sum, PAW invites a mutual ecumenical solidarity that more fully informs a holistic and decolonized approach to leadership formation within and outside of the churches.

PAWEEN/PAW has also been honoured to be invited to be partners in the formation of a new ETE programmatic initiative, the Indigenous Women's Network. The hope is that this article will serve as a resource for the network in the future as well as for others seeking to move forward with a more relevant ecumenical theological education framework.

## Background

In 2013, at the WCC's 10th Assembly in Busan, Republic of Korea, a group of African women and women of African descent gathered to determine a way forward

<sup>1</sup> This article draws upon the thematic issue of *The Ecumenical Review* (71:4 [2019]), edited by Amélé Adamavi-Aho Ekué and Angelique Walker-Smith, "Pan-African Women of Faith and a Vision of Inclusive Global Theological Education."

<sup>2</sup> See John S. Pobee, "Education," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, vol. 2, ed. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 386–87.

to recognize, celebrate, and discuss their contributions to the theological heritage and legacy in the ecumenical movement. They agreed that a way to do this was to engage with the assembly's theme, "God of life, lead us to justice and peace," which took the form of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. By 2015, this conversation had become rooted in the work of the WCC's EEF and the related Ecumenical Institute at Bossey.

Since then, PAWEEN was established within ETE and the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. PAWEEN has built ties with churches, theological schools, and institutions such as Bread for the World (US), the African Union, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and various churches of Africa and of African descent, as well as through the network's own related church affiliations, independent movements, and organizations.

PAWEEN/PAW has built its work on the fundamental understanding that since the earliest biblical accounts in Genesis, women of African descent have played a critical role in shaping the Judeo-Christian faith. PAWEEN/PAW has deepened the understanding of the leadership of Pan-African women – from Hagar and Zipporah in the Bible to the modern ecumenical movement. Further ancient supplementary texts to these biblical texts are important for this fundamental understanding.

PAWEEN/PAW has engaged scholarship and gathered the stories of Pan-African women of faith, too often neglected in ecumenical and church history, and has used them for leadership capacity development and theological education. Building on these women's experiences, PAWEEN/PAW has identified new and renewed models of Christian leadership and discipleship for the changing landscape of Christianity globally, including the growth of Christianity in Africa and in the African Diaspora.

Publications, webinars, seminars, conferences, advocacy, and other engagements have created occasions for this work. In so doing, PAWEEN/PAW has deeply embraced the legacy and histories of Pan-African women in theological education and schools and learning experiences in the ecumenical movement and outside of it.

PAWEEN/PAW has functioned as a decentralized network. The ownership, leadership, creativity, and voices of these women have led to the following learning experiences, findings, and recommendations. These commend decolonizing conventional approaches of ecumenical theological education and theological education in general.

## Decolonizing and Decentralizing Theological Education

Decolonizing and decentralizing approaches to epistemology and methodology for theological education complements a Pan-African ideology.<sup>3</sup> These approaches share the theological values of justice, equality (equity), and self-determination and use methodologies that embrace the knowledge of Indigenous peoples,<sup>4</sup> local knowledge, and advocacy.<sup>5</sup> Anticolonialism is a broad term used to describe action taken by various resistance movements against “colonial and imperial powers” that have impeded the God-given freedoms of Pan-African women to thrive in the life of the churches and society. Together, these Christian values, methodological approaches, and engagement of Christian-based advocacy movements with partners of solidarity provide a framework for understanding the learning experiences of PAWEEN/PAW since 2013. In sum, PAWEEN/PAW has been a movement accountable to a vision of beloved community<sup>6</sup> for and with all peoples, with creation, using a lens of Pan-African women of

<sup>3</sup> “Although the end of colonialism occurred shortly after the end of World War II . . . Demands to liberate Africa from colonial status began at least as early as the end of World War I and the Versailles Peace Treaty. That treaty was based on the ideal of self-determination – the belief that people should decide their own form of government and that world peace hinged, at least in part, on the principle that no people should be ruled by an ‘outside’ group. Pan-Africanism was the attempt to create a sense of brotherhood and collaboration among all people of African descent whether they lived inside or outside of Africa.” See “Pan-African Movement,” American Historical Association, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/teaching-resources-for-historians/teaching-and-learning-in-the-digital-age/through-the-lens-of-history-biafra-nigeria-the-west-and-the-world/the-colonial-and-pre-colonial-eras-in-nigeria/the-pan-african-movement>.

