

The institutionalisation of Christian women's organisations: from docile recipients to agents of change

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Abstract

The institutionalisation of Christian women's organisations in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa played a pivotal role in constituting women as docile objects in theological discourse. However, Christian women's organisations later developed as sites for change. This conversion from docile recipients to agents of change was due to the influence of ecumenism. This article reflects on the following: the historical background to the institutionalisation of Christian women's organisations in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa; the involvement of the Women Mission Society in constituting women of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) into Christian women's organisations that were divided along the lines of race and gender; the discursive contributions of Christian women's organisations; and Christian women's organisations as sites of change.

Introduction

In this article I argue that the institutionalisation of Christian women's organisations in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) played a pivotal role in constituting women as docile objects in theological discourse. On 14 April 1994 in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and the Dutch Reformed Church of Africa (DRCA) united, and the URCSA came into being. The purpose of the article is twofold. Primarily it is an attempt to give a concise summary of some of the major developments of the Christian women's organisations (e.g. the Christian Women's Service, Women's Union, Christian Sisters' Organisation, Christian Women's Association, Christian Women's Ministry, Women's Prayer League, *Christelike Sustersbond*, *Manyano*) in the URCSA. Secondly, an effort is made to outline some of the factors that caused Christian women's organisations to become sites of change. The exposure of women to ecumenical discourse, amongst others, played a critical role in this process. For the purposes of this article, the collective concept "Christian women's organisations" is used to refer to the above associations in the URCSA. In this article I will therefore reflect on the following:

- The historical background to the institutionalisation of Christian women's organisations in the URCSA.
- The involvement of the Women's Mission Society of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in constituting women of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) and Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) into Christian women's organisations separated along racial and gender lines.
- The discursive contributions of Christian women's organisations.
- Christian women's organisations as sites of change.

The historical background to the institutionalisation of Christian women's organisations in the URCSA

The first women's prayer meeting in the DRC took place on 21 March 1890 through the initiative of Emma Murray, the wife of Andrew Murray of the DRC Wellington (Spijker 1906:23-25). This prayer meeting eventually led to the founding of the Vrouezendingbond (Women's Mission Society), with Ms AP Fergusson, Mrs Emma Murray and Mrs AH Spijker as founding members. The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) approved the foundation of Christian women's organisations as gendered mission endeavours in 1890. With the acceptance of the Women's Mission Society regulations on 21 March 1890, women in the Afrikaans Reformed tradition became part of gendered separated structures in the church. The activities of women as discursive objects from then on were determined by a myriad of regulations. With the ratification of the constitution of the Women's Mission Society, the boundaries in the Dutch Reformed Church were provided within which women, in future, would (or should) act or

behave as discursive objects. According to Foucault, discursive relations play an important role in forming subjects: “The discursive formation is not just the order of language or the representation; it is a structuring principle which governs beliefs and practices, words and things, in such a way as to produce a certain network of material relations” (Mcnay 1994:69). The discursive realm is not determined by the non-discursive realm (external events) (Mcnay 1994:70), and discursive relations have a specific effect on all other relations (Foucault 1972:64).

The Women’s Mission Society functioned as a place and/or space where women were formed as objects of discourse. In *Discipline and punish* (1977), Foucault illustrates the judicial system’s all-encompassing control on society. According to Foucault, the body is disciplined and controlled in prisons, schools, factories, the army etc (Strathern 2002:36). In *Discipline and punish*, Foucault (1977(a):136) presents, through the interrelation of disciplinary technology and normative science, the rise of the modern individual as an obedient/dependent and voiceless body. The purpose of disciplinary technology is to create obedient, dependent followers who can be transformed. The basic aim of disciplinary power is to produce people who will act dependently/obediently (Dreyfus 1982:134-135). From 1890, certain aspects of women’s spiritual life was organised through the passing of numerous regulations. Women in Christian women’s associations were isolated socially and spiritually from other women members and denied leadership positions in the church. They were allowed a degree of self-perpetuation, but under the supervision of the church council. Women were thereby excluded from the decision-making structures of the DRC, but enjoyed spiritual re-integration.

