This article, in its entirety, was written for the quarterly WSCF Journal published in 1981 following the 28th General Assembly of WSCF, ‘Come, let us rise up and build together’, held in San Francisco, USA. Mary E. Hunt’s piece was included in the section ‘Structures of injustice and the struggles for a democratic transformation of society’ and almost 30 years later it still remains relevant. It has been shortened and adapted to fit the format of this publication.

Feminism is a prelude to the new humanity which we of the World Student Christian Federation are trying to develop...The struggle for women’s rightful place belongs to every liberation movement. Hence, an analysis of the relationship between feminism and other liberation movements reveals the dynamic of oppression and suggests some common strategies for overcoming it.

Nehemiah 2; 17-18, from which the 1981 General Assembly theme was taken, provides us with a useful three part outline for reflection. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the mothers of children who have disappeared, serve as a graphic example of women’s struggle integrated fully into the liberation process.

The text of Nehemiah 2; 17-18 concerns the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem. The author inspected the ruins of the wall late one night and concluded that faithful Jews must rebuild it. Why? ‘That we may no longer suffer disgrace’ (Neh. 2; 17). Confident that his prayers and fasting had surfaced the will of God, Nehemiah exhorted his companions to ‘rise up and build together’ (Neh. 2; 18). Of course such serious work, and the decisions to undertake it, demand preparation and enthusiasm. So ‘they strengthened their hands for the good work’ (Neh. 2; 18) and set about restoring order.

Christians in disgrace
The dynamics of oppression, for which we will use the experience of women as a paradigm, work much the same way. As a Christian community supposedly dedicated to love and justice we are in disgrace. But some among us, like Nehemiah, have inspected the ruins and invited the community to rise up and build together...

We, the Christian community, are in disgrace because half of our members are systematically marginalised both in praxis and in theory. Women are excluded from decision-making in most corners of the Church and world... Against strong currents to the contrary we have begun a movement which invites communal up-rising and building. The movement is not for women only. Rather, it is based on an insight into the historical and contemporary oppression of women, and meant for any who have internalised the goals of love and justice...

The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires gathered initially four years ago with the idea that strength in numbers might pressure the military government to release their...
disappeared children. The Mothers have been branded as crazy; they have been accused of being subversives since they generate international support for their righteous demands.

...They are women from all classes and of all ages. Poor women from the campo walk arm in arm with wealthy matrons, grandmothers walk next to young women, all wearing the white handkerchiefs that symbolise their plight in silent Thursday afternoon vigils. They include a few men as well. One recently confided in me his pride at being part of the Mothers. And they have begun to denounce the many elements of an instrustructured constellation of oppression which grounds their personal trails.

The Mothers symbolise the new face of the women’s struggle. It has moved beyond the initial but necessary stage of self-reflection and self-definition which in fact made it possible for them as women to carry the symbolic burden of human rights in Argentina and perhaps in Latin America. This reflects not only the necessity of particular struggles like feminism, but also the urgency of an interstructured analysis which we as Christians can make part of our theologising...

**Dichotomies**

First, the disgrace in which the Church finds itself is rooted in a dualistic way of thinking and acting... Beginning with God and the world we discover an 'over againstness' in our habit of thinking such that God is always considered not separate from but better than the created order. The same is true for humans over animals, whites over blacks, rich over poor. Similarly, man and woman, when considered together, yield a stark separation of one from the other, the obvious valuing of maleness in the public sphere...

We suffer the results of this 'habit of thinking' as Thomists would say, when we are unable to imagine not only new content but whole new categories of thought... We can envision the male-female relation in feminist terms as co-members of the created order without regard to sex-role stereotypes.

These changes come very slowly and only at great cost since they are self-involving... meaning they require certain participation on the part of the speaker insofar as she/he is personally affected by the content. For example... to say that men are not better than but exist alongside of women is to invite a new perspective and self-understanding to emerge.

**Substance and accident**

Two of the results of this new perspective are first, an awareness of the irrationality of many of our former modes of prejudice (read: oppression), and second, an equally profound realisation of the psychological affects which oppression creates. From our experience as women we understand that gender is really accidental; that is, in classic terms it is not of the substance of a person whether she or he is female or male... Thus far sociology and psychology, much less than physical sciences, have been unable to prove innate differences

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1 I am indebted for the analysis of this dynamic of oppression to Rosemary Radford Ruether in her book *New Woman, New Earth* New York, Seabury Press, 1975.

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in women and men, aside from the obviously different roles in the reproductive process. This leads us to accept the theological maxim that 'male and female God created them' (of Genesis 1; 2-8) and to assume all further elaboration is cultural.