<sup>4</sup> “Local and indigenous knowledge refers to the understandings, skills, and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. For rural and indigenous peoples, local knowledge informs decision-making about fundamental aspects of day-to-day life. This knowledge is integral to a cultural complex that also encompasses language, systems of classification, resource use practices, social interactions, ritual and spirituality.” See “Local and Indigenous Knowledge System,” UNESCO, <https://en.unesco.org/links>.

<sup>5</sup> As followers of Christ, we always express and embody God’s reconciling love and in all places. Throughout the Scriptures, God speaks of our purpose to rebuild, restore, and renew all that is broken (Is. 61). We are called to work to end the brokenness of hunger and poverty in our communities, in our country, and in other countries. See *The Biblical Basis for Advocacy to End Hunger* (Washington: Bread for the World), <https://www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/biblical-basis-for-advocacy.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> “‘The Beloved Community’ is a term that was first coined in the early days of the 20th Century by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. However, it was Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, also a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who popularized the term and invested it with a deeper meaning which has captured the imagination of people of goodwill all over the world . . . Dr. King’s Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.” “The Triple Evils,” The King Center, <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy>.

faith that has sought to inform a more equitable approach to ecumenical theological education.

This framework is further defined by the network's adoption of the three rubrics of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace following the WCC assembly in Busan in 2013. These three rubrics are the *via positiva* (celebrating the gifts), *via negativa* (visiting the wounds), and *via transformativa* (transforming the injustices).<sup>7</sup>

### ***Via positiva*: Celebrating the gifts of Pan-African women of faith**

Made up of women of faith from Africa and the African Diaspora representing diverse cultures and nations, PAWEEN/PAW renews its call to serve God and to honour the cause of its ancestors. PAWEEN/PAW declares that our history did not begin, as many would believe, with the visitation of our colonial counterparts from nations outside of Africa who arrived on our African shores or on the distant shores separate from Africa after the travail of wretched slave ships in the Middle Passages. PAW/PAWEEN recognizes that long before some of us were shackled in the hulls of ships like the *La Amistad* and the *Henrietta Marie*, people of Africa and of African descent were royalty. PAWEEN/PAW further recognizes the resistance of our ancestors to the colonial violence that assaulted them and sought to enslave them.

The PAWEEN/PAW pilgrimage since 2013 has further exposed the dominant white and colonial narrative that has marginalized and even made invisible their ancestors' voices as well as their own. This personal and communal assault on the identities of the women of Africa and of African descent has deepened their resolve to reclaim their biblical presence and a Pan-African women's lens of justice and peace.

Pan-African women of faith in different parts of the world – Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, North America, Asia, the Pacific, and Europe – have affirmed the importance of being. They have also affirmed their lived experiences in the world through biblical narrative and devotional life. This has led to renewed formative spiritual experiences, together with reading and knowing the Bible, as sources of affirmation and empowerment.

Reading the biblical narrative in this perspective has offered new foundations through these experiences, as well as through webinars and seminars, and contributions to an issue of *The Ecumenical Review* in 2019. Such engagements have led to a questioning of

<sup>7</sup> “An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace,” 8 July 2014, WCC website, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace>.

Western classical models of theological education, which have contributed to fostering the invisibility of Pan-African women in theological education.

PAWEEN/PAW has used new digital tools for learning and to tell the historical stories of Pan-African women of faith who were biblical leaders, saints, and martyrs and those who are emerging as young adult leaders. In 2019, PAWEEN/PAW created a digital storybook in partnership with Bread for the World (USA) and the WCC, available on the new digital platforms of PAWEEN/PAW and the WCC.

PAWEEN/PAW was also built on the legacy of female theological educators. In the October 2019 issue of *The Ecumenical Review*, PAWEEN/PAW highlighted the journey and wisdom of pioneering women theological educators who hold key positions in the ecumenical movement. Through their academic and ecclesial contribution and positions of leadership, these women have paved the way for and with others. “These contributions focused on the link between individual and collective biographies, perseverance in multi-faceted yet always determined educational paths, and on the insistence that theological education which aims at transformation needs to be embedded in real-life experiences and hence in the consciousness about historical and social structures influencing theological and societal standpoints.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***Via negativa: Visiting the wounds***

