

Tackling HIV and AIDS with faith-based communities: learning from attitudes on gender relations and sexual rights within local evangelical churches in Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, and South Africa

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The AIDS pandemic in Africa is devastating the continent. The institution of marriage does not appear to be protecting women – in some countries rates of infection among married women are higher than those among unmarried, sexually active women. Recognising that unequal gender relations are a driving force behind the AIDS pandemic, this article explores the position of local evangelical churches in Africa with respect to gender relations and sex, and the implications for HIV and AIDS. Based on desk and field research carried out by the UK-based NGO Tearfund, the findings indicate that these churches were largely silent on the issue of gender and sex, or were reinforcing traditional values which contribute to HIV infection. In a number of countries, the church seems to have failed to provide leadership to young people, especially young women, facing huge pressure to be sexually active. Strategies for responding are outlined.

In some heavily affected countries, married women have higher rates of HIV infection than their unmarried, sexually active peers. Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, World AIDS Day 2004.

Adhering to the teachings of the Church, we determined to engage more deeply in challenging cultures and traditions which stifle the humanity of women and deprive them of equal rights. We agreed that our greatest challenge is to nurture and equip our children to protect themselves from HIV, so that we can fulfil the vision of building a generation without AIDS. Pastoral Letter from the Primates of the Anglican Communion, 27 May 2003.

All the pastors' wives had never seen a condom as it is seen as a tool for unfaithful wives. NGO worker, Burkina Faso.

Introduction

The AIDS pandemic is having a devastating effect on Africa, with over 2 million deaths in 2005, and 24 million people living with HIV, of whom nearly 60 per cent are women. The impact of the pandemic is heavily gendered: one of the groups most vulnerable to HIV infection are married women. In addition, girls and women often bear the heaviest of burdens in caring for the sick and affected, and women living with HIV often suffer blame and rejection by their families and communities. At the same time, Christianity is seeing an unprecedented period of expansion in Africa, particularly of evangelical² and Pentecostal churches, which now have an estimated 70 million adherents.

Against this backdrop, Tearfund wanted to find out if, or how, the evangelical church in Africa is speaking out on the issue of gender in the context of AIDS, or whether it is staying silent, so reinforcing the perception that it accepts traditional values. Are churches tackling the delicate issues of sexual activity and behaviour, and if so, is this being done in an informed and positive manner? Tearfund therefore funded a small research project to assess the current situation with regards to gender, HIV and AIDS and the role of the church in three African countries. The aim of the project was to discover:

- 1 If churches were doing any work in this area?
- 2 If so, how successful was it proving to be?
- 3 What lessons could be learnt?

Tearfund's mission and values significantly informed its decision to undertake research in this area, and its choice of approach.³ The organisation was founded in 1968 in response to an increasing demand from evangelical Christians in the UK (who total more than 1 million) for a way to address the needs of the world's poor. Tearfund is now one of the seven largest UK-based international development NGOs, working in over 70 countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa through local evangelical Christian partner organisations. The organisation's distinctive approach is that it draws on Christian resources and values as an integral part of its relief and development work. Its organisational purpose is to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ in enabling those who share evangelical Christian beliefs to bring good news to poor communities.

For Tearfund, this foundation translates into:

- Ensuring that Christians are aware of the call to address poverty;
- Effective action to bring about sustainable responses to need;
- Speaking out with, and on behalf of, poor people, to bring about justice.

The latter includes gender justice. Tearfund believes that men and women are equal before God and that men and women are to work in partnership with one another.⁴ Tearfund is committed to the vision of the restoration of God's original intention of partnership for man and woman⁵ and is concerned that the wider evangelical constituency should understand, and act upon, these principles, especially in the context of HIV and AIDS.

Tearfund seeks to challenge and support evangelicals to respond to poverty through direct action for poor people and through speaking out to inform and influence. In particular, Tearfund believes that the church can be, and in many places is, a positive influence for change as it is often well respected and listened to within communities.

Carrying out the research

The research was done in two distinct phases – firstly, desk-based research gave a broad overview of the role being played by the evangelical church in Africa, and highlighted areas that we wanted to probe in more depth at local level. The desk-based research also informed the choice of fieldwork locations: South Africa, Zimbabwe and Burkina Faso.

