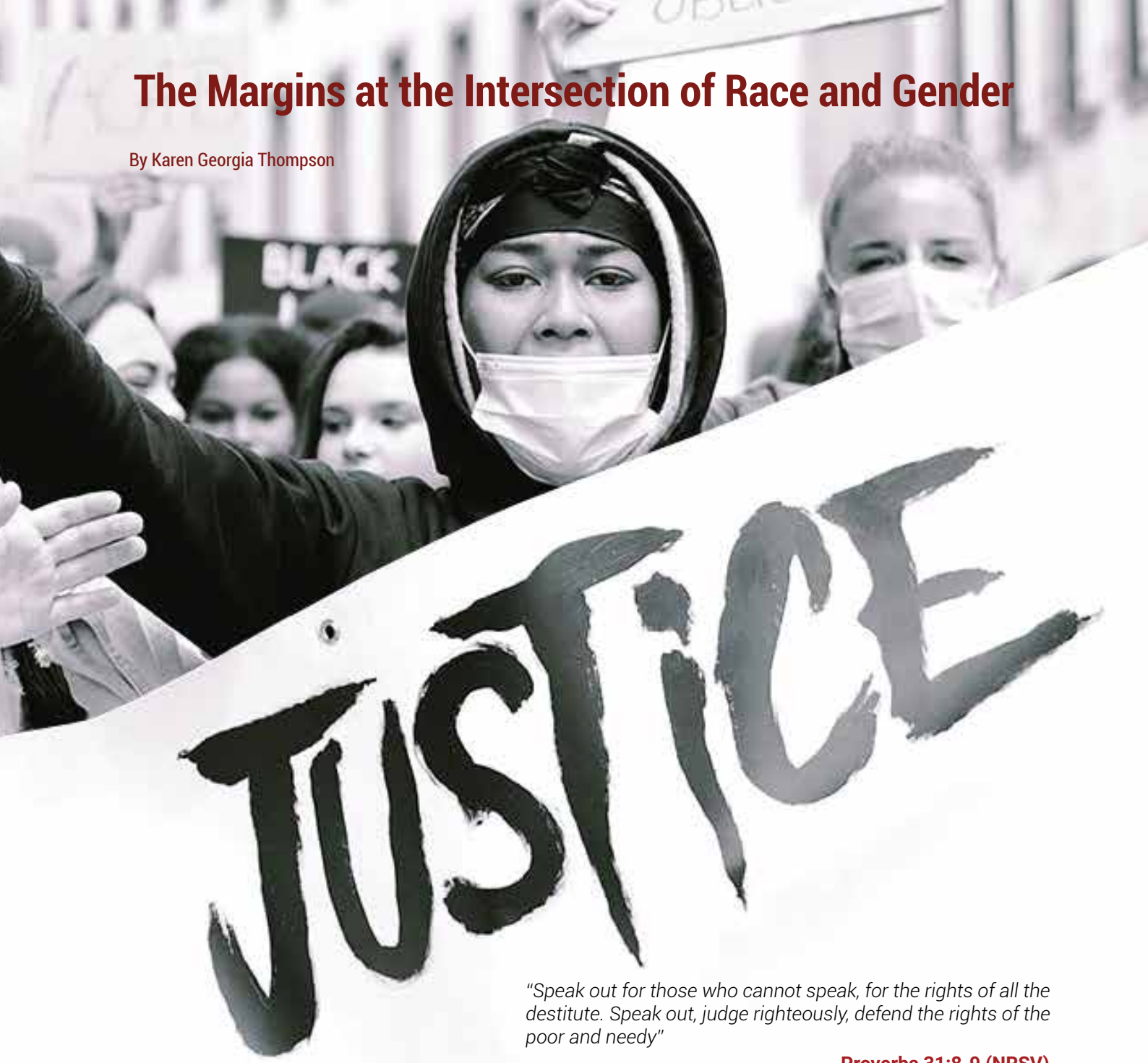


The Margins at the Intersection of Race and Gender

By Karen Georgia Thompson



"Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy"

Proverbs 31:8-9 (NRSV)

