



CRITERION INSTITUTE

Roadmap for Christian Denominations to Use
Finance to Reduce Gender-based Violence

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A Call to Action

Over the last few decades, there have been significant innovations in faith-based investing, aligning the management of church and congregational finances, as well as those of related organizations, to faith-based principles. While no exact figure exists, faith-based investors hold [trillions of dollars in global assets](#) under management. The extension of faith-based principles to finance has often aligned with other social movements, allowing faith-based investors to support ways in which finance is deployed to create and advance social and environmental changes. In addition to the existing practices of screening out investments that contradict a values-informed portfolio, there are opportunities to proactively direct investments in ways that incentivize just practices and correct underlying power disparities. However, investment strategies by faith-based organizations have not yet extended to the issue of gender-based violence.

This roadmap provides a starting point for local congregations, church finance leaders, social ministries and educational institutions, political advocates, and future planners and thought leaders across Christian denominations to use their respective power and ensure that their investment decisions and involvement in financial systems incorporate a gender-based violence lens, which will help to stem the far-reaching harm experienced by women and gender-diverse persons disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence in their communities, the nation, and the world.

Sparking the Financial Imagination of Christian Denominations

For nearly two decades, Criterion Institute has been engaged with faith-based investors, supporting their leadership role in the fields of impact investing, gender lens investing, community wealth building, and other areas of using finance as a tool for social change. Faith-based investors tend to be guided by a narrative of personal morality. We see an opportunity to transform this narrative to encompass a more nuanced understanding of how shifting systems of finance can address systemic inequities, and especially gender-based violence as a ubiquitous social reality with tremendous impacts that reverberate not only across society, but also impact churches and people of faith.

In 2017, Criterion Institute launched a campaign to use systems of finance and investments to reduce gender-based violence. This campaign represents an opportunity to combat the invisibility and stigma around gender-based violence by leveraging the powerful system of finance. Such violence has received increasing attention from asset holders in recent years due to media attention and the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements. It is now more widely known that, globally, one in three women ([30%](#)) experience either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Faith-based organizations and individuals have the power to make a difference by using their financial resources for good. The first step in this process is inviting them to see themselves as changemakers and claim their power.

Over the last half century, several church bodies have taken explicit stands against gender-based violence in its various forms and committed themselves to work toward the reduction of such violence within their churches and in the wider society. Among these are the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, the American Baptist Churches USA, the Anglican Communion, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). These statements typically call on the denomination to address the issue of gender-based violence within the church through policy and practices that increase safety and accountability and in the wider society through education and advocacy. We have not seen finance or social impact investing specifically identified in these documents as a way to approach the pervasive problem of gender-based violence. This roadmap is intended to make that additional tool

more accessible to those churches, which have already committed themselves to work for change in relation to gender-based violence and exercise their economic leverage.

To make the roadmap as concrete and specific as possible, we determined to focus on one denomination as an example for which specific strategies could be developed, with those directions serving to suggest possibilities for other church bodies. The ELCA emerged as a particularly useful example for at least three reasons. First was familiarity. Criterion has a history of working with the ELCA and has cultivated relationships with key leaders in the church, including Dr. Mary Streufert, Director for Justice for Women, in the office of the Presiding Bishop. The second reason was structure. The ELCA is a major US denomination with a membership of 3.5 million, formed through a merger in 1988, and distinctive for its clear connective structure and strong ties with a host of related institutions. The third and primary reason for focusing on the ELCA as an example was the excellence, currency, and status of its social statements regarding issues of gender and gender-based violence.

The [ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ](#) began the journey to address sexism, discrimination, and gender-based violence in 2012, resulting in the 2019 adoption by the Churchwide Assembly of the [Social Statement on Faith, Sexism, and Justice](#) and its accompanying implementing resolutions. An important component of the process was the 2015 [Social Message on Gender-based Violence](#) with its precedent-setting acknowledgement of the ELCA's role in the explicit or tacit consent to the ongoing tragedy that is gender-based violence. Particularly relevant for this roadmap is the [accompanying documentation](#) to the social message, which establishes a clear definition of the problem and the specific actions, policies, and practices that church stakeholders at all levels can take within the organization, as well as within wider society to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.