The field research visited a range of NGOs and churches, of which some were current Tearfund partners and others were not. We conducted semi-structured interviews with key staff in organisations working with the church. Ten organisations were interviewed in South Africa, seven in Zimbabwe and seven in Burkina Faso. In many cases, Tearfund partners facilitated visits to rural communities to interview pastors and members of the church about their views on the subject. During the interviews it was often necessary to separate the men and women in order to gain an openness and honesty in the answers.

Having completed the fieldwork, we presented an initial analysis of the information to the partners, Christian AIDS Taskforce (CAT) in Zimbabwe, and Vigilance in Burkina Faso, giving them an opportunity to correct any wrong perceptions we might have gained. We also held workshops to present the initial findings to country staff from a range of other Christian NGOs and to ask for their feedback. Workshop participants were asked to identify the issues, barriers and solutions to working with the church on gender and HIV and AIDS. These discussions were used in the analysis of the results for triangulation purposes.

Findings of the desk-based research

The link between gender and HIV and AIDS

Gender is one of the keys to the response to AIDS in Africa, because it is often the imbalance in power relations between men and women that drives the spread of HIV

through heterosexual relationships. This is seen in individual relationships, and in the attitudes towards gender within society. Furthermore, a key issue confronting African society in general, and the church in particular, is the nature of the relationship in marriage between a husband and wife. Whilst it is recognised that for many African women, marriage is what a woman aspires to, paradoxically, marriage is a key risk factor for women to become infected with HIV. This is because their husbands may already be infected, or become infected as a result of extra-marital sex, and because for a variety of reasons, condoms are rarely used for safer sex.

The gendered nature of HIV and AIDS is borne out in a number of other practices where men put women and girls at risk of infection, such as widow inheritance⁶ and 'offering' women as a sign of hospitality.⁷ Although most practices that increase women's risk of infection are driven by beliefs about the sexual role of men, women's beliefs about their own roles also contribute to some extent. Girls are brought up to believe that they should seek to satisfy the sexual needs of their husband rather than expect mutual sexual satisfaction. This may result in support for practices such as 'dry sex',⁸ and female circumcision. Young women have sexual relationships with older men – 'Sugar Daddies' – who give them presents, while they also have a partner of their own age. In addition, poverty often forces women into risky sexual relations.

The underlying cause of this situation is the way in which women and girls in parts of Africa are socially subordinate to, and economically dependent upon, men. Contemporary non-church culture can endorse the view that men are dominant and are expected to have several partners. Women are expected to be submissive and passive. They are often economically dependent on men and are therefore in a weak position to negotiate about sexual matters, or to challenge extra-marital relationships. Women have little control over whether, where, and how sexual relations take place. Anecdotal evidence from South Africa also suggests that social change and ongoing high levels of poverty and unemployment appear to have a particular effect on the male psyche, which in turn impacts on women's vulnerability to HIV. With a man unable to articulate his masculinity by providing for his family, or having status from a job, he may look even more to demonstrate it through his sexual prowess with multiple, concurrent partners.

Evangelical churches and gender and HIV and AIDS

There is a widely held view that in sections of the evangelical churches, conservative attitudes towards sex and women are more entrenched than in society as a whole. Church leaders and members believe, in some cases, that sex is to be endured rather than enjoyed as a gift from God, that it is inappropriate, within culture, to speak about sex, and that the Bible requires women to be submissive. These views are mutually reinforcing. The reluctance to speak about sexual issues means that the church is perceived to agree with traditional values. This makes it difficult for a woman church member to challenge her husband's extra-marital affairs. Many churches associate

condoms with promiscuity and so speak against their use, even for safer sex within marriage.

Cultural issues seem to reinforce, and are in some cases reinforced by, evangelical attitudes. The interrelationship is such that it demands that we address not only African cultural traditions and their impact on HIV and AIDS, sex and gender relations, but also challenge the church on its position on the issues. Evangelical beliefs can compound the situation when an incomplete knowledge or biased selection of biblical texts leads to an unbalanced view. For example, many Christians are familiar with only selected biblical texts that refer to the submission of women, and neglect to balance this with other texts that speak of the necessity of equal submission to one another in love, and of men and women being created equally in the image of God. African Christians suggest that in Africa many who identify as Christians actually operate in two worlds concurrently: 'Christian western civilisation', and underneath, traditional African culture. Often, it is traditional values that define beliefs around gender and sex for Christian men and women.