The Women Mission Society and the constituting of Christian women’s organisations in the DRC and DRCA

The Women’s Mission Society played a pivotal role in constituting Christian women’s organisations in the URCSA that were segregated on racial and gender lines. Their initial approach was to bring the gospel to indigenous people in neighbouring states (e.g. Malawi, Angola, Mozambique, etc. (*Acta NGSK* 1924:86 appendix V, (*Acta NGK* 1940:151)). They later initiated the development and regulation of racial, gendered separated structures in the former DRMC and DRCA and this, in turn, ultimately led to constituting of women of the DRMC and DRCA as docile recipients. At the beginning of the 20th century, life in South Africa for most Africans meant poverty, malnutrition, poor housing, poor education, unskilled labour, illiteracy, low wages etc. During 1960 approximately 56% of so-called coloured women were domestic workers and only 3.6% were professional, technical workers. By 1970, a decline from 56% to 43.8% in the domestic workers category and an increase to 6.2% in the professional or technical occupation category had occurred (Van der Merwe 1976:17-18). Among Africans the overwhelming majority at that time occupied either unskilled or semiskilled positions in the workplace. The Women’s Mission Society sent a delegation to the DRMC Synod in 1924 to address societal issues and, at the same time, encouraged the establishment of a Christian women’s organisation (*Acta NGSK* 1924:24)

By 1927, Mrs JWL Hofmeyr, of the national executive of the Women’s Mission Society realised that women of the DRMC were not organised in a similar auxiliary organisation as were the women of the DRC (Handleiding vir die Christelike Sustersbond 1978:27). In Cape Town on 11 February 1927, the Women’s Mission Society held a conference with particular emphasis on the housing and health conditions of coloured people (Kriel 1963:206). At the invitation of the Women’s Mission Society only the missionaries of the DRMC and their wives attended the conference (no coloured people attended the meeting). Mrs JWL Hofmeyr requested the DRMC Synod of 1928 to approve the establishment of Christian women’s organisations for the DRMC. Mrs McGregor, a member of the executive of the Women’s Mission Society, submitted a motion that was accepted as a decision of the DRMC Synod of 1928:

In view of the unfavourable conditions in which the majority of our coloured population lives, the meeting wishes to request the Right Honourable Administrator, cordially but seriously, to urgently consider possible improvements in housing conditions. This meeting also requests the Right Reverend Synod to request the Right Honourable Administrator to take steps that will give coloured girls the opportunity to be trained as nurses so that they can look after their own people. (Skema NGSK 1928:21 – my translation)

Mrs JWL Hofmeyr also recommended that the young daughters of the DRMC be trained as Christian social workers and that this training be carried out in liaison with the national executive of the Women’s Mission Society. This recommendation also became the decision of the DRMC Synod of

1928 (*Acta NGSK* 1928:21). The Women's Mission Society worked diligently to train women from all racial groups in separate training centres at Friedenheim (in Wellington, where white female missionaries and social workers received their training), Haring Street Institution (for coloured women) and the training of social workers at Stofberg Theological School (for black women) (Kriel 1963:136-137). The DRMC Synod of 1928 approved the training of nurses and social workers and agreed to the establishment of a Christian women's association (*Acta NGSK* 1928:22-24). Eventually, the Women's Mission Society played a pivotal role in the erection of schools, teacher training colleges, nurse training facilities, and training facilities for social workers in both the DRMC and the DRCA (Kriel 1963:137; *Acts NGSK* 1937:86; Cronje 1984:5).

