

# **GENDER INEQUALITY AND THE SCOURGE OF HIV/AIDS**

## **The Bahai Religio-Philosophical Solution**

**Don Akhilomen and Idjakpo Onos Godwin\***

### **1. Introduction**

One of the most complex challenges facing contemporary Africa is how to resolve the frightening health crises, especially that posed by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. With the continent hosting about 70% of the world's total population of infected people, HIV/AIDS is correctly to be described as African holocaust.<sup>1</sup> The very high incidence of HIV/AIDS in Africa, and the even more worrying overwhelming preponderance of female infection, rightly provokes the thinking that there is a gender dimension to the HIV/AIDS scourge in the sub-Saharan continent of Africa.

In this essay, we shall be examining the character of the HIV/AIDS infection and its effects within the socio-cultural praxis of gender inequality in Africa. Adopting the empirical, expository and analytical methodologies, this paper seeks to establish that gender inequality is a core factor in explaining and understating the character of HIV/AIDS infection and the care of the affected in Africa. By means of the hermeneutical method, it is suggested that the adoption of the egalitarian principles and teachings advocated in the Bahai religion will greatly help in appropriately addressing and solving the complex challenges posed by HIV/AIDS through the resolution of the social and cultural problem of gender inequality in Africa.

### **2. Bahai Religion**

Founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as the successor to Babism, the "Bahai" religion derived its name from Arabic, meaning, "Glorious." Its founder, whose birth name was Mirza Husain Ali (1817-1892), saw himself as the fulfilment of the prophecy of the Bab (meaning in Arabic, "the Gate"), the prophet of Babism. On instituting the Babi religion in 1844, the Bab foretold the future appearance, 19 years after, of a divine personality

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\***Dr. Don Akhilomen** is a Professor of Religious Management and Cultural Studies, at Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma and **Dr. Idjakpo Onos Godwin** is a Senior lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, in the same University.

<sup>1</sup>A. Adogame, "Announcement of the IAHR Regional Conference and Third AASR Conference in Africa", 2007. <http://www.a-asr.org> Retrieved on the 10/2/2009.

“whom God would make manifest.”<sup>2</sup> Mirza Husain Ali, who was born in Persia, was one of the followers of the Bab.<sup>3</sup>

After the Bab’s martyrdom in 1850, Mirza Husain Ali adopted the name “Baha Allah” (which means in Arabic, “the splendour of God”) and became the leader of one of several Babi factions. In 1852, the Persian government, in line with its official policy of persecuting Babis, massacred some 20,000 of the Bab’s followers; in the course of which, Baha Allah, together with his family, and some of his own followers were spared from death. He was however imprisoned, tortured and finally expelled to Baghdad, from where he and his followers were also subsequently forced to migrate to Istanbul in Turkey, and finally to a penal colony in Akko in Palestine (now Israel), where he remained till his death. While in Baghdad, in 1863, Baha Allah declared he was the manifestation of the divine figure whom the Bab had foretold 19 years earlier (in 1844). His followers, now known as Bahais, believe that he was the latest in a series of divine manifestations that include Zoroaster, the Buddha, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad. They also believe that he brought a new revelation to the world.<sup>4</sup>

Baha Allah strove to establish a universal religion and philosophy, which calls for moral and social compensation of the underprivileged, were chiefly disseminated by his eldest son, Abbas-later known as Abd al-Baha (meaning in Arabic, “the servant of the Glory”). Abd al-Baha was imprisoned for years, like his father before him. He was subsequently freed, and travelled to Europe and North America to spread his father’s teachings. He summed up the Bahai faith in a creed that included among its aims: the promotion of racial and religious harmony; the equality of the sexes; an international auxiliary language; a universal education; a universal faith based on the essence of the great religions; and, a universal representative government.<sup>5</sup> The writings of the Bab, Baha Allah, and Abd al-Baha constitute the sacred literature of the Bahai religion, which has no other institutional authority. The movement lacks both priesthood and ritual. In his will, Abd al-Baha designated his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897-1957), a graduate of Harvard University, as the guardian of the Faith.

<sup>2</sup>Abdul Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, Wilmette, Illinois: Bahai Publishing Trust, 1990, XI.

<sup>3</sup>“Bahai”, *Microsoft Encarta Reference Library*, 2002.

<sup>4</sup>Abdul Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, ix-xiii.

<sup>5</sup>“Bahai”, *Microsoft Encarta Reference Library*, 2002. See also <http://religionsmovements.lib.virginia.edu>, Retrieved on the 7/6/2007.