Given this background, it is perhaps unsurprising that when asked about working with the church in the community, several Christian NGOs implied that progress in changing attitudes to gender is slow and frustrating, particularly with leaders of evangelical churches. To explore these initial findings further, and to investigate the reality of working with the local church on issues of HIV and AIDS and gender, we moved on to our fieldwork. This included visits to Mthatha and Pietermaritzburg in South Africa, Bulawayo in Zimbabwe and Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. In the next section we discuss our findings from our research in these places.

Reality at community level

South Africa

Our fieldwork in South Africa highlighted the disturbing situation of many young people. They are faced with pressures from a number of sources, for example, from Western orientated media, to attain the trappings of prosperity, but at the same time have few prospects of a secure livelihood. They are watching their parents and siblings die of AIDS. Parents are no longer setting boundaries. With little sense of purpose or hope, they turn to sex for recreation or a measure of intimacy without concern for their own prospects of becoming infected. In addition, post-apartheid freedom has resulted here in the misinterpretation of democracy as 'anything goes'. With this new-found freedom has come a general rejection of boundaries and any frameworks that appear to limit freedom, including biblical teaching. Although it is estimated that approximately half of the youth attend church, the teaching received seemingly has little

impact on their lives and their sexual behaviour. Even among the youth found within churches, there are many who are sexually active (Mash and Kareithi 2005). HIV prevalence continues to increase in many provinces.

In this context, there is considerable pressure on young women to have sex without condoms, stemming from a range of factors including peer pressure, economic situations, thrill and excitement, and simply wanting a baby. A common phrase reportedly used by teenagers in Mthatha is 'How can you enjoy eating a sweet while it is covered in paper?' (Church HIV and AIDS worker).

Our fieldwork revealed that the church is struggling to be relevant in this context. Teaching from the evangelical churches comes primarily in the form of negative, unsupportive and blame-laden comments, such as 'you have HIV because of your promiscuity'. The message given out is that 'sex is bad and sex is wrong' (personal communication, NGO worker), with an over-riding emphasis on judgement. It also became clear during our fieldwork that some churches are failing to engage with this situation. They seemed unable or unwilling to help equip young women to withstand the pressures mentioned and despite the fact that young people repeatedly expressed an emotional need for help in dealing with issues of sexual intimacy, churches were not offering this. Churches are failing to provide a safe space where men and women can share their anxieties and work through the changing social context in which they live. Our research showed that the church is not playing the positive role it could in restoring people's sense of self worth and value.

It is not only in its lack of response to the crisis that the church is struggling. At the same time, it is failing to lead by example on matters of sex, gender relations and HIV and AIDS in its own behaviour. In a society where displays of masculinity are extremely important, men still take most positions of leadership in the church. Some men in these positions are known to abuse their power, for example, by being unfaithful to their wives. As a result there is a considerable, visible collision between what the church preaches and the reality its leaders practise. Rather than living lives that affirm basic Christian beliefs and therefore setting an example to the rest of society, some leaders' practices mirror a society that conflicts with these Christian teachings. As one interviewee said, the church is seen to 'look good on the outside and underneath has a broken and disturbed sense of self and being'.

Burkina Faso and Zimbabwe

There are some similarities between what we found in South Africa and what we found in Burkina Faso and Zimbabwe. For example, many churches were found to accept prevailing values from society, rather than examine their compatibility with biblical teaching; at the same time, they make selective use of biblical texts to reinforce these values. The focus in some local churches appeared to be strongly on evangelism, rather than discipleship. Whilst evangelism concerns itself primarily with proclaiming the gospel of Christ to convert, discipleship stresses the importance of enabling

Christians to live out a new life different from that found in society, calling for behaviour change in line with the focus of following Christ.