The Synod also instructed the moderamen to decide on the name of the organisation, draft the constitution and determine the activities of the organisation (*Handleiding vir die Christelike Sustersbond* 1978:5). The moderamen of the DRMC, the Inland Missionary Commission, members of the Women's Mission Society national executive and a number of wives of the missionaries met on 5 February 1930 in the Huguenot Memorial Hall in Cape Town. Together, they established the *Christelike Sustersbond* (Christian Sisters Association) of the DRMC (Kriel: 1963:238, *Notule Christelike Sustersbond* 10 April 1930) and, at the DRMC Synod of 1932, a complete set of regulations was approved for the *Christelike Sustersbond*.

The Women's Mission Society was actively involved in establishing a maternity hospital in Mamelodi. In 1956, local authorities forced black residents to move from Pretoria to Vlakfontein (later called Mamelodi) after the passing of the Group Areas Act (Crafford 1982:541). The Presbytery of Lydenburg stated the following concerning female workers in the congregation:

The Presbytery of Lydenburg declares that they are in favour of training and use female workers in the congregation and work circles. The idea of the Presbytery is that the most able and enthusiastic women and daughters in the congregation must receive training, similar to that of women evangelists at Dingaan's Village and elsewhere. The women will receive no payment or fill any positions in church. They will merely be equipped workers. (*Acta NGKA Transvaal* 1964:12 – my translation)

The women of the DRMC and the DRCA were not involved in the deliberations on the possible establishment of a women's organisation and/or the erecting of racial segregated training facilities. Instead, decisions were made on their behalf. The theological presupposition was that decisions could be taken concerning women as objects of discourse without having to involve them in discursive dialogue.

The activities of the women in these two churches were governed by a myriad of regulations. Christian women's organisations worked under supervision of the church council, the Presbytery and the Synod of their respective churches; women's organisations had to report on their activities in the minor and major assemblies. The objective of the Christian women's organisation was to promote the moral, spiritual and social life of its members, to assist the sick, and to help the bereaved and the poor (*Notule Christelike Sustersbond* 10 April 1930, *Reglement vir die Christelike Sustersbond*). Amendments to the regulations were subjected to the approval and authorisation of the Synod (*Nodule Christelike Sustersbond* 1930:1-10). With the acceptance of the said regulations, the boundaries were provided within which women in the DRCA and the DRMC should, in future, act or behave as discursive objects. These regulations underscored, among other things, the privatisation of faith. The DRCA's Regional Synod of Southern Transvaal of 1968 decided that the activities of the *Manyano* would include, amongst others, visiting the sick and elderly in the congregation; comforting the afflicted and serving the poor; and raising funds for church activities (*Skema Streeksinode NGKA* 1968:167). Issues of social justice, poverty, apartheid, migrant labour, the pass laws – all this completely bypassed women in Christian women's organisations. Instead, women in the former DRMC and DRCA were mobilised in racial, gendered separated structures in which their faith was privatised and they became docile recipients of the prevailing discourse. The theme of special exclusion and cultural integration is especially emphasised in the way in which women were organised into gendered separated structures. They may have been spiritually integrated in such structures, but they were specifically excluded from the decision-making structures of the institutional church. The decision of the former DRMC and DRCA to accommodate women in racially gendered, separate structures meant that duties traditionally executed by deacons were now delegated to women congregants. Members of the Christian women's organisations took the lead in the wards of a local congregation without being part of the church council. Without offering any resistance, women accepted their task as unofficial deacons of local congregations. According to Bouwman (1928:114-116), this task (i.e. of the deacon) is divided into four parts: the collection of offerings, the distribution of offerings, visiting and comforting

the poor, and administration of the poor. It is the duty of deacons, first of all, to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress both within and beyond the community of faith. The task of the Christian women's organisations included the collection of funds and other contributions of charity, distribution of these funds to the poor and visiting those in distress. Women in both churches became preoccupied with the traditional work of women in the church (e.g. fundraising, food preparation, cleaning, and other service roles).

