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## THE ISSUE OF WOMEN'S DEPRIVATION IN LIGHT OF THE SOCIAL COMMITMENT OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

**Abstract.** The issue of gender justice increasingly shifts on to the core commitments of the World Council of Churches (WCC). Matters related to gender appear in a number of statements, commissions, programs and documents held within various bodies of the WCC. The survey of these commitments seems to be difficult to make, due to their diversity reflecting geographical, ethnic, economic and cultural background. This is partly affected by a nature of the WCC as it is the global platform where ideas from whole world are discovered, interpreted and passed on to the world. Article deals with the issue of gender justice and its place in the social discourse of the World Council of Churches.

**Key words:** World Council of Churches, social commitment, justice, deprivation, gender.

In opinion of many, ecumenism desperately needs of new ways since it faces difficulties deeply enrooted in various theological fields. For now, this way appears to be founded both in a common work within the social areas and in the spiritual ecumenism. After theologians from the WCC, cooperation of Christian churches in the eradication of poverty, violence and inequality is intrinsically included in the call to be faithful disciples of Christ. Ecumenism, as a place of inter-Christian relations must provide opportunities to bear common witness to the world. The striving for gender justice is in the heart of these commitments. Even if some demands related to the gender issues seem to be moot from the theological perspective, what was and what is still revealed by various ecumenical agencies on the issue of women's social, economic and cultural deprivation really needs common

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voice of Christianity. In this perspective, feminism and the gender theory may be grasped as a provider of concepts and language which will make striving for the justice in intersocial and intergender relations more efficient and more possible.

### 1. THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AS A "COMMON CHANNEL OF UTTERANCE"

Ecumenical movement must be considered as genetically and substantially connected to the inter-Christian cooperation on the widely spread social level. This is deeply enrooted in the history of ecumenism as it symbolically begun with the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910. The Conference in the Scottish capital was an absolutely unique meeting where mission's leaders had been invited to share their experiences in the missionary work. While gathering they focused on the mission strategy.<sup>1</sup> As the fruit of the conference had been produced nine Reports related to the topic of the particular commissions. Eighth of them has been entitled "Cooperation and Promotion of the Unity". In the introduction to the Chapter V of this Report, "Federation and Union," its authors stressed that "...the supreme object of the missionary enterprise is to plant in non-Christian countries the Church of Jesus Christ. With the growth of this Church there arise problems of a new kind. It is natural that the converts of each Mission should be instructed in the doctrines, and organized according to the polity, of the Church to which that Mission owes its origin. As separate Christian communities, however, thus begin to grow up in a non-Christian country, the question presents itself whether these communities should be allowed to remain isolated and distinct, or whether it is not the aim of all missionary work to plant in each non-Christian nation one undivided Church of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

Ecumenical movement was therefore born on the practical background of the missionary experiences. It has grown up within the frames of the socially focused commitments of the ecumenical leaders. Here is to mention many Church and mission's officers as Natan Söderblom (1866-1931), Lutheran

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph D. Winter, *The Unfolding Drama of the Christian Movement* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2011), 299.

<sup>2</sup> World Missionary Conference 1910. Report of Commission VIII: *Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity* (Edinburgh, London: Oliphant, Anderson, Ferrier, 1910), 83.

bishop of Uppsala and the recipient of the Noble Peace Prize, who should be declared to be one of the principal figures of ecumenism as the founder of the *Life and Work* movement (*Practical Christianity Movement*). Together with the *Faith and Order* movement and with the contributions of the Christian youth organizations they have laid the solid foundations on which the institution of the World Council of Churches was built.

In his ecumenical work envisaged Söderblom the features and nature of the future ecumenical body. Already in 1919 he has displayed its intentions to establish the Ecumenical Council of Churches. It would have been an institution of not a legal nature but the "common channel of utterance." "From the Thron of St Peter as well as from other parts of the Christian world, words have again and again gone forth which find echo in every truly Christian heart, and are spoken on its behalf. But a common platform is lacking. What I propose is an ecumenical council representing the whole of Christendom."<sup>3</sup>

The envision of Söderblom had been accomplished to the certain extent when the World Council of Churches was founded in 1948. From the very beginning it would have been a global platform of meeting of Christianity, the "channel of utterance," forecasted by the Swedish ecumenist. How it would have been declared to work, was well expressed by the Visser't Hooft, the founding general secretary of the WCC: "These Churches are not coming to Amsterdam with the thought of being absorbed in one single, unified World Church. They are not setting up a centralized organ to speak and act in their name. They are not planning to create an ecclesiastical parallel to the United Nations. What they intend to do is something much simpler, but no less important. They desire to enter into a continuing relationship to each other, so as to collaborate regularly in matters of common concern, to render a common witness whenever possible and to deal with the question of Christian unity in a Christian manner. They will meet in grateful recognition of the unity which already exists and will engage in frank discussion of their differences."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Willem Adolph Visser't Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches* (Geneve: World Council of Churches, 1982), 102.