In the rural communities that we visited, a common pattern emerged of wives being submissive to their husbands, and the men taking biblical texts out of context in order to back up their opinions and justify the way they treated their wives. In these cases, believing strongly in their own interpretation of the text, the men genuinely believed they were right. One pastor in Zimbabwe, for example, told us, 'I expect my wife to bow down before me as I bow down before Christ.' When asked how he reconciled this with a preceding passage in the Bible, which states that all Christians should 'submit to one another' (Ephesians 5: verse 21) and that husbands are called to love their wives 'as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (Ephesians 5: verse 25), he replied 'We find that difficult.' In Burkina Faso we found this approach of selective interpretation of the Bible had dire consequences for relationships. In some cases, husbands felt they were in 'successful' relationships, when they were in fact using and abusing their wives. Women, on the other hand, felt very differently, as one woman's comment sums up: 'Our husbands treat us like beasts and animals. They come in, have sex and leave.'

These sensitive and difficult situations are unlikely to be appreciated by church leaders, who are usually men. In rural Zimbabwe in particular, this is so despite the fact that the adult congregation is almost entirely female. There, even if male leaders do have an understanding or sympathy with women, they have little standing with men outside the church, who see church as a place for women and children. 'What can I do? The men don't come to church and when I visit homes they don't want to speak to me', said one pastor we spoke to in rural Zimbabwe. In Burkina Faso and urban Zimbabwe, where there are relatively higher proportions of men within congregations, it is more possible to work with couples.

One long-term strategy used in both countries is to improve the training of church leaders and their understanding of biblical teaching on sex and marriage, particularly around the role of sex to bring pleasure to both husband and wife, and deepen their relationship. In Zimbabwe, CAT is already working with a local theological training institute to train new pastors on HIV and AIDS. So many of the congregations now face this issue that it is seen as essential to equip pastors to deal with the reality of the problems they will face.

Conclusion

Underlying inequalities in gender relations exacerbate the impact HIV and AIDS are having on women and girls. Women are often the most vulnerable and marginalised within African communities. Our visits to Mthatha, Pietermaritzburg, Bulawayo, and Ouagadougou confirmed that the church has, at times, misunderstood Biblical teaching and, as a result, contributed to the problem. In the absence of teaching to

the contrary, church adherents assume that the church endorses traditional values and practices relating to gender. Some evangelical churches maintain traditional values, for instance that women should serve, and be subservient to, men, rather than teaching equal submission in love. This has serious implications in the context of HIV and AIDS. Among other things, married women within the church are unable to challenge the unfaithfulness of their husbands, or negotiate the use of a condom for safer sex. Both these situations may increase the risk of infection with HIV. The church has failed to provide leadership to young people, especially young women, facing huge pressure to be sexually active.

The call to action

On the basis of this research, Tearfund is funding a small pilot initiative to try new ways of working with the church to change behaviours, and to balance biblical theology and work to address the gender inequity in the relationships between men and women in the church. Working with and funding the two partners, Vigilance and CAT, the pilot programmes seeks to gain a better understanding of the gender issues in the evangelical church context and facilitate a change in attitudes in the areas where the partners work. Vigilance and CAT will work with a number of churches exploring issues of gender, sexual rights and HIV and AIDS with the intention of enabling them to find appropriate responses to the issues. In doing so, the programme hopes to mobilise men and women to reduce the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV and AIDS. The evangelical churches in Africa are uniquely placed, often at the centre of the community, enjoying respect and exercising influence with a wide-ranging audience and therefore well able to bring about positive change. This uniqueness has not been fully exploited when looking at gender inequity and its relationship to the spread of HIV and AIDS across Africa. The church can be a catalyst for change in the local community, transforming lives, attitudes and behaviour.

The response proposed in Zimbabwe and Burkina Faso is essentially to bring the message of God's intended relationships between men and women to different groups. In Zimbabwe, CAT will emphasise changing the values of a local community, as there is evidence that community norms determine individuals' behaviour. In a high-density urban area, this will take place through a local church, targeting different members of the congregation in different ways with a consistent message. In a rural area, a partnership of agencies will communicate a common set of messages to all the key stakeholder groups including school students, men at work, traditional leaders, and church leaders and members, with each agency having particular targets. In Burkina Faso, Vigilance will work through church structures in urban and rural areas by means of in-depth contact with particular groups.

Already, CAT has developed a paper proposing a position for local churches to agree on gender and HIV and AIDS. This sets out 'supra-cultural' principles for all Christians, asserting that the church should acknowledge that God has made men and women different but equal, and address the implications of this, especially in terms of empowering young women.