At the same time that we celebrate the gifts, we must acknowledge that the social injury Pan-African women have experienced persists as well. While there has been much to celebrate on the pilgrimage of Pan-African women, there have been and continue to be deep wounds. For Pan-African women, the systemic challenges that contribute to economic, racial, and gender imbalance are structural issues that affect their livelihood and their families. They also affect the women’s advancement, as they endeavour to share their stories and be agents of effective mission and evangelism. This insight was rendered in the first PAWEEN/PAW article in *International Review of Mission*.<sup>9</sup>

The pain of these burdens has been shared in annual gatherings and other related events and reflections. PAWEEN/PAW provided a hospitable and safe space for organic sharing and critical reflection. These created spaces were central to the shared devotional life and the annual observances of the WCC’s Thursdays in Black

<sup>8</sup> “Pan-African Women of Faith and a Vision for Inclusive Global Theological Education,” *Ecumenical Review* 71:4 (2019), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/toc/17586623/2019/71/4>.

<sup>9</sup> “The Legacy, Leadership, and Hope of Pan-African Women of Faith in Building Sustainable Just Communities as a Missional Focus,” *International Review of Mission* 105:2 (2016), 226–42.

campaign in solidarity with women affected by sexual violence. These occasions and this annual campaign allowed for addressing these wounds in the lives of women inside and outside the churches as well as in the lives of the women themselves or women they knew.

This kind of visitation of the wounds invited the women to advocacy as a method for advancing a transformed society of justice and peace. The focus of the advocacy was on addressing the root causes of hunger, racism, poverty, gender inequities, and a related legislative agenda of ending malnutrition and advocating for global nutrition, especially for women and children.

### ***Via transformativa: Leading to resurrection***

Transforming injustices has been an important aspect of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace in which PAWEEN/PAW has been engaged. The report of the meetings of the Theological Study Group for the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and the WCC Reference Group for the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace suggests we are to believe, trust, and hope that “ultimately this way leads towards resurrection. It can and will be transformed into a way of joy and celebration, as we walk together as churches, not for our own sake, but for the sake of the world.”<sup>10</sup>

One of the important learning experiences for PAWEEN/PAW was to affirm that building sustainable just communities with, and not for, Pan-African women of faith is an important decolonized model that can lead to this transforming of the injustices. But to do this, a redress of the structural injustices is still required. While it is important to point out that many of these women are providing significant leadership within and outside their communities, they continue to be hindered by policies, practices, and customs that limit their ability to scale up their micro-communities into macro communities that can lead to strong nation states. Therefore, advocacy became a tool for Pan-African women to build sustainable, just communities. The focus for this advocacy of PAWEEN/PAW was to work toward a vision of ending hunger and poverty.

In November 2016, the following experiences and recommendations resulted from the first global PAWEEN/PAW conference at Howard University with approximately 160 globally diverse PAW leaders from local, regional, and global communities.<sup>11</sup> The agenda

<sup>10</sup> The Report of the Meetings of the Theological Study Group for the Pilgrimage of Justice and the WCC Reference Group for the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. See Angelique Walker-Smith, “The Legacy, Leadership, and Hope of Pan-African Women of Faith in Building Sustainable Just Communities as a Missional Focus,” *International Review of Mission* 105:2 (2016), 233.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.oikoumene.org/events/pan-african-women-of-faith-conference>.

covered the positive, negative, and transformative aspects of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, which also included advocacy. It featured Pan-African women from faith, policy, academic, and private sectors regarding the following calls to action:

- Listening to and working in solidarity with women affected by hunger and poverty
- Engaging in gender and cultural diplomacy to enact change, and to carry authority in our gender, culture, and in simple acts of kindness
- Ensuring justice work is balanced and wrapped in prophetic discernment and self-care
- Creating “alternative economies” to fund Pan African women’s efforts to live out our freedom
- Being aware that we have everything we need (not to get free) but to be the free that we are
- Cultivating the spiritual gift of listening to the voice of God heard and seen in our midst as an exercise of our faith
- Embracing the leadership of young people who are contributing to this intergenerational movement, and learning from them while serving as guides and advisors alongside them
- Challenging and agitating oppressive institutional structures and social and cultural norms that perpetuate discrimination and place barriers in front of women and girls
- Affirming the necessity of working in compassionate partnership to break the powers that hinder our goal to end hunger and poverty
- Acknowledging that to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, including the goal of ending hunger by 2030, we must work differently in our diversity
- Strengthening local capacity and supporting local solutions
- Acknowledging that the United Nations Decade in Solidarity with People of African Descent offers a unique opportunity for us to come alongside the nations of the world in achieving our advocacy goals
- Voting for people who are serious about our issues and to hold our candidates for political office and elected officials accountable<sup>12</sup>