<sup>4</sup> <http://webjournals.ac.edu.au/authors/w-a-visser-t-hooft> [12.09.2012].

## 2. THE WAYS OF ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

According to the opinions of many ecumenists, today's ecumenical settings seem to be far from hopes echoed the turn of the Second Vatican Council. The doctrinal dialogues carried on in the interchurch context have stumbled over theological differences on the one hand and ecclesiological orders on the other. Even though on the inter-Christian space appeared such ecumenical stars as the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, the so-called Lima Document of 1982 entitled *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, the Porvoo Common Statement or the Leuenberg Agreement, the ecumenical movement must still again prove its importance. On the contrary of what was dreamt and envisaged in the post-conciliar epoch, achievements of the doctrinal and theological wrestling present rather poorly. The interconfessional theological differences related to the issues of Eucharist and ministry lost somewhat of their harshness, but they still are acknowledged as the stumbling blocks for the more successful agreements. Moreover, a process of the interchurch relationships introduces its representatives into the ambiguity of the simultaneous convergences and divergences which has been clearly demonstrated e.g. in the works of *Anglo-Roman Catholic International Commission* (ARCIC). The official dialogue Anglicans and Roman Catholics conducted within the ARCIC may easily be grasped through the lenses of this ambiguity: on the one hand the common theological background of the most important questions concerning the meaning and importance of priesthood was really close to being achieved, on the other the women ordination within the Anglican Community for an indefinite time put the common recognizing of the ministry aside.

The case of ARCIC as well as rather modest results of the other official dialogues conducted by the Churches on the interconfessional level, inspired in the ecumenical circles many findings on the future of ecumenism. Lots of them put clearly the need for looking for the other ways to keep interchurch dialogues in the pace. Leaders of the particular churches have called into question the extent to which the shared beliefs may be the subject of the dialogue. According to many, the only solution is to enhance the cooperation of the churches in the area of social issues as well as to arouse the spiritual ecumenism. Moreover, both social and spiritual ecumenism must be combined. It seems it is the way used and the vision fostered by the World Council of Churches.

### 3. THE SOCIAL COMMITMENT OF THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

The WCC labels itself as a “worldwide fellowship of churches seeking unity, a common witness and Christian service” and further explains that “all activities of the WCC are rooted in a threefold vision for transformation of the church and world. This vision is to live out Christian unity more fully, live as churches being neighbors to all while addressing threats to the human community and encouraging churches to take greater care of creation through protection of the earth and its people”. This self-describing is well exhibited through the set of program areas on which the Council focuses attention. These are: 1. The WCC and the Ecumenical Movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2. Unity, Mission, Evangelism and Spirituality, 3. Public Witness: Addressing Power, Affirming Peace, 4. Justice, Diakonia and Responsibility for Creation, 5. Education and Ecumenical Formation, 6. Inter-Religious Dialogue and Cooperation. Such set of issues of engagements may easily express what is the way of the ecumenical mission according to the WCC. The points third and fourth show particularly clearly how important for the ecumenical work is to share the responsibility for the whole humanity and creation. Furthermore, it is obvious, that the social commitment and spiritual ecumenism must be acknowledged as a background of ecumenism in the face of the widely inclusive theological formula used by the Council, according to which a particular church is recognized as a Christian one. This formula states that the WCC is “a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures, and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

Social commitment of the WCC may therefore be confirmed as its core value and inherent part of its being. Since the 1960s the Council has focused on the matters connected to the economical gap between the countries labeling by the expression of the reach North and poor South, and further, on the ecological questions, in particular on the climate changes, on the violence, especially against the children and women, on the issue of health, especially connected to the pandemic of AIDS in Africa (*the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS initiative in Africa*, EHAIA), on the human rights, on the wealth and poverty, on the impact of economic globalization. To the matters of crucial importance belong undoubtedly the widely comprehended gender justice which is an overlapping place of many initiatives of the WCC, encompassing the issues of health, human rights, poverty and violence.