Specifically, the social statement:

- Rejects the misuse of Scripture and promotes a theological reflection on gender justice, patriarchy, and sexism
- Calls for the implementation of internal policies and practices that promote equitable pay, benefits, and leadership, especially for women of color
- Calls for the eradication of gender-based violence within the church and broader society by addressing its systemic aspects and the institution of accountability mechanisms for perpetrators
- Advocates for laws, policies, and practices that respect diverse bodies and uphold the human and civil rights of women, girls, and non-binary people
- Promotes the transformation of gender norms and stereotypes related to the social and economic roles assigned to genders

What is missing in the guidance provided to congregations and social ministries, to leaders and synods, and to the churchwide organization is a specific strategy on how church finances can be enlisted to support the reduction of gender-based violence. This roadmap aims to provide such a strategy as a starting point to spark the financial imagination of the ELCA, as well as other Christian denominations.

“It’s important to emphasize that hope is only a beginning; it’s not a substitute for action, only a basis for it.” - Rebecca Solnit

Financial systems and faith-based communities share a common ground: they base their present actions on their vision of the future. In financial systems, this often involves collecting data and developing risk calculations to predict financial or investment outcomes. In Christian churches, this future orientation requires a personal commitment to live out faith and care for one’s neighbors and community in accordance with a vision of God’s coming realm of justice and peace.

In the face of the challenges around us that may shed darkness on our collective future, faith gives us hope in God’s promised future. The positive and transformative shifts that have occurred over our lifetimes also bring light and give us much cause for hope. Our imagination and hope enable us to see what is possible and commit us to strive to achieve it. This takes effort and the practice of trying and doing. Hope is not passive; it inspires us to act to fulfill our dreams and visions and gives us power to actively create the change we want to see.

With prophetic hope as our investment thesis and a beacon on our journey to end gender-based violence, we pose the question:

What would the church invest in today if it believed that a future without gender-based violence was possible? How will the Church contribute to this future?

To put this in more concrete terms, what would the ELCA invest in if its denominational stance on gender-based violence was put fully into action? How would the denomination and all of its related organizations translate this commitment into discrete strategies, leveraging the power of different stakeholders within the Church’s systems of finance to create a new future free from violence?

To provide an illustrative example of how this thesis on prophetic hope may be enacted, we mapped out a vision of what a world and a church without gender-based violence could look like (see graphic below). Eradicating the social phenomenon of gender-based violence is the ultimate objective of the ELCA’s social message, and this is situated within the larger context of growing efforts by other Christian denominations to end gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence. Working backwards from each point within this vision is an opportunity to spark financial imagination, brainstorming ideas about strategies as well as identifying ourselves as critical stakeholders in a position to effect change.

For example, global evidence underscores the serious [impacts](#) of violence for survivors, which include acute injuries, chronic pain, gynecological problems, depression, psychological trauma, substance abuse, and lower self-esteem. Within faith communities, violence often contributes to the disengagement of those impacted—including survivors, perpetrators, and witnesses. Such violence can also lead to survivors’ internalization of social stigma and negative effects on a congregation or the entire denomination’s reputation. In 2003, the CDC estimated that the [cost](#) of intimate partner rape, physical assault, and stalking in the United States was a staggering \$5.8 billion per year, including direct medical and mental health care services and lost productivity from paid work. Therefore, in a world and church without gender-based violence, we infer that there would be a reduction of associated healthcare, legal, and productivity costs, as well as increased safety and trust at church gatherings and among

parishioners and leaders. Who is capable of achieving this? And how can it be achieved? The sections below identify stakeholders as well as various strategies within systems of finance to answer these questions.

