
Women and HIV/AIDS

The Role of Faith Communities

The Views of Professor Elizabeth Ngugi

There are few women in Kenya who have been more involved in the struggle against HIV/AIDS as Professor Ngugi. She is the founder and Co-Director of the Strengthening STD/HIV/AIDS Control Project and is also a Founder and Director of the International Women's AIDS Run. Her work with and compassion for commercial sex workers is well known. In 2004 Professor Ngugi received a UN award in recognition of her work on Women and AIDS. She answered the questions posed by WAJIBU in writing.

WAJIBU Prof. Ngugi, faith-based organizations have an important role to play in the struggle towards the prevention of HIV/AIDS as well as in reducing the impact of the pandemic on all those infected or affected. As we all know, women bear the heaviest burdens of this disease. Speaking in general, are religious leaders a help or a hindrance in lessening the burdens of the women?

Professor Ngugi. Let me first and foremost underscore the importance of faith communities as change agents.

But there is no cut and dry answer to the above question, the reason being that all faith communities are strong in promoting abstinence and mutual faithfulness in marriage. But then they differ sharply when it comes to male/female condom education, provision and use, even if it is the only HIV/AIDS prevention method after abstinence and faithfulness have not worked, and in a case where one spouse is infected and the other not. The directive [against the use of condoms] from some faith communities facilitates the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Another point is that even when the woman knows her husband is having

extra-marital sex which can expose her to HIV infection, she is not allowed to refuse to have sex with her husband until such time that an HIV test is done to indicate whether she is infected or not. This is not only a gender issue but violation of her right to remain HIV negative (if that is her status).

We can certainly say that Kenyans as a whole have become much better informed about the various causes of HIV/AIDS and we know that there has been some reduction in its incidence. If new cases continue none the less to crop up daily, to what factors do you attribute this and how can faith communities assist in changing this situation?

It is true that HIV infection in Kenya is coming down, i.e. from 15% in 2002 to 7.3% currently.

But it must be said that change of sexual behaviour is viewed as difficult by the majority of people as it is a human need. And people **do** engage in risky behaviour such as lack of abstinence, not being mutually faithful and having unprotected sex.

Therefore, continuous HIV/AIDS education and skill building in all preventive practices including negotiation of safe/safer sex is necessary. Coupled with this, girls and women must be empowered to negotiate no sex status or safer sex practices. And boys and men must respect this. They too need targeted education which supports them to use their higher social/cultural/economic status responsibly. Faith communities should support these processes in order to prevent new HIV infections.

Kenyans are, on the whole, very religious. And our faiths teach us love, compassion and a non-judgmental attitude. Then to what do you attribute

the fact that people living with HIV/AIDS, and especially women, are still so often stigmatized and even shunned?

It is true that Kenya is a very religious country and its various faith communities teach us love, compassion and non-judgment. Yet with respect to HIV/AIDS, in many cases the community moralizes, thus stigmatizing it and causing those who are HIV positive to continue hiding their HIV sero-status and to continue with their sexual life as usual.

Women living with the virus are even more stigmatized and discriminated against with some people calling them loose women or even prostitutes. As if they are not children of God. Their creator loves them and so should we.

To summarize what I have said: Faith communities have a moral obligation to be better partners in halting the spread of HIV/AIDS by:

- Vigorous HIV/AIDS education and skill building.
- Focusing more on men as regards being faithful as well as on boys/young men abstaining.
- Promoting male and female condoms not as a birth control but as HIV prevention just like treated mosquito nets prevent malaria.
- Empower women and girls to negotiate safe/safer sex practices.
- Having a strategy for reducing stigma and discrimination against HIV/AIDS infected persons. For example, those clergymen who are infected should come out and reveal their HIV sero-status to their congregation.