



Time, April Harrison

The Disparities Experienced by Black Women and Girls Task Force was formed by the 223rd General Assembly (2018) to investigate and offer concrete proposals on how the denomination might deepen our investment toward the liberation of Black women and girls. This article is an offering from the youngest member of the task force, Samantha Paige Davis. She offers historical and anecdotal context of the experiences of Black women and girls in our society and the PC(USA); provides rationale for the task force's recommendations and calls us to be provoked into action for the sake of justice and liberation for all God's people.

An Ethic of Love

Understanding and Addressing Disparities Experienced by Black Women and Girls

BY SAMANTHA PAIGE DAVIS

I grew up at Grace Memorial Presbyterian church, a historically Black church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was in community with Black Presbyterians such as Rev. Dr. Johnnie Monroe and Rev. Carmen Cox Harwell, Rev. and Mrs. George (who were pioneers in education justice), the Lavelles (who were committed to economic and housing justice), activists such as Thelma Lovette, Mary Jane Page, and Rev. Shanea Leonard, who—in addition to their advocacy—created space for radical love, authenticity and joy.

I begin this article by naming these individuals because in order to understand the work of the Black Women and Girls Task Force, it is important to first understand that the task force is not solely about recommendations. This is not about the formality of the General Assembly or about naming all the ways the Church has been complicit in violently upholding patriarchy and racism under the guise of Christianity. I am Black, woman and Presbyterian. For me and the Black, femme,¹ queer people of the taskforce, our work is about our humanity and the liberation of our people. The acknowledgement of history, the formalities and the recommendations are necessary, but this work for us is personal and intrinsically tied to who we are and what we as individuals and a collective of Black cis and trans girls, women and gender non-conforming people² deserve.

Our Multiple Social Identities

Broad efforts to address racial inequities and gender inequities consistently undermine the lived experiences of Black women and girls. Between 2014 and 2016, state-sanctioned violence—including the slaughter of Black people at the hands of police—sparked protests and calls for reform across the country, from the White House to the General Assembly. The 222nd General Assembly (2016) adopted

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recommendations that focused on improving life outcomes for Black men and boys. While this is urgent, commendable and necessary, it is just as urgent for Black women, girls and trans people.

In 1955, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. voted to begin ordaining women as ministers. It wasn't until nearly 20 years later that Katie Geneva Cannon was ordained as the first Black woman minister in the denomination. The delay speaks to the way our lack of intentionality around race and other social identities centers the experience of white women and names it gender equity. Professor and lawyer Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw says, "If we aren't intersectional, some of us, the most vulnerable, will fall through the cracks."³ Intersectionality is an understanding that there is no racial justice without gender justice and no gender justice without racial justice. When we neglect to intentionally explore the unique ways that we experience oppression at the intersection of our multiple identities, we fail.

The formation of this task force speaks to the ever-evolving and deepening analysis of our society and the church. It represents the persistent leadership of Black women in the Presbyterian church and the evolving commitment to intersectionality held by Presbyterian bodies.

In our year-long exploration of the unique ways that Black women and girls experience interpersonal and institutional violence, we met with experts across the country who are leading this work.

The task force identified five areas where the PC(USA) could implement impactful policies and practices in solidarity with Black women and girls—

- (1) adultification of Black girls,
- (2) gender equality for Black women in ministry and addressing toxic theology,
- (3) reproductive justice/human rights,
- (4) LGBTQIA+ equality, and
- (5) the elimination of cash bail practices.

Our recommendations are grounded in the lived experience of Black women and girls across the country, quantitative and qualitative analysis and the biblical understanding that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, . . . [God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind will see, to let the oppressed go free" (Lk. 4:18).

Adultification of Black Girls

I was baptized in the Presbyterian church when I was 12 years old. That time was full of joyous memories. It was also the time I remember most vividly having my body, my speech and my actions policed in ways that—even then—felt odd. I felt seen and affirmed in only a few places, but one of those was the church. At Grace Church, I witnessed a Black woman preach and lead ministry unapologetically. The senior pastor there convinced me that my leadership was needed and that my assertiveness and inquisitive nature were valuable gifts.

While I'll always be grateful for that sanctuary, I've learned that many Black girls do not have a sanctuary at all. Church, schools and homes can all be culprits in the erasure of Black girlhood. Regardless of plausible good intent, efforts to ensure we are "ladies"—including biblical interpretations that suggest girls are inferior or must submit to men—hinder girls from showing up as their full, authentic selves; silence their speech; scold them for their autonomy; and deny them agency over their own bodies. This is a perpetuation of patriarchy and fuels both interpersonal and institutional violence.