In a world without gender-based violence, there would be:

- Increased participation, productivity, innovation, and creativity of women and LGBTIQ persons in communities, the workforce, politics, religious life
- Reduction in intersectional inequalities for women and LGBTIQ persons from BIPOC and low-income communities
- Decline in industries such as violent media, types of advertising, pornography, etc. that are based on devaluation of specific bodies
- Closed gender wage gap and gender pension gap
- Reduction of healthcare, legal, child protection, productivity costs associated with gender-based violence
- Gender-equitable and safe access to online resources, forums, opportunities
- Gender-equitable and safe access to offline resources through improved mobility and access to transportation
- Increased educational attainment among girls, boys, and LGBTIQ persons
- Men's increased participation and enjoyment of caregiving and household work
- More harmonious families and communities

In a Church without gender-based violence, there would be:

- Increased safety and trust at church gatherings and among parishioners/leaders
- Increased participation of women and LGBTIQ persons, especially those from low-income and BIPOC communities, in worship, church events, volunteer activities, leadership positions, Sunday school/Christian education, etc.
- Decrease in exploitative relationships in the church, including the abuse of power by people in positions of leadership, that contribute to child abuse and gender-based violence, ultimately leading to improved credibility and standing of church institutions in wider society
- Lower insurance costs for church social services/ministries such as child-care or elder care, freeing up funds for additional social change work and financial sustainability
- Increased wealth among parishioners and contribution to faith-based pension and investment funds, especially among women
- Thriving and intergenerational faith communities as youth are called back in
- Closer relationships between faith-based social service organizations and local/national women's and LGBTIQ organizations, creating powerful alliances for social good

Stakeholders to Engage in Financing the Reduction of Gender-based Violence

The ELCA and several other major Christian denominations have taken strong public stands against gender-based violence and made commitments to work toward its reduction within the church and in the wider society. Different stakeholder groups within the church can leverage their power and positions to enact an investment thesis based on prophetic hope and help their church to fulfill its commitment to address gender-based violence using finance as a tool. These groups include:

- **Local Congregations:** Local congregations are economic beings as well as spiritual, social and physical entities. They can intentionally manage their money, access financial services, set salaries and benefits, and use their purchasing power in ways that contribute to greater safety from gender-based violence. They have assets in the form of property and endowments or

reserves that can be invested with a gender lens. Above all, they have the power of people: their members with their own assets to direct and invest. Their members may include finance professionals and individuals working with gender-based violence prevention and response (e.g., health workers, social workers, human resources professionals), who can help develop financial strategies to reduce gender-based violence. Congregations have the leadership and structures for raising awareness, providing education, and engaging their members in new ways of thinking about their financial resources in terms of their faith and using them to achieve faith-based commitments, including the reduction of gender-based violence.

- **Leaders in Church Finance:** Churches individually and collectively have vast financial resources and the power to invest their assets in ways that advance the social change its members seek in the world based on their faith, including the reduction of gender-based violence. The ELCA, for example, has a foundation, a pension fund, and a church building fund. These major church assets are managed by executive staff engaged by the church body, who in turn are accountable to elected boards. The relevant executive staff and board leaders are key influencers and decision makers in determining investment policy and priorities.
- **Social Ministries and Educational Institutions:** Beyond the connections among various parts of the church itself, denominations are related to other aligned institutions, many of which were originally founded by the church but have since developed an independent status and decision-making structures. The ELCA alone is related to 7 seminaries, 26 colleges and universities, and hundreds of social service agencies. Each of these related institutions may have significant endowments or other financial assets invested. They also have relationships and influence with the range of people they serve, who in turn have the capacity to help reduce gender-based violence and affect other social problems through their own financial power.
- **Political Advocates:** Many church bodies and ecumenical groups engage in advocacy to affect government policy in line with church positions. For example, the ELCA has a dedicated [advocacy practice](#), as well as a digital platform called the ELCA e-Advocacy Network that is aimed at mobilizing parishioners and communities. This network is active across local, state, and national levels. Furthermore, the church provides parishioners and congregations with resources and guidance on important policy and social issues.
- **Future Planners and Thought Leaders:** The church has an ongoing responsibility to reflect on its nature and purpose, study contemporary trends and culture, envision a vibrant church that is relevant to a changing world, and plan for that future. This imagined future world would certainly include radically less gender-based violence, and finance is one significant potential tool for moving toward that future. While many people within the church may have a voice in this ongoing visioning process, the ultimate responsibility in the ELCA falls to the ordained and lay elected leadership of the church, chiefly bishops and the presiding bishop, denominational executives, elected members of key councils or boards. Theologians, scholars, and teachers of the church also have a critical role in this visioning process, many of whom serve in church-affiliated colleges, universities, and seminaries. These church leaders are in positions to bring to the planning process a focus on the reduction of gender-based violence and the use of finance as a tool. They might intentionally draw more wisdom from those with experience or knowledge of gender-based violence and the powerful system of finance.