The discursive contributions of Christian women's organisations

During the 1920s, the Executive Committee of the Women's Mission Society distributed a myriad of books that played a pivotal role in constituting women of the DRMC and the DRCA as docile objects of discourse. Examples of this literature include: *Die Jongedogter en haar liefdeslewe*, *Die man as priester van die huis*, *Liefliker as pèrels* and *Skoner as diamante* (Skema NGK 1940:152). This literature shaped women in the DRMC and the DRCA as obedient/dependent objects. The most important characteristic of these literary contributions was their emphasis on patriarchal theology: the role and function of men and women in the church and society are separated in this material and treated as bipolar opposites. The use of polarities constituted women in the DRMC and DRCA as subservient objects. The binary oppositions that fundamentally belong to these discursive contributions include, among others, the following: male/female, head/assistant, strong/weak, superior/inferior, body/soul, man/woman, white/black, head/help, father/mother and public life/private life. This literature stresses the submissive role of women and led, ultimately, to the silence of women in the public sphere. In all the publications listed above, the subservient role of women is described as divinely ordained (Ferrieres 1967; Malan 1974). This body of literatures also accentuates the claim that the biological differences between the sexes necessitate the distinct roles and functions of women and men in both church and society. Men are presented in these books primarily as the head of the women, as missionaries, ministers, deacons and elders, whilst women, regardless of whether or not they were also missionaries, were always presented as wives, mothers, or daughters. Gender roles are understood to be ordained by God, and are regarded as being authorised by Scripture (Ferrieres 1967; Malan 1974). This literature presupposes a dichotomy between body and soul, matter and spirit, reason and passion, man and woman, thought and feeling. Bipolarity exists within the man-woman relationship, according to which women were regarded as weaker and not of age and as needing strong patriarchal leadership. The above mentioned discursive contributions can be regarded as instruments of social manipulation. In this literature, the emphasis is on the privatisation of the faith (Plaatjies 2003:217-223) and, of course, in this literature, there is no place for the suffering and pain, the hope and desperation, of black women. Women in the DRMC and the DRCA were the receivers of a "strange theology", which had nothing in common with their context. It did not empower women in either the DRCA or the DRMC to act as agents of social transformation. Through this literature, the values and norms of patriarchy were explicitly or tacitly communicated and internalised. Consequently – and unsurprisingly – gender stereotypes and the submissive role of women became deeply embedded in both the attitudes and practices of the DRMC and the DRCA. As a result, boundaries were erected, and this created a space in which women could act as discursive agents. Foucault shows that boundaries are created by language and power discourses (Solomon & Higgins 1996:302). According to Foucault, language is always located in discourse. "Discourse refers to an interrelated system of statements which cohere around common meaning and values ... [that] are a product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual's set of ideas" (Gavey 1989:464). Discourse refers, according to Gavey (1989:464), to a broader concept which, in turn, refers to a way of constituting meaning that is specific to a certain group, culture and historical period, but which changes continuously: "These discourses, which support and perpetuate existing power relations, tend to constitute the subjectivity of most people most of the time (in a given place and time)." Subjectivity, therefore, is constituted by language and discourse. The language used in the literature mentioned above is not a neutral medium of communication, but one that shaped the social reality of women in the DRMC and the DRCA at the time. Indeed, it constructed and organised their social reality and consequently formed these women into docile, submissive social identities.

Christian women's organisations as sites of change: the influence of ecumenism on the discourse

As I have shown above, in the DRMC and DRCA, Christian women's organisations eventually became the space where women were constituted as docile objects. From 1968 to 1982, discursive practices in the mission churches were influenced by Liberation Theology and/or Black Theology. During the same period, women of the DRMC and DRCA read literature which conditioned them to accept patriarchy as