#### 4. GENDER IDEOLOGY AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

It appears impossible to conduct an ecumenical analyze of various trends of the gender ideology, the queer theory as well as various concepts of feminist theologies in a short article. In order to be credible one must consider a number of factors related to the culture, religion and philosophy. Yet, undoubtedly, the starting point of what we think about the gender ideology is that of its thorough impact on this concept on human being, society and culture in which we have lived until now and which was founded to a large extent on the Christian background.

The cultural dimension of the place of woman in a society and woman's striving for emancipation is clearly discerned by the feminist theology developed in some Protestant circles, e.g. by the Lutherans both in Germany and United States.<sup>5</sup> Feminist theologians stress the need of transformations of some theological categories that appear to be responsible for the woman's deprivation in society—here as the example is given the notion of sacrifice—and further, the change of theological language, which strengthens the gender inequality and quite new exegesis of the Scriptures in order to get rid of the biblical reason of such women's place within the social order which is grasped as an inflicted women's objectification. According to the feminist theologians, the Bible must be submitted to reading in a new way which includes a gender sensitivity. They propose as the first step to decanonize and recanonize (*Dekanonisierung und Rekanonisierung*) many factors of Christian tradition related to the patriarchal culture.<sup>6</sup>

Culture is therefore declared to be the main field of battle for the gender justice. Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book "The Second Sex" has trenchantly concluded that, "It is, in point of fact, a difficult matter for man to realize the extreme importance of social discriminations which seem outwardly insignificant but which produce in woman moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to spring from her original nature."<sup>7</sup> Julia Kristeva, one of the most prominent feminist, suggests that "dominant scientific understandings of maternity, from the cult of the Virgin in Chri-

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<sup>5</sup> Ulrike Eichler, Ilse Müllner (ed.), *Sexuelle Gewalt gegen Mädchen und Frauen als Thema der feministischen Theologie* (Gütersloh: C. Kaiser, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> *Gewalt gegen Frauen als Thema der Kirche 2000*. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland – Texte, Heft 71 (Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2002), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, "The Second Sex: Introduction," in *Feminist Theory Reader. Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. Carole R. McCann, Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Taylor and Francis 2013), 45.

stian theology to media images of women in popular culture, have objectified women.”<sup>8</sup> Kristeva, and the other important representative of the feminist sociology, Nancy Chodorov (with her most influential book “The Reproduction of Mothering”), have focused on maternity and its impact on the place of woman in the culture. Judith Butler, author of “Gender Trouble”, the volume of high importance for feminism, with her contribution to the feminist philosophy, made the next step moving the feminism onto more radical division between the notions of sex and gender. According to her, in a western anthropology, one assumes that there are some interconnections between the sex, which is socially undetermined and the gender, which is somehow grown up in the cultural processes. Yet Butler asks, if “do we seek to limit the social construction of gender to either the male or the female body? Might such construction not cross or tangle? Can one not identify across the geography, particularly the in-between space, of gender. And who, ultimately, decides the mix of heterosexual and homosexual versions of the self in the construction of the sexed body?”<sup>9</sup>

Butler’s works introduce into the queer theory with its revolutionary depicted relations between the self-identifications and social belongings. Yet its lines have diverged to a large extent from Christian anthropology. The question therefore is, how the feminist sociological and anthropological concepts affect various trends within Christianity and what is their impact on the programmes and attitudes of the World Council of Churches.

The first assumption to be made of this kind is that we must expect large divergences within the ecumenical movement itself. This is partly affected by the nature of ecumenism which put different theologies and different theological sensitivities under the common denominator, of what example may be the inclusive formula of the WCC and partly by the different trends related to the feminism in its Christian dimension. The second one must be referred to the question of what does in the ecumenical perspective the striving for woman's emancipation mean? What does the gender justice for the authors of the programmes of the WCC mean?

The answer for these questions traces back to the assumptions of the social commitments of Christian churches as the next stage in the future of ecumenism. Ecumenical way of striving for more and more fully unity must today be based on the cooperation on the social level for Christianity still faces the theological and ecclesiological divergences. Some of them are

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<sup>8</sup> Anthony Elliott, *Concepts of the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 120-121.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

clearly seen in the “feminist” dimension. For example, even though in a number of Reformed, Lutheran and Anglican Churches and communities the issue of women’s ordination is an inherent part of the notion of gender justice, its more categorical striving for could put the ecumenical dialogue on the brink. In the same way, the reinterpretation of many theological categories, including a transformation of language of the patriarchal culture, seems to be impossible to inflict. Unlike the theological Gordian knot, Christians face a number of opportunities to be witnesses in their Christianity by working for the justice on various levels of the society and culture. Here is also the place for the gender justice.