The only adequate explanation for the enormous emphasis put on accidental differences lies in an analysis of structures of oppression. While the question of their origin is beyond the scope of this essay, the important fact is their existence and strategies to overcome them. Using sexism once again, we can see that the behaviour we label in certain persons as 'sexist' (eg. the objectification of woman as body, the failure to consider qualified women for certain jobs, the relegation of childcare to the mother without concern for her livelihood, etc) is really 'normal' behaviour within a patriarchal society...

Inviting non-sexist behaviour is to encourage insanity, foment revolution or otherwise disturb the status quo. All this is relatively tolerable. We have hospitals full of crazy women. We have a well developed international movement of women. And we have seen families and communities pay the price with their lives. But what of the really insane, revolutionary, and disturbing possibility of attacking the structures themselves? It is hard to even imagine what a new structure would look like, though various feminist models have been proposed. But at least we know that rejecting the current structure is the first step.

This structural analysis sheds light on the dynamics of oppression and suggests that other of the so-called 'isms' may be approached in like manner. While no true equation can be drawn from feminism to classism to racism to heterosexism and beyond because of their varying histories and manifestations, we can see how the discrimination based on the accidental nature of each demands our firm rejection. Nor can we dream alternatives to each which adequately address the complexities of the problem. But as in the case of sexism, we know that rejecting the structures of classism, racism, heterosexism, etc. is a necessary and urgent first step.

**Beyond internalised structure**

The second insight that comes from feminist experience but can be generalised is an awareness of the deeply lodged psychological affects generated by oppression. As women within a variety of cultures we have been programmed for submission and triviality, dependence and distractibility. We have internalised the programme beyond the extent of the external pressures. Hence, we conclude that along with changes in structure must come the intensely personal and interpersonal struggles to move beyond internalised structures as well.

...This stage calls for personal conversion as a second but critical moment in the process. Conversion has a suspiciously theological ring to it, a reminder that our consideration of feminism and related liberation movements has a distinctly Christian character... But personal conversion as a companion to structural change means that no excuses are acceptable within the Christian family for a failure to enter into the liberation process...

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For example, men who are unable to accomplish their class-based projects because they live under repressive regimes are not exempt from participation in the liberation process when they live in personal relationships predicated on a sexist model. Likewise, white middle class women who lament the sexism from which they suffer cannot be immobilised by their pain and thus prevented from struggling against the contingencies of life which relegate the poor to perpetual marginality and early death...

The Mothers exhibit both of these dynamics in their struggle for justice. They have seized upon the accidentality of disappearance and focused upon it the spotlight of justice. They have done so as mothers, a generic term referring not only to a biological relationship; but drawing from the cultural power of that relationship, they have expanded it as an umbrella to include all who struggle for human rights. Likewise, they have taken the psychological pain of loss and transformed it into a shared grieving, the shared grieving into concrete, courageous, and ceaseless political action. The genius, yes, the grace of the Mothers is not to be overlooked.

The risk of leadership
Nehemiah in exhorting his companions to rise up and build, the second of the three stages of our analysis, took on the risk and burden as well as the creativity of leadership...

Naming structures of oppression and daring to defy them contains more than an element of risk. Women who have called sexism by its name and challenged it in structures and in individual actions need no definition of risk... But once again the insight has power, and once it has dawned we have no choice but to resist. For us resistance is another name for risk. From this experience of risk we can understand and stand in solidarity with the poor, with sexual minorities.... We can affirm and encourage their risks because we have taken our own, knowing that the different oppressions which we suffer are bound in common dynamics.

We can avoid self-righteous judgment (though we must name what we see) of those who cannot risk, because we know too that burden which befell Nehemiah. His burden to build the wall, like ours to tear down the walls of sexism, assures that life will not be easy. It is not easy to run counter to the prevailing currents. It is not pleasant to admit to oneself and to loved ones the extent to which one is oppressed, the extent to which one has internalised the oppression of others. But the burden of leadership for love and justice has as its ultimate consequences the cross and resurrection, and there is precedent for its efficacy...

Creative listening
Nehemiah relativised the risk and burden of leadership by issuing a clarion call to his friends. He answered the needs of the moment with a creativity which called on all people to join in his effort. So too we as women have been pushed to the limits of our creativity as we strategise for inclusive ways to overcome oppression. Leaders among us have designed programmes, rewritten laws and theories, and led campaigns of many types. But most of all we have listened for hours unto days to the experiences of our sisters and brothers. Creative strategic listening, hearing each other into action, to paraphrase the words of Nelle Morton,
has been the cornerstone of our creativity. Thus our leadership has the character of invitation rather than coercion...

As leaders of the human rights movement in Argentina, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, know well the risk, burden, and creativity. Every Thursday at 3:30 PM they stage a silent protest in front of the president’s office. In so doing they defy the ban on public gatherings laid down during the 'stage of siege'. They never know what the official reaction will be, but accept the risk as part of their commitment to the eventual triumph of truth. Some of them have been tear gassed, others taken away by police for arrest and questioning. Some Thursdays they are left in peace; other times they are heckled and intimidated. Perhaps the most telling element of their risk is the fact that it is incalculable.