In November 2018, PAWEEN/PAW, together with representatives from civil society, governments, the private sector, media organizations, and faith-based groups met in partnership with the Faith and Spirituality Sector of the African Union–Pan African Diaspora Women’s Association, Bread for the World–PAW, and the WCC’s PAWEEN

<sup>12</sup> For more on this, see “Pan-African Women of Faith International Consultation, June 2016,” *Ecumenical Review* 71:4 (2019), 566–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12460>.



at the US Mission to the African Union in Washington, DC. PAWEEN/PAW re-committed to deepening the global strategy movement initially ignited in 2016 at the Howard University.<sup>13</sup>

Four key messages came from this annual conference and were affirmed as a Call to Action as a method of transforming the historic wounds to acts of justice and repair. These messages are key learnings for decolonizing and decentralizing knowledge from a PAW perspective in theological education:<sup>14</sup>

#### **“African at Heart”**

We receive the gift of being “African at Heart” that individually and collectively invites and engages a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values and ethics of Pan-Africanism

#### **Season of the 2019 Quad-Centennial**

Africa’s Diaspora, the African Union’s Sixth Region, whether displaced through slavery and colonialism or part of modern day migration is part of Africa’s history and future. The Sixth Region was constructed to increase the participation of actors located outside of the continent. The 2003 Protocol on Amendments to the Constitutive Act sought to “invite and encourage the full participation of the African Diaspora as an important part of our Continent, in the building of the African Union.”<sup>15</sup>

#### **Lifting Pan African Women’s Voices in unity in our diversities**

We celebrate and invite our beautiful diversity in culture, heritage, languages and religion which shall be a cause of strength, including the tangible and intangible heritage of Africa’s island states and her diasporas.<sup>16</sup> The Africa of 2063 would see attainment of full gender parity.

#### **Advocacy for Justice**

We are a collective voice of faith urging our nations’ decision makers to end inequitable policies and lack of enforcement and lack of creation of policies at home and abroad. By changing policies, programs, and conditions that allow injustices like hunger and poverty to persist, we become transformative change agents<sup>17</sup> of hope for and with our families, communities and nations. (Bread for the World)

The 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were also welcomed as a global policy pathway toward sustainable communities with and for Pan-African women at both the micro and macro levels.<sup>18</sup> The SDGs themselves were adopted

<sup>13</sup> See “Pan African Women of Faith Global Strategy Consultation, November 2018,” *Ecumenical Review* 71:4 (2019), 572–74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12460>.

<sup>14</sup> African Union, Agenda 2063: *The Africa We Want*, Aspiration 5, #40, <http://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/agenda2063.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> *2003 Protocol on Amendments to the Constitutive Act*, Article 3, [https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/35423-treaty-0025\\_-\\_protocol\\_on\\_the\\_amendments\\_to\\_the\\_constitutive\\_act\\_of\\_the\\_african\\_union\\_e.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/35423-treaty-0025_-_protocol_on_the_amendments_to_the_constitutive_act_of_the_african_union_e.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> African Union, Agenda 2063, Aspiration 5, #41.

<sup>17</sup> See “Pan African Women of Faith Global Strategy Consultation, November 2018,” 572–73.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

by 193 heads of state and government and high representatives meeting at the United Nations Headquarters in New York in September 2015. Given the disproportionate numbers of Pan-African women affected by the issues that the goals seek to address, the accompaniment of world governments to commit to systemic structural change is critical to obtaining sustainable just communities. Every country that endorsed the goals committed to all of them. Countries are not free to pick and choose among the goals.<sup>19</sup>

### Intercontextual and interregional approach to theological education framework

While decolonizing knowledge and decentralizing approaches of theological education has emerged as a key finding of what it means to embrace a more relevant ETE, PAWEEN/PAW also recognizes that this approach is informed by intercontextual and interregional approaches.