The scrutiny of the contribution of the World Council of Churches into the gender issue appears to be very complicated. The common platform of various Churches, communities, panconfessional organizations has been flooded with the documents, programmes, visions and initiatives of different range and direction. Yet the “gender” commitment of the WCC may be traced back to the work of *the Commission of Churches on Diakonia and Development* (CCDD),<sup>10</sup> which was established in 1970. Together with *the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs* and the *Commission of the Churches on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* it belongs to the consultative bodies of the WCC and develops various programmes connected to the social transformations. One of its most conspicuous initiative was the proclamation of *an Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women* (1988-1998) launched on Easter Sunday 1988. The Decade aimed on the one hand to end both emotional and physical abuse of women and their economic, political and culture deprivation and powerlessness, on the other it encouraged Christian churches to include the full contribution of women into the church life. *The Decade of Solidarity with Women* was completed with the next initiative, namely the *Decade to Overcome Violence* (1998-2008) of which large part has focused on the issues related to the sexual and domestic violence against women.

The works of both Decades have sparked a number of actions concerning the gender justice. Their commitment has referred mainly following ones: pandemic of HIV, violence against women in all forms, increasing economic inequality and its effect on women, global economic crisis, xenophobia and racist attitudes. All these areas of activities construct an enormous platform of various activities of different groups and organizations held within the WCC.

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<sup>10</sup> Karol Karski, “Rola Światowej Rady Kościołów w ruchu ekumenicznym,” *Roczniki Teologii Ekumenicznej* 2(57) (2010), 64.

Statement of the WCC which has been prepared for *the Fourth World Conference on Women* in Beijing in 1995 admitted that “It has been painful for us to acknowledge that institutions which should stand in solidarity with women, including governments and the churches, have not often responded with resolute action. We encounter, through our contact with women at the periphery of all our societies, the struggle for dignity and livelihood that women engage in every day. We believe that empowerment is not possible as long as women live in contexts of violence, often exacerbated by cultural and religious tradition.”<sup>11</sup> Reception of the commitments included in this statement may be easily recognized in the activities of the WCC in the last two decades. The way WCC thinks and works is well highlighted through two examples, strictly connected to the other areas of commitments: pandemic of HIV and global economic inequality.

## 5. GROUND ISSUES OF THE STRIVING FOR GENDER JUSTICE

### *Pandemy of HIV as a background of- and challenge for gender justice*

The AIDS commitment is theologically declared to be one of the most crucial challenges facing the Churches, as it is well expressed by the sentence of “If one of our members has HIV then we are all affected. If one part of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer.”<sup>12</sup> According to *the World Health Organization*, one in five organizations engaged in the initiatives related to AIDS pandemic is Christian faith-based. Involvement of Christian churches creates a worldwide network of supporting people, in particular these on the margins. This gives the institutions of Christian provenience an advantage in the field of HIV<sup>13</sup> for they provide both the infrastructure connected to the health care as well as to promoting of healthy behaviors and for they bring on values and life style and create identity which affects an attitude of a responsibility. On the other hand Christian churches have been often accused of being responsible for the increase of morbidity due to their moral judgments

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/international-affairs/ecumenical-united-nations-office> [12.09.2013].

<sup>12</sup> Sue Parry, *Beacons of Hope. HIV Competent Churches. A Framework for Action* (Geneve: World Council of Churches, 2008), 24.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

on the contraceptive measures and for the cases of stigmatizations those infected and those at risk.

Moral judgments share also Christians within the World Council of Churches. Yet, a number of initiatives have set up a common platform of working. Among many programmes launched within the Council, the most important and influential has been EHAIA, mentioned above, (*the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa*), founded in 2001 during *the Global Consultation on Ecumenical Response to challenge of HIV/AIDS in Africa*, in Nairobi. Consultations were preceded by the discussions and meetings held across Africa and with participation of various institutions from Europe and North America.<sup>14</sup> As the result of the Nairobi conference the *Plan of Action* was released, which outlines a wide range of fields of involvement. Gender has been one of the thirteen of commitments, yet various aspects related to the women have appeared also in the other places.