Selected Strategies to Use Finance to Reduce Gender-based Violence

Systems of finance require transparency and accountability. By taking action to comprehensively integrate gender-based violence prevention and reduction into their financial lives, both personally and institutionally, the various stakeholders in faith-based organizations mentioned above have an opportunity to effect systems-level change based on their vision of prophetic hope.

There are many ways investors can put their assets into action today in support of gender-based violence prevention and mitigation. This section explores three illustrative strategies that the ELCA could use to translate its denominational stance on gender-based violence into action: strengthening screens in faith-based investment portfolios, designing housing and real estate investments, and addressing the risk factor of economic insecurity due to student debt. These strategies are not exhaustive but provide a starting point. They aim to empower and spark the financial imagination of stakeholders across the ELCA, as well as other Christian denominations, by providing an initial set of concrete ideas.

Strengthen Screens in Faith-Based Organizations' and Individuals' Investment Portfolios

Individuals and institutions involved in traditional and even faith-based investing may not be aware of the ways in which actions to achieve their financial goals inadvertently contribute to multiple forms of violence against women and gender-diverse individuals. For example, church pension funds or individual parishioners may hold investments in sectors or industries that are heavily female-dominated or male-dominated—such as the healthcare sector, hospitality sector, construction and engineering, agribusiness, private prisons, and adult entertainment, among others—that sustain gender inequalities and power imbalances that contribute to persistently high levels of gender-based violence.

Those who manage churchwide and individuals' investment portfolios can apply screens that remove exposure to such industries, certain sectors, or even distinct companies—specifically those that are connected to high gender-based violence prevalence and risk in the case of negative screening. For instance, within the healthcare field, women represent close to [70%](#) of the global workforce according to the WHO and upwards of [60%](#) of the U.S. healthcare workforce. It is estimated that within the U.S., healthcare workers are [four times](#) more likely to experience physical assault than in private industry. Women working in hospitality, where they make up close to [54%](#) of the global workforce, experience the highest levels of sexual harassment of any industry. In the prison industry, publicly traded prison operators have been involved in [numerous lawsuits](#), fines, and contract terminations resulting from allegations of widespread sexual assault and misconduct at prison facilities they manage. Among the incarcerated, [three times](#) the number of women as men report experiencing physical or sexual violence before their imprisonment.

The converse is also true for positive screens, where the investment universe is populated only by companies that meet criteria for positive action on gender-based violence. Positive actions might include investing in companies that are implementing programs to eliminate the pay gap and gender-based violence from their supply chains.

Faith-based investors have a strong history of utilizing divestment and negative screening. According to the GIIN's Faith-Based Investment Survey, [88% of faith-based investors](#) use divestment and negative screening as their predominant strategy. When considering a strategy such as screens, it is important for investors to first acknowledge that gender-based violence is a global, pervasive problem and can be found in every culture and every sector of an economy. It is structurally present within every single industry. Gender-based violence is ubiquitous. It is not a series of individual incidents; it reinforces and is

facilitated by political, social, cultural, and economic systems that give permission for and facilitate violence. Yet, given that screens are an established investment practice, they can be leveraged to press against these larger forces, broadly signal efforts to address this issue, and still act as a reliable tool for social change. Against this backdrop, Criterion Institute recognizes that there are no established screens for gender-based violence as there are for other social issues (e.g., child labor, human rights controversies) and has [pioneered approaches](#) to apply a gender-based violence lens to investments. Implementing and amplifying these approaches are a powerful way to signal that churches and faith-based actors reject gender-based violence in all forms.