a norm in both church and society. Liberation Theology did not bring about a paradigm shift as far as the issue of women was concerned. Instead, women are largely absent, invisible and silent in the theological contributions of the black Reformed church fathers. During the struggle for social justice, the woman's issue was sidelined: "The priority efforts to combat institutionalised racial discrimination during the struggle for liberation, though it is understandable, have unfortunately led to the sidelining of women's issues" (Ackerman 1995:122). The worldwide discourse during the 1970s on the ordination of women, and the representation of women in leadership structure forms did not, therefore, form part of the theological discourse of the former DRMC and DRCA (Plaatjies 2003:217-223). The rise of feminism in Europe in the 1970s bypassed women in the DRMC and DRCA. Today, on the one hand, the former DRMC and DRCA and the current URCSA rejects apartheid ideology but, on the other hand, the total theological anthropology responsible for the dominant discourse with regard to class, race and gender has never been deconstructed. Until the 1970s, no theological reflection on the *lobola* system, the plight of the poor, mixed marriages, the migrant labour system or ordination had been paid any attention by Christian women's organisations in the DRMC and DRCA.

After 1960, the DRMC became involved in numerous ecumenical organisations (e.g. 1960 membership of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC); 1968 membership of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (REC); 1970 observer status and in 1982 membership of the South African Council of Churches (SACC); 1991 membership of the World Council of Churches (WCC) (*Acta NGSK* 1990:1002-1003)). Until 1982 women were excluded from the decision-making structures of both the DRMC and the DRCA. This meant that only men represented their respective churches at ecumenical meetings in South Africa or abroad. From 1990 things changed for the better. Women in the DRCA and the DRMC became agents of social transformation. Women of the DRMC were delegated to the SACC general council meeting in Bellville in 1990 and to the SAARC meeting in Lesotho. Women were included in the delegations at the WARC in Debrecen 1997, the WARC in Accra 2004, the WCC meeting in Seoul 2006, and the WCRC 2010. During this period, Christian women's organisations embarked on a critique of gender relations in the church. Since the 1980s, the conferences of the Christian Women's Ministry became institutional spaces in which women made statements, declarations and proposals on social justice issues to the synods. These conferences addressed, among other things, the following topics: HIV/AIDS, gender equity, relationships between men and women, ecclesial and religious language, economic injustice, women in ministry and ordination, poverty, moral regeneration, women's participation in decision-making structures in the church and society, sexual harassment, domestic violence, prostitution, abortion, sexual orientation, homosexuality, church unification etc. The Christian Women's Ministry acknowledges men and women as bearers of the image of God and the co-responsibility of both in church and society (*Skema Streeksinode Kaapland VGKSA* 1998 16/4, *Skema VGKSA* 2001:16/9).

In 1990, the Christian women's organisation, by its own submission, was renamed the Christian Women's Ministry. During 1990 the chairperson of the Christian Women's Ministry, Mrs Edna Pick, attended the SAARC consultation on the ordination of women in Lesotho, after which she became an advocate for the ordination of women (before this, the *Christelike Sustersbond* had ignored this issue). At the DRMC Synod in 1990, Edna Pick highlighted the fact that little progress had been made on the issue. She challenged the DRMC on the absence of women in leadership positions in the church. The DRMC was not prepared for this critique: some ministers regarded the report of the Christian Women's Ministry as decisive and voiced strong objections to it (*Acta NGSK* 1990:745). The DRMC Synod 1990, however, accepted the concept of partnership *between men and women* of the WARC. The DRMC decided to test its total theology, praxis and all the other facets of the church, honestly and critically, in order to identify every possible form of sexism. The Synod pointed to the following guidelines: the dismantling of all partitions that still separated women and men in church communities; the need to listen afresh to the biblical evidence regarding the association of men and women; to recognise women's involvement in leadership positions and positions of authority on all levels; to describe God by using a variety of biblical images drawing on both male and female metaphors; to give men and women equal access to job opportunities, and to ensure that women receive equal salaries and benefits (*Acta NGSK* 1990:950). The URCSA also accepted a policy on partnership *between men and women* on the inception synod. In this regard they learn from WARC's Department of Partnership of Women and Men when it defines its task as: "to listen anew to the biblical witness about community (*koinonia*) and partnership, to eradicate sexism in the theology and practice and promote gender awareness, to recognize the gifts and talents of women for ministry and leadership, and to work for the renewal and transformation of church and society as we strive to break down the barriers which still divide women and men." (*Acta NGSK* 1994:215).