If successful, it is expected that the process will be used in other communities, theological institutions and pastoral training courses to influence and transform present and future church leaders. Local people external to the churches, but who understand the context, language and culture of the church in Africa, will facilitate the entire process.

CAT and Vigilance will face their own organisational challenges as they work on this project and will face external opposition in some areas as they move forward. Tearfund believes that prayer is an integral part of all that we do, that God answers prayer and that this can bring about change. Given this belief, the project will include the establishment of a regular prayer group to pray about this specific issue over the next two years, and to ask for help and guidance in the challenges CAT and Vigilance may face.

Future issues

As mentioned before, if these activities are successful, there will be scope to extend the interventions to many other places where African Christian leaders are recognising the need to address what the church believes and communicates concerning gender relations, especially in the context of HIV and AIDS. This could be the beginning of a movement of leaders in the evangelical church in Africa who are restless with the church and want to work with it to equip it to take on the challenges ahead. The church is a powerful institution which, harnessed for good, can make a massive impact.

There is always hope for the future and a recognition that changes can and do happen. A doctor at the workshop in Zimbabwe looking at the issue of gender, HIV and the church said, 'I have begun to see God using me more even amongst my colleagues at work. I know the workshop didn't just benefit me in terms of ideas but a spiritual deposit was put in my heart that has left me not the same.'

Tearfund hopes this attitude will spread among many Christians across Africa and begin a movement for change that will leave the continent transformed.

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Nigel Taylor is an independent development consultant, with long experience relating to Africa. He is particularly interested in the response to HIV and AIDS, especially enhancing the effectiveness of international aid, and the role of faith, and faith-based organisations. He dedicates this article to the memory of Yvonne Dlomo, Natasha Ndlovu, and many other women of Africa who have inspired him, but smile no more because of AIDS. Email: lotheni@yahoo.co.uk

Notes

- 1 We are grateful to all of the people who, graciously and so generously, gave us their time, thoughts and resources during our field visits. Particular thanks to the staff of Christian AIDS Taskforce and Vigilance for organising such comprehensive visits. Also to Lynell Bergen and Brian Dyck, Graham and Colleen Beggs, and Janet and David Cunningham for their generous hospitality.
- 2 The term 'evangelical' comes from the Greek word for 'Gospel' or 'good news'. To be *evangelical* means to be acting in agreement with spreading *the good news* message of the New Testament. The word 'evangelicalism' usually refers to branches of Christianity typified by an emphasis on a personal experience of conversion, biblically oriented faith, and a belief in the relevance of the Christian faith to cultural issues, including social justice. Evangelicals are found in a wide range of denominations. Many groups in the South are fast growing, especially among poor communities. The size of the evangelical movement inevitably leads to diversity. For example, in North America evangelicalism tends to have an image of being politically and theologically conservative, although many North American evangelicals would reject such a caricature. In the UK and many other parts of the world, evangelicals are often strong supporters of social justice. Tearfund acknowledges that parts of the constituency hold unhelpful perspectives and have not responded well to poverty. Tearfund looks to play a critical role in connecting the capacities and resources of its supporter base in the UK with Christians in the South who are committed to its principles, and in challenging other evangelicals in both North and South.
- 3 For background information see: www.tearfund.org
- 4 Gender in Relief and Development policy, Tearfund 1998.
- 5 We define this as men and women being equal in the eyes of God, living in partnership with one another, living together in love, respect, and mutual trust.
- 6 In many traditions, when a man dies, his family forces his widow either to marry a brother, or at least to sleep with one. The woman has no say in this matter as she is seen as the property of the husband's family. In some areas, this has been ended due to HIV and AIDS, but a brother remains the administrator of all the possessions of the dead man's household. He may then exploit the widow's vulnerability in demanding sexual favours.
- 7 This is a cultural practice where a girl, or a wife, is given to a male visitor for sexual intercourse as a demonstration of welcome and friendship.
- 8 In parts of Southern Africa, women believe that men are more sexually satisfied if their vagina is 'dry'. So, they go out of their way to use herbs and other inserted material that

cause the vagina to be dry in the belief that men prefer or require this. This makes them more vulnerable to infection.

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