Actions for Local Congregations:

- Support parishioners to screen out gender-based violence from their personal or household investments. For example, this could involve developing and equipping parishioners with a tool such as a list of “10 questions you should ask your financial advisor about gender-based violence” to learn about the specific impact their investments may have and request that assets are removed from specific sectors, industries, and companies.

Actions for Leaders in Church Finance:

- Apply existing negative screens on child labor, human trafficking, human rights controversies, and labor rights controversies—issues that oftentimes go hand-in-hand with gender-based violence—to the organization’s portfolios.
- Signal the importance to the market by instituting and publishing strict divestment policies for companies found in violation of the ELCA’s social statement principles.
- Actively divest from sectors and industries with a high prevalence of gender-based violence, such as hotels, restaurants, and leisure; health care providers and services; construction and engineering; real estate management and development; agriculture (factory farming); private prisons; and adult entertainment.
- Engage gender equity and gender-based violence experts and local groups such as women’s or LGBTIQ rights organizations in the development of churchwide faith-based investing guidelines or a model portfolio.
- Participate in shareholder advocacy—whether by voting on proposed changes within the Board of Directors, certain policies, or company actions at the annual meeting; placing a vote via mail-in proxy ballot; or introducing a shareholder resolution—to pressure companies to measure, report, and mitigate their impacts on gender-based violence.

Actions for Social Ministries and Educational Institutions:

- Work with investment managers of educational endowments or organizational funds to apply negative screens to reduce investments in sectors, industries, and companies that contribute to the high prevalence of gender-based violence.

Actions for Political Advocates:

- Advocate for policies and strengthened financial regulations requiring companies to measure and report their activities’ impact on gender-based violence to support increased data availability and the development of future screens specifically tailored to gender-based violence.

Design Housing Investments and Repurpose Real Estate Using a Gender-based Violence Lens

Gender and racial disparities in the economy lead to economic insecurity, especially for women and gender diverse people facing multiple forms of discrimination, which undermines their ability to access affordable housing. Gender-based violence compounds this situation by contributing to economic insecurity (through lost wages or assets, for example), and economic insecurity in turn represents a risk

factor for gender-based violence. Survivors' safety from further violence and long-term recovery depends on securing safe, affordable housing. The lack of housing available to survivors deters them from leaving abusive partners out of fear of experiencing homelessness. This shortage relates both to housing as an asset and to survivor-friendly rental properties.

As a result, domestic violence is one of the primary causes of homelessness for women and their children in the United States. Between [22% and 57%](#) of homeless women and children are without homes due to domestic violence, and 38% of all survivors experience homelessness at some point in their lives. In fact, a [study](#) published in 2016 found that up to half of women experiencing homelessness reported that domestic violence was the immediate cause. Sexual harassment in housing is also an important issue, where landlords have significant power over whether tenants obtain or maintain housing or receive a positive reference. Reports suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has seen an [increase](#) in landlords demanding sexual favors or enacting sexual harassment as more women are facing economic hardship and challenges in meeting rental payments.

Transgender persons, who experience higher rates of gender-based violence in the form of physical and sexual abuse, bullying, and family rejection, experience especially high rates of homelessness, as do LGBTQ individuals. For example, one [2014 survey](#) found that 55.3% of LGBTQ youth and 67.1% of transgender youth who were homeless in the United States reported that the primary reason for their homelessness was being forced out by their parents or running away in relation to their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. In the U.S., Black, Indigenous and other women of color experience [higher rates](#) of gender-based violence, which is a powerful contributor to homelessness. Black individuals face systemic housing discrimination, due in part to the persistent effects of the historic practice of redlining as well as racial discrimination. One [2012 study](#) found that people of color were often shown fewer rental units and denied more leases, while White people were offered lower rent, negotiable deposits, and other reduced move-in costs. While African Americans make up 13% of the general population, they comprise [40%](#) of the homeless population.