Mrs Angela Buys, the chairperson of the Christian Women's Ministry, attended the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches during 1994 and the General Assembly of the World

Council of Churches in Porto Allegra, Brazil, during 2006 (*NGSK Skema* 1994: A20/1; *Acta General Synod URCSA* 2005:50). Her report played a huge role in the appeal of the DRMC Synod 1994 to congregations to participate in the *Decade in solidarity of women and men* and the decision to take women along in the re-structuring process of the Christian Women's Ministry (*Acta NGSK* 1994:215, *NGSK Skema* 1994: A15/3; *Skema Streeksinode Kaapland VGKSA* 1994:28). She emphasised, amongst others, that the breaking of chains of gender injustices within the church requires viable partnerships of women and men in all leadership structures. She urged the church to move away from hierarchy to shared leadership between men and women. Christian Women's Ministry emphasised under her leadership the partnership between men and women and the engendering of gendered institutions in the church. Under Angela Buys's leadership, the Christian Women's Ministry embarked on a study of the *Belhar Confession*. At the Christian Women's Ministry Conference of 2005 in Wellington, delegates discussed, among other things, how the practice of apartheid began in the exclusionary practices of the church's worship in South Africa, and how injustice emerged from distorted understandings of the sacraments and the unity of the church. They also discussed the decision of the twenty-first Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 1982 in Ottawa, Canada, to declare the practice of apartheid to be a situation of *status confessionis* and Apartheid as such a heresy (Minutes Christian Women's Ministry 2005:1-20).

During the DRMC Synod of 1994, a fully fledged report on the restructuring of the ministries of the DRMC was tabled. The Synod of 1994 decided to restructure the different ministerial structures in the church and proposed a shift from the voluntary association model to a ministry model (*NGSK Skema* 1994: A15/23). The Christian Women's Ministry opposed the proposed restructuring strongly. Before the synod they sent out a questionnaire to their members in order to test their opinion on the proposed structural changes: the majority of their members indicated that they had concerns with the proposed restructuring. In opposition to the proposal, they specifically called for the inclusion of women within the structures of the church and an end to discriminatory rules and practices that kept women on the margins of the church's decision-making structures. The Synod worked on the assumption that exclusive groups of women/men/youth had a hampering effect on the notion of partnership between men and women. The Synod indicated that one of the problems of Christian Women's Ministry lay in the fact that they had a fully fledged autonomous management structure from congregational level to synod level with its own system of governance (*NGSK Skema* 1994:A18/27). In fact, it seemed as if Christian Women's Ministry had developed as a women's church operating alongside the church structures of the DRMC. They developed a structure which bore a resemblance to the church governance structure of the DRMC. For example: the congregational committee, Presbyterian committee and the Synodical executive committee of Christian Women's Ministry resembled the minor and major assemblies of the DRMC (Regulation 23 in the *Kerkorde NGSK 1990*: point 8, Regulation 23 21 in the *Kerkorde Streeksinode Kaapland VGKSA 1994*: points 6.4.3). Christian Women's Ministry voiced their concerns about their exclusion from the discourse on the proposed restructuring of the church. Without the support of the Christian Women's Ministry, attempts to replace the association model with a ministry model were doomed to be unsuccessful (*Acta NGSK* 1990:880).

The Christian Women's Ministry claimed that, regardless of the Synod's acceptance of the partnership between men and women, and regardless of the *Ecumenical decade in solidarity with women*, these decisions were never implemented at a practical-theological level (*Skema Streeksinode Kaapland VGKSA* 1998:16/4). Furthermore, the Christian Women's Ministry also proposed direct representation of the Christian Women's Ministry in all the decision-making structures of the church.