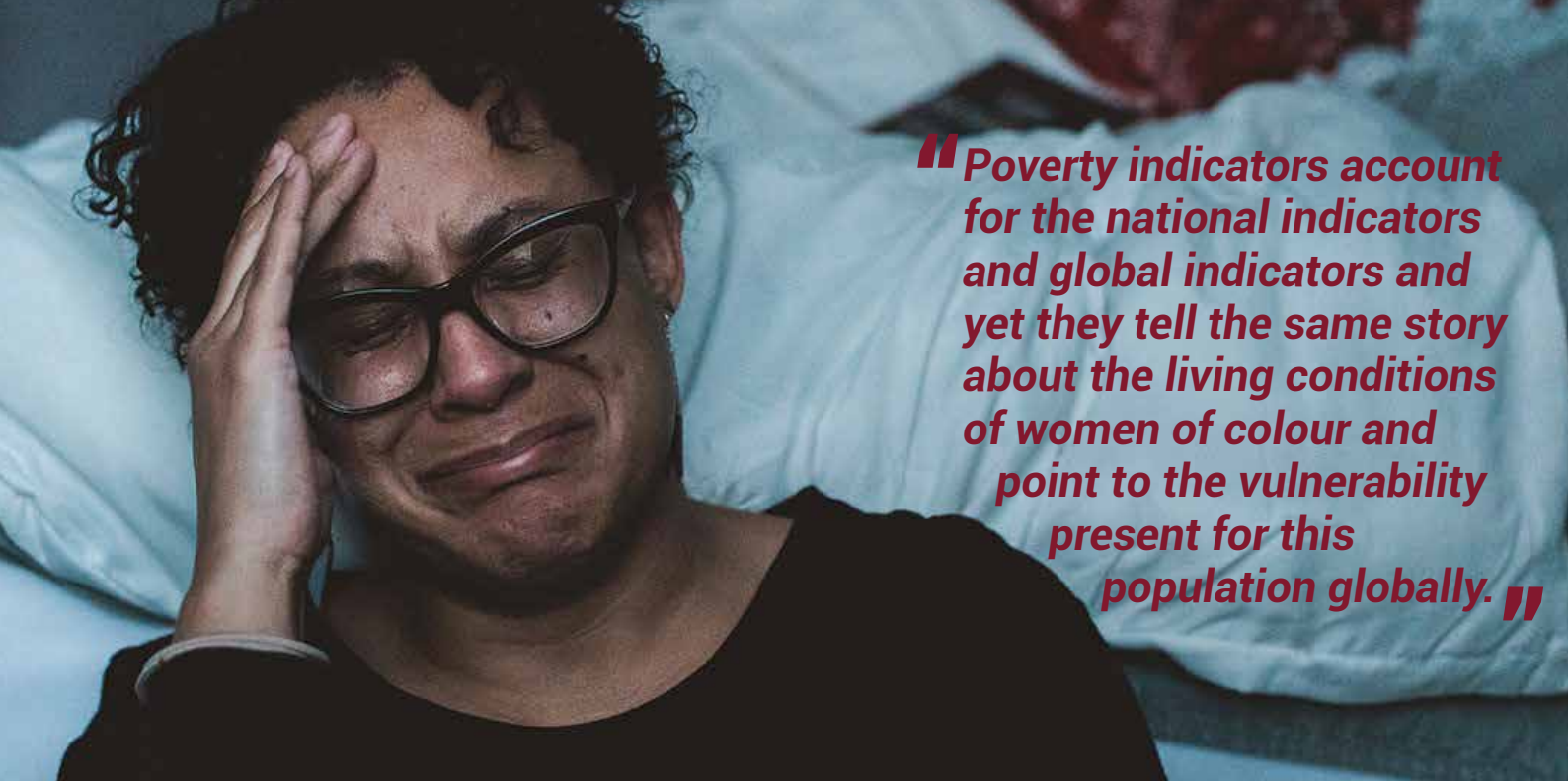
Women of Colour in Crisis

This article was inspired by a keynote speech I gave on the occasion of a World Council of Churches virtual Women's Pilgrim Team Visit to North America in March 2022. The speech opened the two-day programme which was attended by women from Canada, México, United States and the Caribbean and was entitled *Race, Gender and the Seeds of Oppression*, a title which highlighted the exploration of the intersectionalities of injustice present for African descendant, Latina and indigenous women in the region.