In the AIDS discourse members of WCC commissions and working groups stress a subordinate position of woman in society. Sue Perry, in her outstanding study, has recognized various risk factors of pandemy, of which most important ones have declared to be gender imbalances and norms as well as gender-based violence. The first one consists in the gender scripting which may render woman “more vulnerably to HIV infection.”<sup>15</sup> Larger vulnerability of woman is also affected by the gender-based violence which refers “to a range of harmful customs and behaviours against girls and women, including intimate partner violence, domestic violence, assaults against women, child sexual abuse and rape.”<sup>16</sup> Both risk factors have been acknowledged by the WCC in a number of its documents and standpoints and became the main place of commitments for many ecumenical actions. In light of what is recognized by the Council, gender discourse must be a provider of language, hermeneutics, notions and ideas that could be used in the cultural striving for transformation of cultural norms and behaviour patterns in order to decrease vulnerability to HIV as well as to develop proper intergender relations of equality, responsibility and partnership.

#### *Economic paradigm and its impact on anthropology*

It seems to be impossible to make in a short article a relevant survey of all initiatives and documents on the issue of global economy and its impact

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

on the economic gap across countries which have been prepared by the WCC. Yet, similarly to the previous issue, authors of the WCC programmes stress an importance of striving for the cultural and political transformation. According to them there is a need for a new economic framework that eradicates poverty, unemployment, hunger and homelessness. The way they propose is to reject an economic paradigm built on a structural greed (*greed is good*) and an unlimited growth and to shift on to the models based on a redistributive growth. This is possible only when economy will be found on the Christian perspective of anthropology, striving for community and not to selfishness. In the very important statement from São Paulo (2012), on “the International Financial Transformation for the Economy of Life”, economists, church leaders, activists, politicians and theologians participating in the works of the WCC display that they “reject the economic abstraction of *Homo Oeconomicus*, which constructs the human person as being essentially insatiable and selfish, and affirm that the Christian perception of the human person is embedded in community.”<sup>17</sup>

An outline of ecumenical agreements and statement on economy of last ten years provided by the WCC indicates how much attention is paid to the position of women in the globalized economies. It is discerned that inequality and lack of socio-economic security of contemporary economical settings affect women in a particular way. Women, for they are in many cultures submissive and subordinated to men, are more vulnerable to various crisis effects. According to the São Paulo Statement, gender justice is included in the envisaged new social architecture as its inherent part. This idea is displayed in the whole of social and economic discourse of the WCC. It was well expressed in one of the paragraphs of the statement “Tackling the roots of poverty”: “A wealth of studies reveals that the lack of access by the poor (especially poor women) to assets necessary to achieve socio-economic security as well as higher productivity and income is a ‘fundamental constraint’ on poverty eradication.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/finance-speculation-debt/sao-paulo-statement-international-financial-transformation-for-the-economy-of-life?set\\_language=en](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/finance-speculation-debt/sao-paulo-statement-international-financial-transformation-for-the-economy-of-life?set_language=en) [12.09.2013]

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/poverty-wealth-and-ecology/statement-on-the-millennium-development-goals> [12.09.2013]

To rebuild cultural and behaviour patterns in order to make social life more just and thus more Christian is the standing challenge facing Christian churches. An inherent and one of the most important parts of this call is the striving for gender justice. Even though feminism as well as gender theory diverge in some points from the Christian anthropology, in some points they converge together in the fight for human dignity. Women's deprivation has been mostly enrooted in the culture and culture must be the main field of battle for women's emancipation. Theological research have to display what is of culture and what is of faith, in order the culture would not be identified with the God's covenant as well as it would not justify inequality, poverty and violence referred to gender.

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ZAGADNIENIE DYSKRYMINACJI KOBIET  
W ŚWIETLE ZAANGAŻOWANIA SPOŁECZNEGO  
ŚWIATOWEJ RADY KOŚCIOŁÓW

Streszczenie

Kwestia sprawiedliwości gender przesuwana wciąż do centrum społecznego zaangażowania Światowej Rady Kościołów (ŚRK). Zagadnienia związane z upośledzeniem kobiet pojawiają się w szeregu stanowisk, komisji, programów i dokumentów, które opracowywane są w obrębie różnych komórek i instytucji ŚRK. Przegląd różnych dróg zaangażowania odzwierciedla geograficzną, kulturową, ekonomiczną i etniczną różnorodność Światowej Rady Kościołów. Jest to po części spowodowane samą jej naturą, ŚRK jest bowiem globalną platformą, na której idee i pojęcia z całego świata są odkrywane, interpretowane i prezentowane światu. Artykuł omawia zagadnienie upośledzenia kobiet i jego miejsce w społecznym dyskursie Światowej Rady Kościołów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Światowa Rada Kościołów, zaangażowanie społeczne, sprawiedliwość, upośledzenie, gender.