They know too the burden of leadership in the continued suffering that comes not only from the disappearance of loved ones but also with the time and energy which go into thus far fruitless efforts. Yet curiously they maintain their position, and they do not judge those who cannot stand with them. However, as mentioned above, they name what they see, calling those who have power responsible. In fact, their creativity lies in the subtle persuasion of their witness, and not in any heavy-handed urgings. To those of us without disappeared relatives who have marched with them, there is inevitably a gracious ‘thank you for accompanying us.’ To those who are unable to take the risk, no matter how famous or powerful in international circles, there is only another invitation.

Apparently this strategy works because the Mothers, apart from being nominated for a Nobel Prize and apart from receiving other international honours, are gradually chipping away at the credibility of an allegedly democratic country. In the process they are carving out a new image of love and justice, namely, the feminist ideal of women and all the marginalised people directing the liberation process.

**Strengthening hands**

Nehemiah mentioned a third phase in this process, specifically, the need to gird up one’s resolve and prepare for the task ahead... It is an effort to 'strengthen their hands' for the work. Taken literally it means a physical preparation for a demanding job like masonry. But for our purposes it means strengthening the muscles, if you will, of love and justice. Because love and justice, like any goal, take practice, and practice demands patience and perseverance.

This preparation process is the stage at which we find ourselves in the struggle for liberation once we as people of faith have understood the dynamics of oppression and taken on the leadership. Although the two previous moments are difficult, this final aspect presents the

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2 Nelle Morton is professor emeriti of Drew University. Her famous ‘hearing each other into speech’ puts... active listening ahead of the speech itself. Cf. her article in *Women and the Word*, Berkeley, California, Center for Women and Religion, 1972, entitled 'The Rising Woman Consciousness in a Male Language Structure' and her 'Beloved Image' published in the *Challenge of Feminism to Theology*, edited in Italian by Mary E. Hunt and Rosino Gibellini, Brescia, Italy, Editrice Querinana, 1980.

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greatest challenge. Like Nehemiah we have to mobilise and coordinate the training for execution of liberation strategies. This is what I see to be the task of the WSCF in the 80s...

Since the dawn of the second wave of the women’s movement in the early 1960s ...women have carried on consciousness-raising, or what I have referred to above as creative strategic listening... This kind of listening and sharing, as well as the special valuing which the Latin American bishops called at Puebla a 'preferential option for the poor' has brought us to our current situation. I submit that the WSCF adopt this style and commitment.

A second suggestion which arises out of feminist experience is the attempt to develop an interstructured analysis of the oppression/liberation process. Women have tried to do this by moving beyond the particularity of sexism and searching out its common roots with classism, racism, heterosexism, etc. This too is possible for the WSCF...

**Mothers, bishops, and soldiers**

Once again the good women of the Plaza de Mayo prove that the seemingly theoretical is eminently possible. They provide on-going support for one another through their contacts with counselling services and pastoral people. Theirs is a preferential option for the most marginalised, those who in a sense are neither dead nor alive. As mentioned above, the Mothers are beginning to branch out in their analysis as they reflect on the economic and social conditions which have given birth to the disappearances. Third, they are clear in their analysis of the need for structural change, refusing to accept a list of the names of the disappeared which the government will probably provide in the near future to another group. Rather, the Mothers are bypassing 'cheap grace' and holding out for definitive word, the real goal, namely, their children, alive or more likely dead.

The Mothers have spent the last four years building up personal integrity and trust. Imagine what fortitude it takes to face a repressive government week after week, and how clear one must be about one’s goals. Imagine too the trust as they get up each Thursday morning wondering how many of their sisters will be in the Plaza. And now, being more and more certain that they will not be alone, imagine their satisfaction, and their hope...

The Argentine Catholic bishops met recently at a retreat centre to write and approve a yet to be published pastoral document, rumoured to include mention of human rights. A group of the Mothers went to the rural location to petition the bishops to use their position and prestige to pressure the government on the question of the disappeared, something the bishops, with few exceptions, have been reluctant to do. A local newspaper carried a picture taken at the centre while some of the bishops were out for a stroll. One sees the backs of the bishops in their cassocks, then several armed soldiers, and beyond the soldiers the Mothers being barred from speaking with their spiritual leaders.

I pray that the WSCF in its capacity as an ecumenical church body may draw strength from the struggles of the Mothers who represent all people in need of liberation. And I challenge the WSCF, and myself too as a friend of the group, to know where to locate ourselves in the Mothers-soldiers-bishops continuum, and to take our place now.

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