Women of colour are living within the margins at the intersection of race and gender. Racism and sexism are injustices which marginalise billions violating

their human rights and hindering the flourishing of their lives. Writing for the United Nations, *Roberto Cuéllar* notes: "In Latin America and the Caribbean, racism and discrimination have historical, economic, social and cultural features which have kept specific groups, including indigenous populations, Afro-descendants and women, in a state of marginalisation, exclusion and extreme poverty. In this sense, discrimination is a crime, not only because it conflicts with international law but also because it lays the ground for the violation of basic human rights."

Women continue to live on the margins and with them, their children. The marginalisation of women is global and historic. The list of challenges and concerns continues to grow with women being left behind, particularly where economics is concerned.



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This global reality holds, because while many point to the wealth present in the United States and to the indicators of development which would name the U.S. and Canada as “developed countries”. There are the truths of the lives of women of colour living in these countries which decry this narrative. Poverty indicators account for the national indicators and global indicators and yet they tell the same story about the living conditions of women of colour and point to the vulnerability present for this population globally.

The injustices facing women globally have long been documented and are currently exacerbated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. More so, women and children of colour continue to be among the most vulnerable populations with race being an additional demographic which compounds and inhibits the ability to achieve successful outcomes for their lives. Women of colour around the world are facing a myriad of injustices which continue to affect their quality of life and in many cases violate their human rights. These include discrimination, lack of access to fair wages, lack of access to health care, low wages, lack of safety in their homes and the absence of resources necessary to care for themselves, for their children, and for their families.



Women of colour in the Americas live in this state of marginalisation, exclusion and extreme poverty carrying concerns about their lives, their children and their families. They are concerned about the ways in which they are treated by institutions including the church, schools and governmental organisations. They are concerned about what it means to be single parents, partnered or married women providing for their families. Family includes their spouses, partners and children, and for some, caretaking for elderly relatives or parents.

There are over 388 million women and girls predicted to be living in extreme poverty in 2022 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Close to 23 million are identified in the Americas as living in extreme poverty based on global poverty indicators. More women than men live in poverty with 56 percent of those living in poverty being women. The number of women living in deep poverty is also larger than the number of men. Deep poverty is defined as a state in which an individual household's annual income falls below 50 percent of the poverty line. More than 18.5 million people in the United States live in deep poverty.

The layers of vulnerability are staggering and threatening. Across the biblical narratives, Jesus and the prophets teach the importance of caring for each other in community and more importantly, they name the priority of caring for the most vulnerable in the communities in which we live. This is not a suggestion. It is a part of the call to discipleship. And, as the world continues to confront the problems and opportunities created by the pandemic, the church too has to find its place in addressing the widening social and economic gaps being experienced by women.

Race is a pandemic living among us and has been for centuries. The presence of racism as an injustice experienced by women would take days to unpack. These years of health pandemic, deeper rifts and incidences of racism and all forms of discrimination globally are being exposed.

In her article for Brookings Institute on the topic of women and the workplace, *Adia Harvey Wingfield* wrote: "Race and racism create specific, unique challenges for women of colour that are too easily ignored with broad platitudes that seek to advance women's representation without questioning which women are most likely to benefit." While writing with reference to the US context, this is true for women of colour around the world, even in countries where they are not racialised minorities.

Also present is the trauma being experienced by women of colour. There is trauma in living as a woman of colour and I will speak from my own experience as a Black woman. There are hurts experienced and wounds too deep to name as a result of the exposure to racism, sexism and discrimination due to encounter resulting from the embodiment of race and gender. The micro aggressions and dehumanising treatment are traumatising. Fighting to ensure agency for ourselves and those around us is physically and emotionally exhausting. And with each encounter with people and systems that assail our dignity and threaten our welfare, there is the silence and the dismissive ways in which our experiences are filtered by those around us.