The Christian Women's Ministry recommended that the church ordinance stipulations and articles be altered in order to effect change in the composition of minor and major assemblies. During the 1990s, the Christian Women's Ministry recommended amendments to the church order which would have had significant implications on the Presbyterian church governance system. The Christian Women's Ministry recommended, among other things, that women have at least 40% representation on all decision making structures of the church i.e. Church Councils, Presbyteries, Regional Synods, General Synod and all Commissions. (*Skema Streeksinode Kaapland VGKSA* 1998:8/7). The Synod accepted the first part of the draft resolution, namely that 40% of the church council members should be women, but rejected the recommendation that half of this 40% be members of the Christian Women's Ministry. The Synod also rejected the recommendation that representatives of the Christian Women's Ministry be delegated with voting powers to the Presbytery, the Synodical Commission and the Regional Synod (*Skema Streeksinode Kaapland* 1998:8/10 & 16/21). The Synod worked on the basis that the proposal was in divergence with the polity of the Reformed Church (*Skema NGSK Sinode* 1994:A15/25). The Synod also reaffirmed, within the context of its commitment to the basic principles of Presbyterian polity, that the URCSA shall be governed by the church council and not by

representatives of the different ministries of the church. The Christian Women's Ministry, on the other hand, worked on the assumption that the church ordinance stipulations and articles should be amended in order to effect change in the hierarchical system of church governance. The Christian Women's Ministry consequently challenged the Presbyterian Church governance system of the URCSA.

Dineo Seloana, the chairperson of the Christian Women's Ministry, attended the national conference of the SACC (which took place on 2-4 August 2004 in Johannesburg), the All Africa Conference of Churches General Assembly in Yaoundé, Cameroon (2004), and the WARC General Council meeting in Accra (also in 2004). These ecumenical gatherings took place at a time when the world was gripped by terror, war and increasing disparity between the rich and the poor. Dineo Seloana emphasised ecumenical themes from her position of leader of the Christian Women's Ministry. Taking the Accra declaration into account, the Christian Women's Ministry resolved, at their general conference during 2005 in Durban, to engage themselves in extensive Bible studies that focused on economic justice and globalisation. Seloana also challenged the URCSA to involve women proportionally in the decision-making structures of the church, taking into account the decision of the WCC in 1968 in Uppsala (regarding the proportional representation of women in the church's decision-making structures). At the General Synod 2005 of the URCSA, a gender policy was accepted which was very much inspired by the contributions of the Christian Women's Ministry. During 2004 the Executive Committee of the URCSA, in liaison with the Christian Women's Ministry, organised a gender justice workshop in order to develop a gender policy for the URCSA. The workshop took place on the 12th and 13th August in Mamelodi. At the consultation Dineo Seloana highlighted, among other things, the following issues: women's struggle for equal rights and recognition in the church, women's struggle to be allowed into the ordained ministry and all levels of leadership, and discrimination and abuse against women in both the church and society. She identified the unequal power relations between men and women as they exist in the family, society and the church. In order to address gender imbalances within its governance structures, Seloana (2005:3) emphasised that the URCSA should accept the principle of direct representation of the Christian Women's Ministry at congregation-, presbytery- and regional synod level. Persons of all racial ethnic groups, different ages, and both sexes, should be guaranteed full participation and access to representation in the decision-making structures of the URCSA (Seleona 2005:4). Accordingly, the Christian Women's Ministry raised the question about the extent to which the URCSA was self-critical of its accommodation to social and cultural patterns that excluded women, and whether it was prepared to actively challenge those patterns as an aspect of its commitment to gender transformation.

Conclusion

During the past century, Christian women organisations employed a number of mechanisms for establishing and exercising its power over women. Women were generally absent, invisible and/or silent in the discursive contributions in the URCSA during the first part of the 20th century. A shift from their being docile recipients to becoming agents of change occurred during the later part of the 20th century. The Women's Mission Society and Christian women's organisations functioned as spaces where women were formed as docile objects in the church. The Christian women organisations used regulations to control, dominate or to impose conformity on their members. They also regulated what was included or excluded for consideration or debated. During the latter part of the 20th century, however, women's exposure to ecumenical discourse enabled them to claim their freedom and to resist domination.

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