In the PAWEEN/PAW-focused edition of *The Ecumenical Review* of October 2019, there was a focus on the interregional approach.<sup>20</sup> Since 2013, the resource tools and occasions for this have focused on building up relations between institutions and churches of different regions. This has helped to foster awareness of intersections, mutual support, and the development of common interregional and thereby intercontextual strategies for learning. This focus “epitomizes needs and aspirations articulated by theological educators and church leaders in all regions of the world,” mainly around the following salient strands:

- Pursuing authentic and experiential theological education that intertwines all classical domains of theology: theoretical, practical, wisdom-based, and poetic strands
- Developing a relational theological education, which values contextual specificities without losing sight common grounds, experiences, and visions with other contexts
- Insisting on transformation as one vital objective of theological education, transcending the conventional, restricted understanding or preparation for ministry and service in academia.<sup>21</sup>

PAWEEN/PAW represents a network that has responded to these aspirations by being situated at the intersection of classical formal theological education and advocacy work. Its objectives have been related to promoting experience-based, historically conscious,

<sup>19</sup> The Sustainable Development Goals are listed at <https://sdgs.un.org>.

<sup>20</sup> See Amélie Adamavi-Aho Ekué and Angelique Walker-Smith, “Pan-African Women of Faith and a Vision for Inclusive Global Theological Education,” *Ecumenical Review* 71:4 (2019), 407–10, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12448>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 407–408.

holistic, innovative, and transformative theological education in all parts of the world from a Pan-African women's perspective.

Further, PAWEEN/PAW has been experience-based. It relates to often-underscored and invisible experiences of marginalized or underrepresented groups in theological education, lifting their stories as valid narrative content, methods, and ethos in theological education. The network developed and promoted consciousness for historic perspectives and connections, while seeking to pay attention to how the Pan-African female experience links to other collective experiences of invisibility and marginalization. It also looks at how these experiences at the same time provide and shape opportunities for new models and expressions in theological education. This has led to a strengthening of mutual empowerment and "being in community" with the intercultural diversities within the specific communities of Pan-African women.

### **Shifting from an Intercultural and Interregional Focus**

In 2018, at the WCC's Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Arusha, this community of Pan-African women opened its female orientation to an invitation in community with men. This was done during the warshas (workshops) on "Changing the Narrative: Pan-African Women Leading and Advancing Just Models of Transformative Discipleship" and the collaborative workshop on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. Both warshas contributed to a timely moment that led to a shift from the intercultural and interregional approaches as a goal to being objectives that commend and inform the goal of decolonizing and decentralizing epistemology and methodology for a more relevant theological education today and going forward.

The workshops gave voice to the contributions and special concerns of Pan-African women of faith in Africa and in the African diaspora regarding the history of Christian mission and evangelism from their various perspectives. These women shared the wounds of the painful history of colonialism related to them in their diverse and common narratives of mission and evangelism. They remembered the disregard of Pan-African women in ancient places like Ethiopia and Egypt, during the colonial mission period, the neo-colonial period, and now. Participants came to recognize that Pan-African women, including indigenous women of Africa and of African descent, have been directly and disproportionately impacted by this woundedness and yet, at the same time, have been resilient and "African at Heart."

In sum, the workshops engaged the theological lens of agency, affirmation, woundedness, and transformation (as set out in the WCC Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace) and of being Pan-African and women. This took place in a season of growth and future

of Christianity in Africa and in the African diaspora. The workshops did this through presentations and discussion that sought to inform renewed models of discipleship and mutual mission partnerships with Pan-African women.

The development of emotional, spiritual, and relational capabilities is essential for building communities of diverse Pan-African women and ecumenical community, especially in today's world of increasing antagonisms. These experiences informed an evolution to commending a decolonizing and decentralizing epistemology and methodology. But they also confirmed the process of interculturalism and critical interrogation to encourage perspectives toward solutions for common challenges. This also encouraged the methodological scrutiny relevant to theological education, building upon contextual experiences as relational experiences that unite rather than divide.

## A Pan-African Global Season

This shift toward decolonizing and decentralizing has been taking place in a heightened and visible Pan-African global season for PAWEEN/PAW and the world. This is and has been a historic season globally for its unique invitation to global engagement to renew our faith commitment. It is also unique in its call dismantling the systems, policies, and relationships that promote and codify racism, which is a historic wound in and outside of the churches.

