

Human Rights, HIV/AIDS prevention and Gender Equality

AN IMPOSSIBLE COCKTAIL
FOR FAITH BASED ORGANISATIONS?



POSITION PAPER



Faith Based Organisations must:

- Take leadership in fighting the AIDS pandemic.
- Take the issue of gender equality seriously and challenge norms of gender inequalities.
- Promote evidence based prevention including condom use.
- Promote basic sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Recognise that empowering women is essential to a holistic HIV and AIDS strategy.
- Recognise that involving men both as right holders and as important duty-bearers to change unequal relationships is crucial.

Faith based organisations (FBO's) have a unique possibility and responsibility to address one of the most important drivers of the AIDS pandemic, namely gender inequality. FBO's provide moral and social leadership, establishing norms which determine how individuals with faith, and communities of individuals with faith, respond to HIV and AIDS concerns (for example, what prevention methods are acceptable, whether people living with HIV are stigmatised and discriminated against and which kind of gender behaviour that is considered acceptable). FBO's provide, therefore, extensive existing community-based structures for responding to HIV. **At the same time dealing with human sexuality and gender equality is a real challenge to most FBO's.**

Gender inequalities drive the AIDS pandemic

There is a global increasing feminisation of the HIV and AIDS pandemic with an increase in the proportion of women being infected with HIV. AIDS started as a disease mostly affecting men, but gradually this is changing. The global figures show an equal number of women and men being HIV positive. However looking at Sub-Saharan Africa, the region worst affected by HIV and AIDS, the ratio is 39% male to 61% female. Young women are the most affected and the most vulnerable group in most countries. Looking at young people between 15-24 years in Sub-Saharan Africa, the ratio is 26% male to 74% female.

Societal norms and cultural discourse in many countries reinforce patriarchal structures with gender norms that dictate women and girls to be passive and ignorant about sex. Therefore, their scope to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights is limited or they may even be unaware of these rights. At the same time unequal access to and lack of control over productive resources contribute to lead young girls and women in poor economic conditions to involve in risky behaviour such as transactional sex or sex work. Especially adolescent women and young girls are vulnerable and susceptible to HIV and AIDS due to biological reasons, discriminatory social and cultural practices and fundamental gender inequality. **They lack basic sexual and reproductive health and rights that faith based organisations should be promoting.** The right to decide freely when not to have children, to be protected from sexual coercion, genital mutilation or forced pregnancy and to have access to safe contraception that prevents the spread of HIV are key human rights and critical preconditions for any effective HIV prevention effort.

Men are also victims of unequal gender roles that expect men to always be in control and often expect them to act in ways that put their own health at risk. Generally men make up a low percentage of those accessing the VCT services and post test clubs. This suggests that gender stereotypes constrain men from taking an interest in their sexual health, with the implications that men will remain ignorant about STIs.

Churches and FBO's should connect gender equality and HIV prevention

To reflect the God given value of each human being, churches should work for an equal and respectful relationship between men and women. To most people of faith religion has a serious influence on their concept of gender roles, human sexuality and marriage. **Therefore if FBO's are to participate and contribute to the prevention of further spread of HIV, the issue of gender justice must be taken seriously.**



AS LONG AS MEN AND WOMEN ARE DEFINED AS UNEQUAL, THE CONTROL OF HIV AND AIDS WILL PROVE TO BE A CHALLENGE. THIS CALLS THE CHURCH AND ITS LEADERSHIP TO REPENT FROM BAPTISING PATRIARCHAL RELATIONSHIPS AND TO STRUGGLE WITH PROPOUNDING A THEOLOGY THAT AFFIRMS BOTH MEN AND WOMEN AS MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE AND EQUAL BEFORE GOD (GEN 1:27). JESUS HAS LONG SINCE SET PRECEDENCE BY DISREGARDING PATRIARCHAL POWER AND CALLING INTO BEING A CHURCH THAT RECOGNISES THE EQUALITY OF MAN AND WOMAN.

(REV. JAPHET NDHLOVU, ONE BODY PAGE 14)

Faith based organisations must be challenged when they maintain and defend discriminatory and harmful norms and practices. **FBO's have a responsibility to show leadership in fighting the pandemic. Instead of addressing and blaming individuals – particularly women – for the AIDS crisis, the responsibility for change should be given back to the local community ensuring that also women and girls participate.** It is necessary to work and promote dialogue within the local context taking into account existing power relations. A comprehensive and inclusive approach based on advocacy for gender equality that encourages women and men in the local communities to promote social change is needed.

Women's social, political and economical empowerment

Many societies still marginalize women from access to property and decision-making. Besides, women may have limited possibilities to negotiate about safe sex and faithfulness in marriage/relationship. Further, a culture of violence has escalated so much in the HIV and AIDS era that many girls and women are subjected to sexual abuse and harmful practices that violate their sexual and reproductive rights and make them susceptible to HIV transmission. The formula of 'abstaining' is defeated by underlying social ways of distributing power unequally. **Therefore the much promoted ABC strategy is largely insufficient.**



PHOTO: KLAUS HOLSTING

We must support activities that empower women, in particular young girls, to be more assertive in determining their own gender roles and claiming their sexual and reproductive rights. Women must be able to participate as equal citizens in their country's political and formal economic spheres; they must have the right to a life free from violence; they must have equal access to and control over productive resources; they must have greater access to information of prevention methods that put the power to prevent AIDS into their hands. **Empowering women is essential to a holistic HIV and AIDS strategy.**

In many societies legal structures do not sufficiently protect the rights of children, young people and women against sexual abuse and harmful cultural practices that violate their rights and make them susceptible to HIV transmission.