Though Bahaim originally arose in Persia, not later than 1920, it had built up its greatest following in the United States. Under the direction of Shoghi Efendi, the US Bahais developed an administrative system with headquarters in Wilmette, Illinois. Wherever nine or more Bahais reside, a "spiritual assembly" may be formed. Bahaim has adherents in more than 300 countries including some countries in Africa. The Bahai faith was first declared in Africa in 1921 in the northern part of the continent.<sup>6</sup> From the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the religion began to reach other parts of the African continent with a number of Africans becoming followers of the Bahai faith that has "its headquarters for Africa in Kampala, Uganda where there is a large temple built on a hill."<sup>7</sup> With over five million followers residing in almost every nation on earth, the Bahai religion surpasses some religions in its geographic spread.<sup>8</sup> The movement has its world headquarters in Israel, on the slopes of Mount Carmel overlooking Haifa and Akko, where a shrine of the Bab, an archive and an administrative centre are located.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Gender Inequality

Gender inequality or gender discrimination has become a sad and unfortunate part of human history. Regrettably, this has been the case from the earliest beginnings.<sup>10</sup> *The Black's Law Dictionary* has defined discrimination as "Differential treatment; especially, a failure to treat all persons equally when no reasonable distinction can be found between those favored and those not favored."<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, gender or sex discrimination has been defined as the "Discrimination based on gender, especially against women."<sup>12</sup> Sadly, male chauvinism seems to have nourished, on a global scale, the discrimination against women at the cultural, legal, social, political and religious levels. This is especially true of Africa, where there are many forms of gender discrimination, reinforced by stereotypes, culture, traditions and religious beliefs.

In view of the negative effects of gender discrimination on human development, especially on the part of women, the past thirty years has witnessed a number of agitations for gender equality by human right

<sup>6</sup>J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, London: Heinemann, 1977, 188.

<sup>7</sup>Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 188.

<sup>8</sup><http://religionsmovements.lib.virginia.edu>, Retrieved on the 7/6/2007.

<sup>9</sup>"Bahai" in *Microsoft Encarta Reference Library*, 2002.

<sup>10</sup>Alan Wolfe, "The Gender Question," *The New Republic*, June 6, 2007, 27-34.

<sup>11</sup>B.A. Garner, *Blacks' Law Dictionary*, St. Paul, Minn: West Group, 1999, 479.

<sup>12</sup>Garner, *Blacks' Law Dictionary*, 480.

institutions and the feminist movement. The effect of the women liberation movement and the human right struggles has been a greater awareness of the evils of gender discrimination, culminating in the recognition and declaration of women's right as human right by the International Covenants on Human Rights and the conventions of the United Nation's Commission on the Status of Woman. In harmony with the demands of the traditional liberal feminists, the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, in September, 1995 decided to set out an Agenda for Equality.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. HIV/AIDS

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a member of the Retroviridae family of viruses, commonly known as retroviruses and classified in the subfamily, lentiviruses. HIV was isolated in 1983 almost simultaneously by three groups of scientist: Luc Montagnier's group at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, Robert Gallo's group at the National Cancer Institute, and a group headed by Jay Levy at the University of California, San Francisco. A result of human infection with HIV is the complex clinical disease known as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS); a condition which may take ten or more years to develop. It is "a clinical syndrome (a group of various illnesses that together characterize a disease) resulting from damage to the immune system caused by infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)."<sup>14</sup>

The origin of HIV in human beings is extensively claimed to have resulted from cross-species transfer of a Simian Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV) from the chimpanzee, *Pan Troglodytes troglodyte*, in central Africa, probably centuries ago.<sup>15</sup> Two main types of HIV have been identified. These are known as HIV-1 and HIV -2. HIV-1 is said to be responsible for the majority of infections in the West, (Europe and American) while both HIV-1 and HIV-2 are prevalent in Africa. HIV-2 is associated with a less aggressive disease course than HIV-1. HIV -1 has been further classified into several subtypes, known as "clades," whose geographical distribution varies from country to country.

<sup>13</sup>There were three major United Nations' Conferences held (in 1975, 1980 and 1985) prior to the one in Beijing, China in 1995; the latter "centered on human rights issues relating specifically to women." See "Women's Movement" in *Microsoft Encarta Reference Library*, 2002.

<sup>14</sup>"Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome" in *Microsoft Encarta Reference Library*, 2002.

<sup>15</sup>"Human Immunodeficiency Virus" in *Microsoft Encarta Reference Library*, 2002.