Specific to PAWEEN/PAW, this unique period invited and engaged special collaborative efforts and learnings with the following:

- the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, which affirmed that people of African descent are part of their 6th Region during this time
- the 2001 United Nations (UN) World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and other Intolerances in Durban, South Africa, and its recent resolution of the Permanent Forum of People of African Descent
- the implementation of and contributions to the UN International Decade for People of African Descent 2015–24
- the Africans and Africans in Diaspora – Manchester Conference (AAD) and collaboration in creating a Pan-African Network
- the adoption and affirmation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals
- learnings and partnerships with the global Black Lives Matter movements and campaigns and other similar historic and newer Pan-African movements

Most recently, the creation of AAD and its collaboration with PAWEEN has been an important step toward a Pan-African network that builds up the ecumenical vision of the community of women and men.

All of this is in addition to the conversation happening through the new WCC Overcoming Racism initiative. On 8 December 2021, there was a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the WCC Programme to Combat Racism, the forerunner to the current Programme to Overcome Racism. Those gathered explored, held dialogue, and reflected on racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia across all the regions of the world. The consultation undertook a historical evaluation of previous commitments by the ecumenical movement toward the elimination of racial injustice. Participants analyzed and evaluated past and present strategies and activities as well as describing the current battlefronts for overcoming racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia.<sup>22</sup>

An important learning approach has been a model that, rather than being integrative, finds synergy from the strength from women and men as partners. This was modelled in the 2021 AAD-Manchester Conference in October 2021 and in webinars from 2018 to 2021. These partners came together and have put together the following ten affirmations in the AAD-Manchester Conference Declaration based on the learnings of their Pan-African partnership since 2019:

- (1) To develop a programme of decolonizing knowledge, education, and educational systems to ensure that people of African Descent globally develop tools of critical thinking, research, and innovation to find solutions to challenges facing them and the world. This program shall include a rewriting of our community narratives to unequivocally promote gender equity and the leadership of women in the development of sustainable life in Africa and in the African Diaspora. This platform will also include building partnerships with youth and young adults. These communities will also provide necessary resources to build a platform for the present and future of Africa and people of African descent.
- (2) To engage each other in our understanding of our different forms of spirituality and together develop liberating forms of spirituality as part of the decolonizing of the mind and more fully embracing the human spirit. Such engagement will inform how we center human dignity and thereby the human rights of Africans and the African Diaspora in self-determination and progress.

<sup>22</sup> See the “WCC pre-Assembly consultation on Overcoming Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia,” World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/events/wcc-pre-assembly-consultation-on-overcoming-racism-racial-discrimination-and-xenophobia>, and the statement that resulted from the consultation: “Report of the Advisory Group on the Programme to Overcome Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia 6-10 December 2021.” Doc. No. EC 04, World Council of Churches Executive Committee Video Conference 8 February 2022. See also Doc. No. EC 10, World Council of Churches Executive Committee Video Conference 30 May–2 June 2022.

- (3) To prioritize solidarity and action especially with Africans on the African continent and people of African descent globally, who are among the most vulnerable and marginalized. Such solidarity and action will lead to the creation of opportunities and spaces for Africans and People of African Descent globally to interact with and learn from each other, understand each other better, to be able to act in solidarity with one another in a collective manner to change the balance of forces globally and force the world to change its perspectives about Africans and People of African descent, and move us towards ending racism in the world.
- (4) To seek a formal relationship with the Directorate of the Division on the Diaspora of the AU (CIDO) based on the AU's Sixth Region for the African Diaspora.
- (5) To seek a formal relationship that holds policy leaders, international organizations and civil society actors and actresses accountable for integrating Pan-Africanist ideals in policy and decision-making at the UN Permanent Forum on People of African Descent as well as support fully the UN International Decade for People of African Descent 2015-2024.
- (6) To seek a formal relationship that holds policy leaders, international organizations and civil society actors and actresses accountable to integration of Pan-Africanist ideals in policy and decision-making government bodies in the African Diaspora space – in CARICOM, Latin America, United States, Canada, European Union and other regions on matters that affect people of African Descent.
- (7) To create a platform to encourage trade and collaboration in business and civil society enterprising between Africans on the African continent and people of African Descent globally as well as work together to develop enterprises with competitive and comparable advantage globally. This platform shall facilitate regional and national exchange of entrepreneurial initiatives, cultural ideas, critical reflection and capital between Africa and the African Diaspora.
- (8) To address the racist perspectives on reparations for Africa and people of African descent and build on continuing efforts of reparatory justice mobilization across the world. Such efforts should address the economic, social and political costs of histories of enslavement of Africans and African diasporas in solidarity with related issues in the Pacific and among indigenous communities, especially in India, the Americas, Europe, and other issues such as those of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa.
- (9) To enter consultative processes with as many diverse entities that address matters related to People of African Descent and Pan-Africanism with the view of establishing a sustainable global Pan-African Network within a period of a year to ensure that our commitments are turned into reality to achieve a Pan-African renaissance to end racism in the world. This shall include a mission of facilitating future dialogue and engaged network activity, and pilgrimages to various locations where people of African descent are found and Pan-African histories are (re) discovered, to build a movement towards a vision of transformation with Pan-African priorities and themes identified in our concept note for the conference for and with all.
- (10) To resolve that a follow-up Pan-African conference be held within three years to evaluate progress made and next steps to be taken to achieve the full liberation of people of African Descent, politically, economically, socially and spiritually.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> “Declaration on the Outcomes and Actions of the Virtual Africa and African Diaspora (AAD) Conference Held on the 23-29 October 2021,” <https://capsi.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/DECLARATION-ON-THE-OUTCOMES-AND-ACTIONS-OF-THE-VIRTUAL-AFRICA-AND-AFRICAN-DIASPORA-AAD.pdf>.