Women and COVID-19

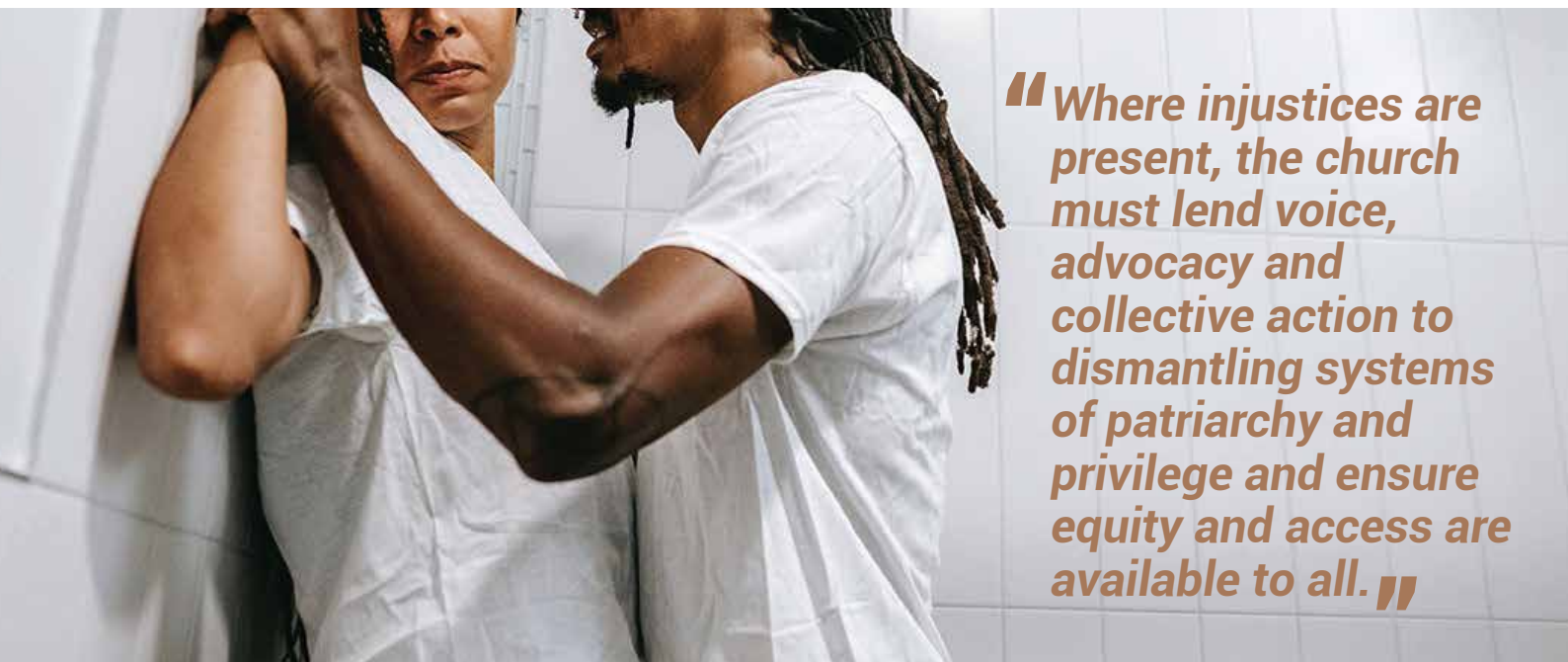
The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in over *6 million deaths globally*. Along with the escalating death toll, is the impact the related lockdowns and resulting global economic downturn is having on the most vulnerable communities. *Writing for Concern Worldwide, Olivia Giovetti identified seven reasons why COVID-19 is having a tougher impact on women and girls.*

1. Emergencies deepen inequalities that are already there
2. Women have lost more income than men due to COVID-19
3. Women are more likely to go hungry due to the pandemic
4. Most frontline health workers are female - but they don't always have a voice
5. In a pandemic, women and girls are most likely to take on the extra labour
6. Women are facing more mental and physical health challenges due to COVID-19
7. A higher male mortality rate also affects women
8. COVID-19 has led to increases in gender-based violence
9. A pandemic can end a girl's education
10. A health crisis threatens women's reproductive health

These items noted by Giovetti are noteworthy as the learnings and opportunities of COVID-19 continue to be gathered. Each of these ten items point to challenges for communities, and more especially for women of colour and communities of colour. COVID-19 amplified the fault lines already present for vulnerable communities. The items highlighted in the article are cause for concern as they further erode the opportunities for women and girls as the pandemic continues.