Many congregations—individually or cooperatively with other congregations, consortia, or not-for-profit agencies—have been active in advocating for safe, affordable housing and in providing such housing as part of their ministry. While not recommended specifically in the ELCA's statements, investing in housing options for survivors of gender-based violence strongly aligns with the ELCA's commitments to advance equity and justice for women, girls, and gender non-conforming people in its Social Statement on Faith, Sexism, and Justice, particularly through the advancement of housing as a human right. Such investments also deliver on commitments made in the Social Message on Gender-based Violence to ensure care and create safe and healing communities for survivors as well as pursuing policies and practices to prevent violence.

Stakeholders in Christian denominations have an opportunity to examine and leverage their real estate to address gender-based violence. Congregations individually and collectively own a tremendous amount of real estate. In fact, it is estimated that religious institutions own more than [7% of the world's land surface](#). Many properties and facilities are underutilized as church membership has declined and populations have shifted. Some churches have shown enormous creativity in repurposing excess space. More of this valuable resource could be put to new and creative uses to address gender-based violence. Repurposing excess church property to create safe housing is a way to acknowledge the history and continuing occurrence of gender-based violence on church property and to work positively for the eradication of gender-based violence.

Actions for Local Congregations:

- Make available surplus living space to services and agencies addressing gender-based violence. For example, congregations (or parishioners) could provide space for free or at reduced rates for nonprofits or professionals that are actively serving the cause of reducing gender-based violence or addressing the needs of survivors by supporting community awareness or providing support services such as legal aid, emergency shelter, job training support, or psychosocial services.
- Remodel church buildings or reconfigure property to offer social services such as food pantries, psychosocial support services, or day-care centers as part of the ministry of the church.
- Sell church property to make capital available for advancing the reduction of gender-based violence, making intentional and faithful decisions about how to distribute the proceeds of the sale to various ministries or institutions (e.g., direct funds to agencies providing support services or working for the prevention of gender-based violence, establish an endowment restricted for the purpose of reducing gender-based violence and addressing its impacts, invest the corpus of the endowment with a gender-based violence lens).

Actions for Leaders in Church Finance:

- Ensure new and current housing investments are designed to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. This may include actions such as the following:
 - Enact rental/lease requirements that are friendly to low-income, single income, and self-employed persons.
 - Ensure flexible deposit/guarantee requirements (e.g., no deposit required, options for deferred payment or payment in installments, fixed rent for fixed periods).
 - Remove or create exceptions to “zero-tolerance” nuisance ordinances, which can be used by landlords/housing providers to evict domestic violence survivors due to damage inflicted in leased apartments, alleged nuisance conduct, or when a certain number of calls for police have been made at a property.
 - Allow for exceptions to breach of contract fines/penalties—for example, in a situation where an individual experiencing gender-based violence needs to leave an apartment with no prior notice.
 - Pilot micro-mortgages (loans provided over five years to fund the construction and acquisition of “core” housing: a small house to which the owner can incrementally add features and rooms over time) for low-income individuals and families.
 - Structure housing loans in ways that make it easier for women of color and women-headed households to purchase homes (e.g., rent to own, low-interest loans).
 - Implement flexible options for cosigners (e.g., allow gender-based violence survivors to be released as cosigners of perpetrators’ housing loans to avoid financial abuse or damage to credit score, implement “both to sign” requirements for jointly held debt).
- Shift the power relationship between the gender-based violence survivor and perpetrator by providing short-term housing for the perpetrator, accompanied by rehabilitation support. This will preserve the right of survivors (and their children) to stay in the family home and enable them to continue their life with minimal disruptions. The underlying concept of this approach is that women and children should not be penalized by losing their homes as a result of being the victims of criminal activity.
- Ensure building construction agreements with housing contractors include provisions for safeguarding against sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse onsite among construction staff as well as towards the public (e.g., anti-sexual harassment policy implementation).

Actions for Political Advocates:

- Advocate for affordable housing investments in locations that do not further racial segregation and provide access for residents to good employment opportunities, schools, public transport, and services.

Actions for Future Planners and Thought Leaders:

- Encourage and provide expertise and resources for congregations engaged in creating safe, affordable housing. ELCA's Mission Investment Fund presents an example of this kind of practical support for building projects in addition to providing low-cost loans for construction or renovation costs.
- Examine the origins and history of church real estate and plan for reparations and land back for Black and Indigenous communities, who experience higher rates of gender-based violence due to the history of slavery, colonization, and structural inequalities.