## Going Forward

On the last day of the most recent annual conference of PAWEEN/PAW, a young Pan-African woman of faith, Dr Dorcas Chebet Juma, suggested the way forward for PAWEEN/PAW, stating that the contribution of Amélé Adamavi-Aho Ekué and Angelique Walker-Smith in *The Ecumenical Review* of October 2019 provided a prophetic entry point into the discourse of liberating ecumenical theological education for Pan-African women of faith.<sup>24</sup> In her presentation, she also referenced the writings of Esther Mombo, the vice-moderator of the WCC's Commission on Ecumenical Education and Formation, in the 2019 journal as well as in other recent work.<sup>25</sup> Mombo, according to Juma, acknowledged that the full realization of the vision for a transformative ecumenical theological education can fully be achieved through the empowerment of women ecumenists together with men; however, not much is said about how transformative theological education might find an impactful way to achieve engendered theological education that addresses how the empowerment of women ecumenists together with men is to be achieved. Arguably, the glaring gaps in church leadership and gender parity that contemporary society is grappling with are because of empowering the male gender at the expense of the female gender.<sup>26</sup> According to Esther Mombo, the vision of the empowerment of female and male ecumenists can be achieved through engendered theological education.<sup>27</sup>

In this approach, “normative western theological models, African patriarchy and male centered theologies continue to be challenged with the view of proposing inclusive, affirming and relevant models for a meaningful life of faith.” Mombo further argues, “Engendered theological education stresses dialogue, openness, grace and the willingness to submit to God’s will – that all may have life and life in its fullness (John 10:10).” In this perspective, the empowerment of female and male ecumenists takes a holistic approach. On the other hand, the radical shift of focus to programmes of women’s empowerment has silently ignited a fire of insecurity

<sup>24</sup> See “Pan-African Women of Faith and a Vision for Inclusive Global Theological Education,” *Ecumenical Review* 71:4 (2019).

<sup>25</sup> See Esther Mombo, “Considerations for an Inclusive Global Theological Education: Old Issues, New Questions,” *Ecumenical Review* 71:4 (2019), 449–60; “Theological Education and Women,” in *That All May Live!: Essays in Honour of Nyambura J. Njoroge*, ed. Ezra Chitando, Esther Mombo, and Masiwa Ragies Gunda (Bamberg: University of Bamberg Press, 2021), 31–45.

<sup>26</sup> See Dorcas Chebet and Beatrice Cherop, “Teaching Gender and Theology in the Reformed Institute for Theological Education (RITT) in Eldoret, Kenya,” in *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew?: Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa*, ed. H. Jurgens Hendriks et al. (Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2012), 170–81.

<sup>27</sup> Mombo, “Theological Education and Women,” 31–45.

among many African men. Thus, the contribution needed to underscore a clear ecumenical strategy that fully addresses the empowerment of both male and female ecumenists in ways that create a conducive environment that allows for both men and women to live a life of dignity as equally created in the image and likeness of God, as originally intended in Genesis 1:27.