Education and economic progress are at stake for girls and women. Loss of income and the inability to access education have grave implications for the future of girls and impact the health, mortality and poverty of women and children. Equity has to remain a focus for women and girls beyond COVID-19 because as Giovetti notes, emergencies will continue to deepen the inequalities that exist between the genders. Loss of income affects food access and is at the root of the increasing number of women experiencing poverty. As service industries have lost jobs due to the pandemic, women have lost jobs and income, although many were already in low wage jobs.

The implications for women's mental and physical health will require long term attention as well. The stress of pandemic living and the adaptations to the loss of income, inability to procure food and necessary resources are wearing away at the health of women. In addition, the increase in gender-based violence is an additional stress as social isolation and sheltering in place required individuals to be in their homes more. All homes are not safe places for women and girls.



“Where injustices are present, the church must lend voice, advocacy and collective action to dismantling systems of patriarchy and privilege and ensure equity and access are available to all.”

Intimate partner violence was a problem prior to COVID-19 and has worsened in the past two years. The *UN reported that one in three women worldwide* has experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, emerging data and reports from those on the front lines, have shown that all types of violence against women and girls, particularly domestic violence, has intensified.

The experiences of women and girls during these two years of pandemic has mirrored the experiences of the past and they have worsened. More women are losing jobs. More women are in poverty. More women are going hungry. More women are experiencing physical and sexual abuse. These are women who are a part of the church. These are women who live in the communities we live in and the communities we serve. Women cannot advocate alone for the changes needed to guarantee safety and human rights for women and girls.

The church has a role to play to ensure that all of God's children are able to live as recipients of justice. This moment is inviting us to name the truths of the realities in which women of colour are living. I believe in doing so the church will be responsive and attending to these matters of justice. We have to start with the places where we live, calling the churches to accountability for our complicity in the marginalisation of women in our communities.

Where injustices are present, the church must lend voice, advocacy and collective action to dismantling systems of patriarchy and privilege and ensure equity and access are available to all. Where silence persists

in the presence of injustice, we render ourselves complicit in perpetuating behaviours which are harmful to the greater good of all and render the least of these that much more vulnerable.

The church must account for the ways in which discrimination and harm are being inflicted upon women and in doing so, must be prepared to act to bring awareness, healing, change and reconciliation to the world. If one among is not well we are not well. Or as Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "If one

member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26).

We hope for an end to the pandemic and as we wait, we must address these issues to bring justice and relief for women who are suffering. Women are suffering and more so, women of colour are bearing the brunt of the injustices facing women globally. This is a call for the church to provide leadership in ministry and mission to see a better world for all. ■

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together

Written by Karen Georgia A. Thompson

*we walk side by side
people of faith
boldly building new communities
connected by Spirit's fire
balancing bounty and need
we flourish
committed to the body of Christ
together*

*we are the gift
the presence of God revealed
reflected in the beauty of all we are
at one across the miles of our differences
we embrace unity in our diversity
the church as one
impacting the world around us
together*

*we like trees firmly planted
blossom and bloom
courageously changing lives
we nurture each others' spirits
needing each other
learning from each other
we are the Holy Spirit poured out
together*

*we breathe love
visioning the possibilities:
new churches
revitalised worship communities
developing new leaders
providing for our neighbours in crisis
we are evidence of the church in action
together*

*we are miracles
insightful and creative
Spirit-inspired, generosity-filled
children of love and life
giving from the abundance of who we are
giving to build the whole church
giving to strengthen the Church
together*

*we emanate the spirit of Pentecost
extending extravagant welcome
with arms outstretched we heal
touching each others' lives with grace
tearing down walls and building bridges
erasing borders and boundaries
we are the church
growing stronger
together*

26 January 2022
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KGAT
Olmsted Township, OH

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