In individuals infected by HIV, there is a gradual loss of immune cells (call CD4 + T-lymphocytes) and a resultant declining immune function. "The loss of immune function, if untreated, results eventually in the development of opportunistic diseases caused by common infections that do not present a threat to healthy individuals, including fungal, bacterial, protozoal, and viral diseases, as well as by malignancies that appear to be associated with immune dysregulation."<sup>16</sup> Death from AIDS is generally not due to HIV infection itself, but due to opportunistic conditions following the appearance of any one of more than twenty different opportunistic infection and malignancies, termed AIDS defining illnesses, which provides the clinical diagnosis of AIDS in HIV-infected individuals.

### **5. Gender Inequality as a Factor in HIV/AIDS Incidence in Africa**

The epidemic proportion of HIV/AIDS infection in Africa, no doubt, justifies a rationalization of the ugly phenomenal which has made the continent to be stereotyped as, "the cradle of disease and death."<sup>17</sup> With about 30 million of the total world figure of 40 million infected people claimed to be living in Africa, the need to comprehensively locate the factors that can possibly explain the African peculiarity and vulnerability becomes very urgent and imperative. Out of the roughly 30 million infected people in Africa, it is believed that about 20 million, representing 75% are of the female gender. The gender bias of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa becomes more worrisome when it is further realized that the burden of the care of those infected and affected by the disease in Africa, largely lies on the shoulders of the females; either as mothers, aunties, wives, sisters or nurses.

The above reality of the gender character of HIV/AIDS infection and its effects in Africa, evidently underscores the thinking, which this paper now seeks to establish, that gender inequality is a fundamental factor in HIV/AIDS incidence in the continent. The role of gender inequality in the very high incidence of HIV/AIDS infection in Africa will be examined further from the educational, cultural, economic and social perspectives.

### **6. Educational Inequality**

In pre-independent Africa societies, there was a very high degree of gender inequality in the area of formal education. Even up to the present time, this

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<sup>16</sup>"Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome" in *Microsoft Encarta Reference Library*, 2002.

<sup>17</sup>Adogame, "Announcement of the IAHR Regional Conference."

educational inequality against the female child evidently persists in African societies, in several guises. To the majority of Africans, the woman's place is in the kitchen. Hence, it is commonly assumed that African families, majority of which are already impoverished, need not have the added burden of educating girl children, as they will most likely end up being domesticated in the homes of their future husbands. Considering the cost of education and the poor economic fortunes of the majority of Africans, educating a girl child is therefore erroneously considered a wasteful and unreasonable investment.

Even in cases where the values of educating the females have been fairly realized, patriarchal considerations tend to influence the discrimination against the woman concerning the courses to study. In this respect, women are often assumed to be unfit to study professional courses that are likely to give them some level of independence and enhance their economic wellbeing. This explains why it is assumed that women should study courses in education (teaching), nursing, catering, etc., rather than studying engineering, law, or medicine. In such circumstances, for example, women who study law are presumed to be likely to be less submissive and more troublesome in marriage; the ones who study engineering are thought to be very likely to be too involved with men and masculine activities; while the female doctors are condemned for the possibility of having physical access and contact with other men in the course of their professional practice, and these are strangely considered in most Africa communities as immoral.

Part of the consequences of the poor and unwilling attitude of Africans to educate the female children is the high degree of ignorance which is to be found among the vast majority of women in the continent. This level of ignorance, directly and negatively impact on the high incidence of HIV/AIDS infection in Africa. This ignorance manifests in several dimensions which includes: the lack of knowledge of basic hygiene; the ignorance of the universal methods of transmission of HIV and the causes of AIDS; the accommodation of many unhealthy beliefs and practices informed by ignorance, which tends to promote the spread of HIV/AIDS infection in the continent. Among the latter is the entering of lovers into blood covenant to secure love relationships; thereby exposing more people to unscreened blood which is one of the ways of transmitting the virus. In most cases, this practice is cherished by women who are desperate to get hooked to a man as a possible wife in a society which does not value a woman for her intrinsic worth but more for her marital status.



Other beliefs and practices stemming from ignorance and distorted orientation, which possibly account for the high incidence of HIV infections in Africa include the belief that AIDS is not real but an "American Invention to Discourage Sex"; that sexual intercourse with a man who uses condom rubs the act of pleasure; that insisting on the use of condom by a woman signals the lack of love for the man or that the woman is too spoilt; and that the hindered reception by the woman of ejaculated sperm in a protected sexual intercourse denies her of vital nutrients essential for the bodily vitality and hair growth. From the above, it is perhaps much more convincing that the poor educational exposure of the majority of people in Africa, especially the women, who are more disadvantaged because of the combination of poverty (which causes the inability of parents to educate both the male of female children, equally) and patriarchy, account for the very high incidence of HIV/AIDS in the continent.