Given anti-Black racism, the bodies and behavior of Black girls are hypersexualized, adultified and criminalized. A survey by Georgetown Law Center on Poverty found that Black girls ages 5–14 were perceived as more adult and less innocent of the same childhood activities as white girls.⁴ This year, a 9-year-old Black girl in crisis was handcuffed and then pepper sprayed by police *after* they yelled at her "You are acting like a child!" She answered, "I am a child!"⁵

This adultification equates to less support for Black girls who are survivors of gender-based violence and more punitive approaches to their normal adolescent behavior. It means Black girls experience more trauma and less love, care and dignity in their day-to-day encounters with the world. Gendered and racialized violence impacts Black girls in many aspects of life.

The task force found a pattern of spiritual and emotional violence Black women theologians often endure—being excluded, policed, silenced and questioned about their qualifications in their divine call.

- One in four Black girls will be sexually abused before the age of 18.⁶
- In middle and high school, Black girls represent 16 percent of the population, yet they represent 44 percent of those arrested.⁷
- The suicide rate for Black children, ages 5–12, is nearly two times higher than for white children of similar ages.⁸
- Black girls are over two times more likely to be adjudicated for “status offenses”—like truancy, curfew violations, or running away—than both white girls and Black boys.⁹

To break these patterns, the task force is calling on the General Assembly to (among other things) direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) to create educational resources for congregations to learn and interrupt practices and policies that perpetuate the adultification of black girls and criminalization of adolescent behavior.

Discrimination and Toxic Theology

In the U.S. and many other countries, toxic theology has been the tool of oppression to maintain power for heterosexual, cisgender white males and to oppress all others. Out of context and/or inaccurate applications of scripture were used to justify the violence perpetuated by white Christians, to justify the enslavement and exploitation of Black people and the rape and emotional abuse of Black

women. The task force report reminds us that during the time of chattel enslavement, “Black women were not recognized as human theologically, socially or legally.”¹⁰ Many leaders in the Presbyterian Church profited from and staunchly defended enslavement.¹¹ Moreover, many Christians, including Presbyterians, did not offer quick or universal support of the abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights movement or more recent calls for justice. Toxic theology remains deeply entrenched in our society, so was felt deeply throughout the task force’s exploration of disparities experienced by Black women and girls both within and outside the PC(USA).

While I am not a minister, the Black women, queer and gender-non confirming theologians I admire and love have all experienced the wrath of toxic theology, raring its head in the form of misogynoir (anti-black racist misogyny that black femmes experience). I have witnessed and heard stories of microaggressions from their professors in seminary, congregation members and the white leadership in mid-councils. I’ve related to them as a Black woman leader in my own profession, of their leadership and divinity being called into question by non-Black folk, Black folk, even Black women who have internalized their own oppression. The task force found a pattern of spiritual and emotional violence Black women theologians often endure—being excluded, policed, silenced and questioned about their qualifications in their divine call.

Without safe, affirming spaces that address the power dynamics

that exist at all levels of the church, we will not know the full truth of Black women theologians’ experiences and cannot expect them to share their stories without support or security. To this end, the task force is calling on the General Assembly to direct Research Services in the PC(USA) to conduct a survey of Black Presbyterian women, including Black clergywomen, about their experiences within the denomination and hold regional focus groups with black clergywomen conducted by trusted, notable, black women facilitators, consulting with gender and racial justice staff in the Presbyterian Mission Agency.

Reproductive Justice and Human Rights

Reproductive justice is the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy; have children or not have children; and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities. (See pages 14–17 for more information.)

To share a personal point of view on this subject, I am a Black woman who works with Black children who are denied safety and access to basic necessities. I am a Black woman who has relied on birth control since I was 15 years old to help with debilitating periods. I am a Black woman who has had an abortion and who was prayed over by a Black woman minister who assured me that my body was my own and that God loves me. I am a Black woman who almost lost my best friend while she was in labor because of a racist healthcare system

that too often kills Black mothers and Black babies.

I am also a Black woman who consistently battles the shame and guilt brought on by toxic theology that says what a woman can do or can't do with her own body, that limits the definition of womanhood solely to organs or the ability to bear children, and that spews rhetoric around personal responsibility without calling out the injustices of this world. These beliefs show up in our country's policies and practices that restrict access to reproductive healthcare, that shame teen mothers, that enact medical violence on Black femme, intersex, and trans bodies.