Involvement of men

Even when AIDS interventions do address gender issues they often fail to address men's gender roles. Only when programs are designed to directly address men's sexual behaviour can there be a significant reduction in the rate at which the pandemic is spreading. The main mode of transmission of HIV is through sexual intercourse. Men usually make decisions with whom, where and how to have sex. However men's sexual behaviour is a manifestation of prevalent gender norms and men often has to appear to be in control to maintain their status.

Involving men as important duty-bearers to change unequal relationships and promote more protective environments for young girls and women is crucial. **We need to involve men as partners in social change, particularly in terms of challenging gender stereotypes that disempower women.** Gender stereotypes also encourage double standards with multiple sexual partners for men and sexual ignorance for women. Men also need to be actively involved in ending sexual violence; and in protecting their own and their partner's health by using preventive measures including condoms.



PHOTO: BJARNE USSING

Life skills education and Condom promotion are key to prevention

Training in risk assessment and sexuality education will help young people to define personal moral norms and personal boundaries in order to prevent abuse and other vices that young people fall prey to. **Life skills education to facilitate the formation of non risk taking sexual behaviour is key to prevent vulnerable young women and girls from being abused by older people.** This will also help to prevent myths related to sexuality that lead young people to risky sexual behaviour. Ideally the life skills education should promote human rights and gender equality and address underlying determinants of vulnerability by promoting a culture that respects, promotes and protects the rights of all people.

Furthermore primary prevention of HIV through condom promotion is recognised as a cost-effective strategy. Condom promotion should be seen as complementary to other primary preventive strategies, but it is unfortunately still viewed as controversial by many FBO's and churches. The most detrimental to a HIV prevention programme is when FBO's actively work against condom promotion. **A constructive evidence based dialogue on all preventive methods including condom use with such FBO's is essential - with a view to promote a policy shift.**

Window of opportunity

A growing awareness of the gender aspects of HIV and AIDS has created a window of opportunity to address the disproportionate impact that the pandemic is having on women and girls. However in order to actually move from this recognition into concrete action is a major challenge and so far not enough is being done to address the gender dimensions of the pandemic. We believe that Faith based organisations are in a unique position to offer a sustainable and holistic approach to the field of HIV and AIDS – we should live up to the challenge and constructively fight the key drivers of the epidemic together.

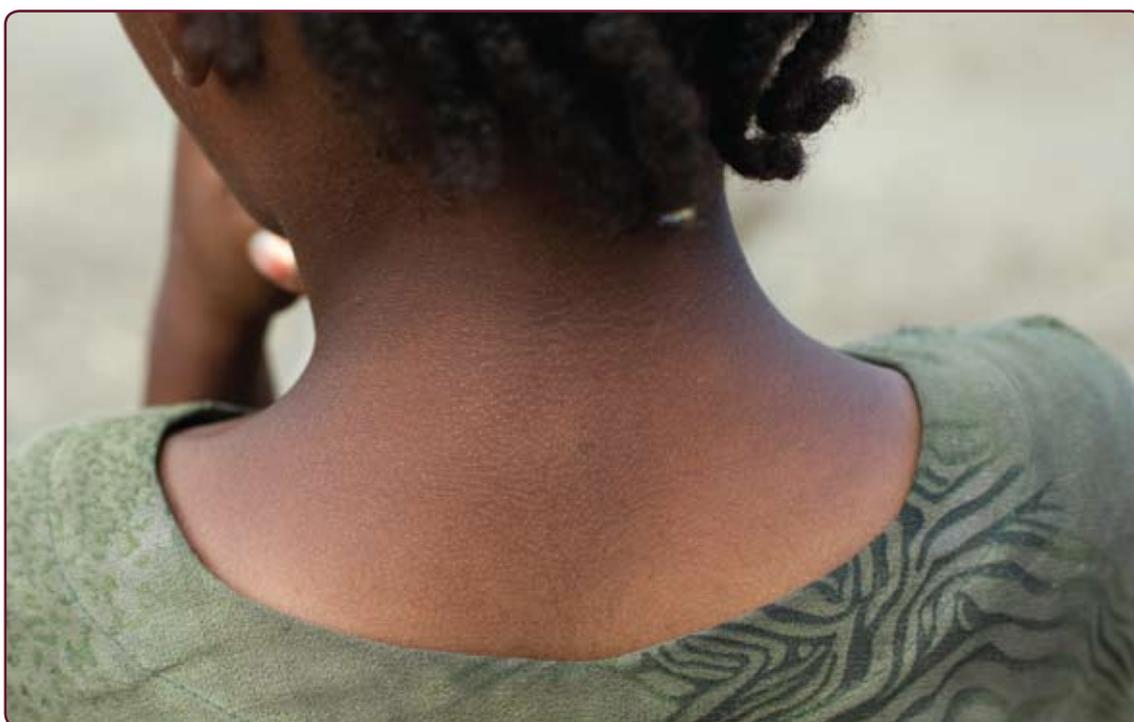


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