## Observations and Recommendations

A vision for inclusive global theological education looking to the future should first consider contexts where COVID-19 has exacerbated gender-based violence, transforming women's bodies into crime scenes.<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that before the outbreak of COVID-19, gender-based violence was already widespread. Many women of African descent have experienced physical or sexual violence, most of them by an intimate partner.<sup>29</sup> However, during the pandemic there was a dramatic increase of violence against women and girls. Available information shows that gender-based violence has generally been found to increase in Afrocentric contexts in the face of pandemics because of patriarchy.<sup>30</sup> "As a Feminist Theologian and a leader in the ecumenical movement, Mercy Ambe Oduyoye, has worked tirelessly to ensure that woman's voices and concerns have been heard amidst momentous changes in African societies."<sup>31</sup> Since PAWEEN/PAW takes seriously the experiences of African women, such life-altering experiences of COVID-19 cannot be ignored in the post-COVID-19 ecumenical theological discourse.

In addition, PAWEEN/PAW should take seriously the rapid global changes that continue to socialize women to practise colonized ways of thinking. Colonial rules and the actions of many African leaders continue to affect the resources and institutional settings that are directly linked to economic development and poverty eradication, including many Afrocentric settings. Women of African descent are already driving Africa's transformation and contributing to a global reset. However, gender discrimination and male dominance continue to prevent women from ascending into key leadership

<sup>28</sup> See "The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19," UN Women website, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>.

<sup>29</sup> See Anita Kalunta-Crumpton, ed., *Violence against Women of African Descent: Global Perspectives* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> See UNHCR, *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SABV) Prevention, Risk Mitigation and Response* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2019), <https://www.unhcr.org/5ec7c1084>.

<sup>31</sup> See Kwok Pui-lan, "Mercy Ambe Oduyoye and African Women's Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20:1 (2004), 722.



positions that shape policies that directly affect women's lives. This way, it continues to be difficult for women of African descent to name, expose, and challenge male dominance. Globalization "is affecting societies and cultures around the world,"<sup>32</sup> but the global changes nevertheless continue to socialize women to practise colonized ways of thinking. Theological education in an era of globalization needs to be structured in such a way that it responds to this situation.

Finally, PAWEEN/PAW needs to consider the negative cultural ideologies and destructive beliefs nurturing gendered biblical interpretations, discrimination, oppression, and the disempowerment of women of African descent. A strong focus should be directed to matters of human sexuality. In many Afrocentric settings, it is taboo to speak about sex in public and in the private sphere, yet in many African settings the Bible continues to be interpreted in such a way that the sexuality of women is negatively viewed as an object of sexual desire.<sup>33</sup>

In these ways, PAWEEN/PAW will continue to be a relevant platform that responds to life-threatening issues regardless of time and space.

## Conclusion

The October 2019 issue of *The Ecumenical Review* outlines various stories and analyses of experiences of Pan-African women that inform a reimagined way forward of theological education with regard to Pan-African women of faith. The issue is "structured thematically in the following manner: first, building on the legacy of female theological educators; second, relating the biblical narrative with Pan-African female stories; and third, interrogating the past and charting a course of the future of theological education."<sup>34</sup> The contributions include themes of legacy and leadership, lament, and hope, making the biblical case for a renewed vision of theological education and a reimagined framework for theological education. The final articles in the issue set out a "reimagined framework for theological education," focusing on the theme of hospitality, with a case study of Pan-African women who are stateless as an issue of gender discrimination overcoming white supremacy in the Brazilian context and uplifting the presence and narratives of women of African descent. In this way, they expose the myth of a

<sup>32</sup> See J. Paul Rajashekar, "Theological Education in an Era of Globalization," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, 1 January 2015, <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1069>.

<sup>33</sup> See Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> Amélie Adamavi-Aho Ekué and Angelique Walker-Smith, "Editorial," *Ecumenical Review* 71:4 (2019), 401.

racialized democracy, mainstreaming gender in theological education in Jamaica, the US, and Canada, and the importance of mentoring as advanced by groups like the Caribbean Women Theologians for Transformation and the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.<sup>35</sup>

PAWEEN/PAW has indeed lifted the stories and experiences of the lives of Pan-African women of faith in such a way that it links the past to contemporary collective experiences of invisibility and marginalization. It is from this context that one sees that these experiences provide and shape opportunities for new and renewed models and expressions in ecumenical theological education.

<sup>35</sup> See the articles in *Ecumenical Review* 71:4 (2019), 516–74.