Reproductive injustice is seen in our current society as well.

- Nationally, Black women are three to four times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women.¹²
- Black preschoolers are 4 times more likely to be suspended than their white peers.¹³
- Black Americans are three times more likely than white Americans to be killed by police.¹⁴

To this end, the task force directs the PMA (among other recommendations) to provide grants for a core group of Presbyterians from various regions in the church to receive sex education and inclusive reproductive justice training in order to share information with their local congregations. Additionally, the PC(USA) should support legislation that actively protects Black queer

and trans women and girls, and protest legislation that harms this community.

LGBTQIA+ Equality

While the task force did not have a specific mandate to center the voices of queer and trans people, Black queer and trans people are the most impacted by institutional and interpersonal violence. Erasing them from our report or the larger narrative of Black women and girls' experiences would be an act of violence in of itself.

The task force report lifts up the following statistics—

- LGBTQIA+ youth contemplate suicide at three times the rate of heterosexual youth and harassment or abuse increases the likelihood of self-harm.
- Black women were 91 percent of transgender and gender non-conforming people killed by violence.
- Nearly half (47 percent) of black transgendered people have been incarcerated, a rate that is 10–15 percentage points higher than the rate for all Black folk.
- Fifteen percent of trans people live on less than \$10,000/year—a rate of poverty that is four times the national average.¹⁵

While the PC(USA) position is to welcome all gender identities into church membership, many of our queer and trans siblings do not find the church to be a welcoming or safe place for them. Some congregations

project toxic masculine theology that casts judgment on their decisions to marry, parent or take on leadership roles within the church. This toxic masculine theology refers to a belief, in the simplest terms, that these life experiences are meant solely for the pleasure and/or under the authority of cis-hetero men. Outside of the Church, the broad society continues to create barriers and perpetuates an “othering” narrative that restricts queer and trans people from fully participating civically, economically and socially.

To that end, the task force directs PMA to offer support and grants for congregations working with Black queer and trans organizations and engaging in programming that directly addresses the needs of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Elimination of Cash Bail

To understand the need to eliminate cash bail, it is important to make the connection between the prison industrial complex and the sin of chattel slavery. The majority of American history—246 years—includes the enslavement of Black people. Black people survived enslavement to be exploited for our labor once again as indentured servants, domestic workers, and industrial manufacturing laborers. We were stripped from resources we need to thrive by segregation and discriminatory practices. Our behaviors and culture were criminalized, our communities policed and Black people became and/or remained enslaved in the prison system. While most of the narrative

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around mass incarceration centers Black men and boys, women often face the brunt of the cash bail system. Women are both the fastest growing prison population¹⁶ and are the mothers, daughters and/or partners left to care for their communities and find bail for their loved ones who have been detained.

- Black women are imprisoned at twice the rate of white women; Black girls are incarcerated three times as much as white girls.¹⁷
- Of the nearly 110,000 women in local jails, about 60 percent are awaiting trial and haven't been convicted. About 80 percent are mothers.¹⁸
- Approximately 86 percent of women imprisoned have

experienced sexual violence in their lifetimes.¹⁹

The tragic story of Sandra Bland shows that cash bail can be fatal. After a "routine" traffic stop led to her arrest, but she didn't have the \$500 for bail, Sandra was jailed. She was found dead in her cell three days later.

To this end, the task force honors the work PC(USA) is doing to eliminate cash bail and recommends supporting legislation to end cash bail.

In closing, this work has been emotionally taxing, yet it is a labor of love for the members of this task force. We do this in honor of all the Black women, girls, queer and gender nonconforming people who have come before us and will come after us. The task force is spending the

next few months holding teach-ins on each of the five areas of the report. We invite you to join us. During the first one in February, Rev. Shanea Lenoard proclaimed, "I love the church and therefore I must criticize her."²⁰ I echo their sentiments, this is a task force of Black people that love the church. My hope is that the stories, the statistics and the resolve provoke you into action and stretch you into a space of productive discomfort where you can grow in deeper love with God and all of God's people. 🍓

Samantha Paige Davis is a Black Feminist, policy wonk and storyteller, committed to investing in Black youth, building Black power, and cultivating Black joy for the sake of liberation.

