

HIV/AIDS & Gender Equality: Transforming Attitudes and Behaviors

Bahá'í International Community Statement HIV/AIDS and Gender Equality: Transforming Attitudes and Behaviors Prepared for the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS

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The relationship between the AIDS pandemic and gender inequality is gaining recognition globally. New HIV/AIDS infections are now increasing faster among women and girls than among males; therefore, last year half of all new cases occurred in females. At the recent 45th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, where HIV/AIDS was one of the main thematic issues, the complexity of the challenges in addressing the issue were underscored by the undeniable association of AIDS with such an intractable problem as sexism. There is no denying the importance of research, education and cooperation among governments and civil society. However, awareness is growing that a profound change of attitude--personal, political, and social--will be necessary to stop the spread of the disease and ensure assistance to those already infected and affected. This statement will focus on two of the more significant populations who need to be represented in these global discussions: men, because of the control they have traditionally exercised over women's lives; and faith communities, because of the power they have to influence the hearts and minds of their adherents.

In order to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS among women, concrete changes need to occur in the sexual attitudes and behavior of both men and women, but especially men. Fallacious notions about the naturally voracious sexual appetites of men must be addressed. The real consequences to women--and men--of the practice of satisfying one's sexual desires outside of marriage must be fully understood. Educating women and girls is critically important, but the current power imbalance between men and women can prevent a woman from acting in her own interest. Indeed, experience has shown that educating women without educating the men in their lives may put the women at greater risk of violence. Efforts are needed, therefore, to educate both boys and girls to respect themselves and one another. A culture of mutual respect will improve not only the self-esteem of women and girls, but the self-esteem of men and boys as well, which will lead toward more responsible sexual behavior.

The denial of equality to women not only promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that affect their families, the workplace, political decisions and international relations; it also contributes substantially to the spread of HIV/AIDS and retards the progress of society. Notice how culturally accepted social inequalities conspire with economic vulnerability to leave women and girls with little or no power to reject unwanted or unsafe sex. Yet, once infected with HIV/AIDS, women are often stigmatized as the source of the disease and persecuted, sometimes violently. Meanwhile, the burden of caring for people living with HIV/AIDS and for children orphaned by the disease falls predominantly on women. Traditional gender

roles that have gone unquestioned for generations must now be re-examined in the light of justice and compassion. Ultimately, nothing short of a spiritual transformation will move men--and women--to forego the behaviors that contribute to the spread of AIDS. Such a transformation is as important for men as it is for women, because *"As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs"* [1].

Because the cultivation of humanity's noble, spiritual core has always been the province of religion, religious communities can play an important role in bringing about the change of heart and the consequent change in behaviors that will make possible an effective response to the AIDS crisis.

The leaders of faith communities are especially equipped to address the moral dimension of the AIDS crisis both in terms of its prevention and its treatment. The spread of HIV/AIDS would be significantly reduced if individuals were taught to respect the sanctity of the family by practicing abstinence before marriage and fidelity to one's spouse while married, as underscored in most faith traditions.

Religious leaders and people of faith are also called to respond with love and compassion to the intense personal suffering of those either directly or indirectly affected by the AIDS crisis. However, a tendency on the part of society as a whole to judge and blame those afflicted has, since the onset of this disease, stifled compassion for its victims. The subsequent stigmatization of individuals thus afflicted with HIV/AIDS has fostered a profound reluctance on the part of infected individuals to seek treatment and of societies to change cultural attitudes and practices necessary for the prevention and treatment of the disease. Such judgments can be particularly pronounced in religious communities struggling to uphold a high standard of personal conduct. One of the seeming paradoxes of faith is the individual obligation of believers to adhere to a high standard of personal conduct while loving and caring for those who fall short--for whatever reason--of that same standard. What is often forgotten is that "moral conduct" includes not only personal restraint but compassion and humility as well. Faith communities will need to strive continually to rid themselves of judgmental attitudes so that they can exert the kind of moral leadership that encourages personal responsibility, love for one another, and the courage to protect vulnerable groups in society.

We see signs of hope in increased interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Among faith communities there is a growing recognition that, as Baha'u'llah states, "the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God". It is, indeed, the transcendent nature of the human spirit, as it reaches toward that invisible, unknowable Essence called God, which galvanizes and refines mankind's capacity to achieve the spiritual progress that translates into social progress. As dialogue, cooperation and respect among religious communities increase, cultural and religious practices and traditions that discriminate against women, no matter how entrenched, will gradually give way. This will be an essential step toward retarding the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Indeed, it is in the recognition of the oneness of the human family that hearts will soften, minds will open, and the attitudes of men and women will be transformed. It is out of that transformation that a coherent, compassionate and rational response to the worldwide HIV/AIDS crisis will be made possible.

Notes

1. Baha'i Writings

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