Reduce Domestic Violence by Addressing Economic Insecurity Due to Student Debt

While gender-based violence is ubiquitous, occurring across all geographies and socioeconomic statuses, economic insecurity remains a critical risk factor. Financial dependence on a partner and economic insecurity are very common [reasons](#) behind an individual's inability to leave an abusive relationship. In fact, nearly all victims of domestic violence experience [financial abuse](#), which may include a perpetrator forbidding a victim from working, restricting their access to bank accounts, withholding money from them, running up debt on joint accounts, or even stealing the victim's identity and assets, among other [manifestations](#).

Student debt significantly contributes to economic insecurity and disproportionately impacts women, especially women of color. In the United States, women hold an estimated [two-thirds](#) of outstanding student debt. They graduate with approximately \$31,276 in outstanding debt after obtaining a bachelor's degree from a public college. Black women are disproportionately impacted by the student debt burden, owing an average of \$37,558 after graduation. Overall, women also take on larger student loans than men, borrowing [14% more](#) on average for postsecondary education, and they take longer—approximately 1.9 additional years—to pay off this debt. In part, this is due to structural inequalities and social norms that contribute to the gender pay gap, women's lower economic status, the unequal burden of unpaid care work, and the concentration of women in lower-paying industries. On average, women in the U.S. make only [\\$0.82](#) for every dollar a man earns. For every dollar a white man earns, a Black woman earns \$0.63, a Native American woman earns \$0.60, and a Latina woman earns \$0.55. Additionally, unequal gender norms persist. One study found that 50% of only-boy households had money [saved for college](#), compared to 35% of only-girl households. The COVID-19 crisis has deepened gender inequalities and increased the student debt burden, especially for women.

Although the ELCA's Social Message on Gender-based Violence and Social Statement on Faith, Sexism, and Justice do not explicitly address the connections between domestic violence and student debt, they recognize that violence occurs in the educational system and acknowledge the serious impacts of economic abuse. To respond to this reality, the ELCA has outlined [specific actions](#) for seminaries to enact policies and practices around survivors' safety, confidentiality, and the right to due process. They recommend that church-related educational institutions encourage awareness, avoid the re-victimization of those who have experienced gender-based violence on campus, and update curricula to break the silence and stigma. The ELCA also calls for [just economic policies](#), regulations, and practices to enhance gender equity and efforts to redress the gender pay gap among staff at faith-based educational institutions.

The ELCA's commitment to end gender-based violence in relation to the educational system can further be strengthened through efforts to reduce the burden of student debt upon women and gender-diverse persons—and especially those experiencing intersecting inequalities associated with race, ethnicity, disability, migrant status, and other identity characteristics—in turn, reducing their vulnerability to violence.

Actions for Social Ministries and Educational Institutions:

- Restructure student debt products for students at the ELCA's 26 colleges and universities and 7 seminaries in ways that allow them to navigate situations of crisis and continue to pay back their loans. This may include working with student loan servicers, including those covering federal and private loans, to:
 - Incorporate flexible and longer repayment terms for individuals in crisis.
 - Implement [income-driven repayment \(IDR\) plans](#) so that women and gender-diverse persons can customize loan payments in accordance with their economic circumstances, providing streamlined information and instructions so users can easily navigate their options.
 - Expand eligibility criteria for interest-free loan deferment to cover individuals experiencing gender-based violence or allow for paused collections on defaulted loans for individuals experiencing gender-based violence.
 - Implement flexible options for co-signers (e.g., allow gender-based violence survivors to be released as cosigners of perpetrators' loans to avoid financial abuse or damage to credit score, implement "both to sign" requirements for jointly held debt).
 - Allow survivors [easy access](#) to set up an account that is not listed online, change passwords to access online information about student loans, and change addresses or phone numbers associated with the account and ensure confidentiality.
- At educational institutions, support students' overall financial needs, for example by designing affordable [on-campus access to childcare](#). Ensure students are provided with accurate financial information and guidance.