Notes

1. Femme indicates any female identifying person, regardless of genitals.
2. Cis describes a person whose gender identity matches the biological sex they were assigned at birth. Trans describes a person whose gender identity differs from the biological sex they were assigned at birth. Gender nonconforming describes a person whose gender expression does not align with their society's expectations around gender.
3. "Reach Everyone on the Planet . . ." Kimberlé Crenshaw and Intersectionality, edited by Gunda Werner Institut in the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Center for Intersectional Justice (Berlin, 2019); www.boell.de/sites/default/files/crenshaw_-_reach_everyone_on_the_planet_en.pdf.
4. Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake and Thalia González. *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*. Washington: Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017.
5. Deepti Hajela and Lindsay Whitehurst, "I am a child! Pepper spray reflects policing of Black kids," February 12, 2021; <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/child-police-pepper-spray-shows-kids-exempt-75846409>
6. Jameta Nicole Barlow, "Black women, the forgotten survivors of sexual assault," American Psychological Association, February 2020; www.apa.org/pi/about/newsletter/2020/02/black-women-sexual-assault.
7. Sally Afia Nuamah, "Black girls more likely to be arrested than the police who murdered Breonna Taylor," October 4, 2020; <https://thegrio.com/2020/10/24/black-girls-arrested-police-breonna-taylor>.
8. "Age-Related Racial Disparity in Suicide Rates Among U.S. Youth," National Institute of Mental Health, May 21, 2018; www.nimh.nih.gov/news/science-news/2018/age-related-racial-disparity-in-suicide-rates-among-us-youth.shtml.
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12. "Racial and Ethnic Disparities Continue in Pregnancy-Related Deaths," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 5, 2019; www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2019/p0905-racial-ethnic-disparities-pregnancy-deaths.html.
13. "Black Preschoolers Far More Likely to Be Suspended," *Code Switch*, NPR, March 21, 2014; www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/03/21/292456211/black-preschoolers-far-more-likely-to-be-suspended.
14. "Black people more than three times as likely as white people to be killed during a police encounter," Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, June 24, 2020; www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/blacks-whites-police-deaths-disparity.
15. "Disparities Experienced by Black Women and Girls Task Force Report."
16. "Incarceration of Women Is Growing Twice as Fast as that of Men," Equal Justice Initiative, May 11, 2018; <https://eji.org/news/female-incarceration-growing-twice-as-fast-as-male-incarceration>.
17. Ibid.
18. Sarah Willets, "Black Mama's Bail Out and the Abolition of Cash Bail," May 8, 2020; <https://msmagazine.com/2020/05/08/held-for-ransom-dismantling-the-unjust-cash-bail-system>.
19. "Overlooked: Women and Jails in an Era of Reform," www.vera.org/publications/overlooked-women-and-jails-report#:~:text=Significant%20mental%20illness%20affects%20an,sexual%20violence%20in%20their%20lifetime.
20. Paraphrasing of James Baldwin's famous quote, "I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."

May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

—Psalm 126:5–6



Our world is struggling to emerge from a global health pandemic. Our country is struggling to address how racism ends lives and fractures communities. Our eyes collectively brim with tears as we bear witness to this devastation. We lament with and for all who grapple with illness, death, violence, hunger, job loss, isolation and suffering.

Presbyterian Women, our tears of lament—for our communities and churches; ministries and programs; neighbors, friends and family; even for our own bodies and circumstances—give expression to our deepest hurts, fears and frustrations. As a community of deep faith, however, our tears sow seeds of love, kindness and possibility.

Even in the deepest valley, we cannot despair. We are confident in God's presence, the strength of our PW community and our call to serve.

Turn Tears into Joyful Community

Say the name of a PW sister or mentor, friend or mother, leader or neighbor who is on your heart today. Give thanks to God for her witness and for the special place she holds in your heart.

Prayerfully consider a financial gift to build the Susan Jackson Dowd Endowment, established to nurture connections among women of faith worldwide, especially young women. Seeded by a generous gift in 2019, the endowment ensures opportunity for PW today and tomorrow.

To contribute to the Susan Jackson Dowd Endowment, visit www.presbyterianwomen.org/give and select Susan Jackson Dowd Endowment.

You may also send a check to Presbyterian Women, Inc., PO Box 643652, Pittsburgh, PA 15264-3652; indicate "Susan Jackson Dowd endowment" in the notes line of the check (or on a separate page).

Share your laments or share about your sisters who inspire your walk! Send your story to carissa.herold@pcusa.org.