Actions for Political Advocates:

- Advocate for expanded [public service loan forgiveness programs](#) of at least [\\$10,000](#), especially for women and non-binary students, low-income students, and students of color, and support their enrollment in existing programs.
- Leverage the ELCA's [political influence](#) to support local, state, and national stakeholders to end the gender pay gap (e.g., by supporting the [Paycheck Fairness Act](#) or regulations that prohibit employers from basing an employee's salary on their past history), protect and expand Pell grants, and increase public funding for education.

Additional Strategies to Explore

Gender-based violence is a broad and complex issue, which means that there are many more strategies to leverage financial systems and mitigate prevalence beyond the aforementioned three strategies. The following are additional strategies that could be further developed in order for the ELCA and other Christian denominations to apply their economic leverage to the challenges of addressing gender-based violence:

- Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) could build flexible credit products for survivors in order to address the impacts of financial abuse, such as low credit score, as well as promote survivors' economic security more broadly.

- Local congregations could provide loans to small businesses in the community that create financial independence for survivors or at-risk individuals, such as low-income women, to reduce and prevent future occurrence of violence. To do this, churches could leverage Criterion’s existing [1K Churches](#) Bible Study and lending program.
- Insurance companies can adjust insurance premiums and qualification requirements, incentivizing organizations to implement required safeguards, policies, and practices.

An Invitation to Move Forward Together

Gender-based violence is pervasive, yet preventable. Different stakeholders across Christian denominations, including local congregations, church finance leaders, social ministries and educational institutions, political advocates, and future planners and thought leaders have power within their existing roles and networks to call attention to and end this violence. By outlining these three selected strategies—strengthening screens in investment portfolios, designing housing and real estate investments, and addressing the risk factor of economic insecurity due to student debt—this roadmap aims to empower these stakeholders to both envision a world without gender-based violence and take action to bring that vision to life.

While no perfect solution exists and little direct attention has yet been paid to leveraging systems of finance within Christian denominations, **this roadmap demonstrates how we can get started.** Getting started may look different for each person or institution. For example, you can read this roadmap and bring it to a church group, faith-based organization, or leadership meeting. You can dive deeper and learn about the potential to use systems of finance by exploring Criterion Institute’s [Blueprint for Faith-based Organizations on Using Finance as a Tool for Social Change](#). You can open yourself to grace and allow yourself to explore what a vision of prophetic hope looks like in your church and in your day-to-day activities. You can seek out financial advisors or investment managers who name eradicating gender-based violence as an explicit goal of faith-based investing, and you can also push them to do so. You can explore institutional partnerships with women- and LGBTIQ-led organizations to build an advocacy network that will join you in the work. Whatever that next step is, our hope is that this guide empowers you to take it.

Beyond encouraging individuals or organizations to take action, this roadmap is an invitation for us to move forward together. At Criterion, we will continue to advance this work within the framework of our gender-based violence program as well as across other programs. Join us by:

- **Designing** more specific strategies, co-creating tools, piloting implementation, and ideating with us at our annual conference, [Convergence](#).
- **Amplifying** this roadmap, sharing broadly within your denomination or faith-based organization as well as with other professional and personal networks.
- **Teaching** others how to implement strategies to use finance to end gender-based violence, sharing your own experience, and building the capacity of Christian denominations to engage in this work.
- **Building the field**, recognizing that our work exists in an ecosystem where diverse actors can join together and draw upon each other’s expertise and work to advance the field of gender lens investing.

- **Influencing others** by encouraging stakeholders across denominations to see themselves as changemakers who can use their power to address this issue, signalling your own intent to do something, and speaking up about the ways gender-based violence appears in the world and in the church.
- **Strategizing** to determine next steps and imagine new possibilities, focusing on actions today that are part of systems-level change.

We know how challenging this work is, but we are not alone. We look forward to deepening our partnerships, learning how to do this work together, strengthening our collective knowledge, and allowing ourselves to envision the joy and the possibilities of a world free from gender-based violence. Reach out to us at info@criterioninstitute.org to get started.