### 7. Economic Inequality

Economically, the female gender in Africa is largely known to be disempowered.<sup>18</sup> From the traditional till the present day society, this attitude seems to have been consistent. For example, in the predominantly agrarian traditional societies, women were encouraged to cultivate the subsistent, consumable crops rather than the essential cash crops; thereby economically disempowering them. Today, in most African societies, patriarchy has also inspired the attitude of not encouraging women to meaningfully engage in serious commercial, political or professional career activities, by tacitly stigmatizing women who engage in these highly economically promising ventures, as loose women of easy virtue. In some African societies, there are even some traditional and cultural restrictions and discriminations concerning the right of ownership of the core productive factor of land in the community. In such societies, like those in South East of Nigeria, women are not allowed to own, inherit or sell land, by themselves.

Hence, one of the many sad consequences of poor education, patriarchy, male chauvinism and sometimes misogyny, is the economic impoverishment of women, which makes them more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection, thereby partly accounting for the high incidence of the disease in Africa. The poor economic condition of most of the

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<sup>18</sup>O. A. Akinsan, "Women and the Church: An Appraisal" in Dopama A. P. Abubakre R. D. et al. eds., *Religion, Leadership and Society: Focus on Nigeria*, Nigerian Association for the Study of Religion, 2004, 99-100.

women/girls makes them easy preys and cheap sex gratifying tools in the hands of the relatively more financially empowered males in the communities. In this way, the disadvantaged economic status of the women serves as a weakness which lures some un-willing women into accepting unwanted advances from men; the bulk of which, most likely, results in unprotected sexual intercourse.

### 8. Cultural Inequality

As it is very well known, culture is the totality of the way of life of a people.<sup>19</sup> In both the material and immaterial aspect of the African cultures, there seems to have been entrenched, gender inequality, inspired by patriarchy and stereotypes. The culture of the Africans appears predominantly to favour the male and disadvantage the female gender. For example, Africans generally seem to prefer the male child over and above the female child. In Africa, the birth of a male child is generally far more valued and celebrated than the birth of a female child. In Nigeria, for instance, the newly born male child is often heard described as the delivery of “full current” or “full voltage” (a highly valued phenomenal in electrical power supply, especially in a country with dire energy problems), whereas that of the female child is derided from birth as the birth of “along the road” or “ashawo” (local term or name for prostitute). This not only has the effect of injuring the female’s feelings, but more so, has the harmful consequence of setting a low societal estimation of a woman’s worth and negatively psychically conditioning the female for a life of easy virtue, with its attendant possibility of festering the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Another character of African culture which is very critical to the issues of gender inequality and the phenomenal of HIV/AIDS is to be found in the area of marriage. In Africa, the most popular form of marriage is the polygamous type, where a man can legitimately marry more than one woman as wife at the same time.<sup>20</sup> This type of marriage is legitimized by the various Native Laws and Customs of the people. Unlike the practice in the developed societies of Europe and America, where there are various legislations which forbids polygamous marriages as bigamy, Africa societies officially allow and recognizes both the monogamous and

<sup>19</sup>M. E. Omohan, “Society, Culture and the Individual” in Isiramen C.O. and Elekhame L. A. eds., *Reading in General Studies* Vol.2, Ekpoma A.A.U Publishing House, 2004, 112-114.

<sup>20</sup>M. E Omohan, “African World View” in Isiramen C. O. and Flekhame L. A. eds., *Reading in General Studies*, vol. 2, Ekpoma A.A.U Publishing House. 2004, 142.



polygamous marriages. Polygamous marriages are not only tolerated, allowed and recognized in Africa, they are often valued, celebrated and glamorized as evidence of a man's prosperity and virility.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, a man in Africa is not considered to have committed adultery if he has sexual dealings with a woman, other than his wife, who at the time is not another man's wife. Hence, even in marriage, a man may keep other lovers as mistresses and concubines. Considering the sexually permissive attitude of Africans in favour of the men, the health risk to the women especially those in a polygamous relationship is very high. Thus, a polygamous man who has other sexual relationships outside his marriage may get infected of HIV from one of such relationships and come home to possibly infest all his wives. This, perhaps, partly explains the very high incidence of female infections which is due to their vulnerability rather than promiscuity as it may sometimes be imagined or assumed.

In many African communities, the practice of female circumcision (*clitoridectomy*) is rife. This practice of female genital mutilation has become difficult to effectively discourage because it is popularized and perpetrated by patriarchy which seeks to achieve a dwindled libido in women. This practice, which has been variously criticized as unhealthy, terrible and a breach of the women's right, tends to have some fundamental implications for HIV/AIDS status in the continent. For example, in some African societies, circumcision rites are a communal ritual performed for all female members of the community as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood.<sup>22</sup> At such events, all the young girls are collectively circumcised with the dangerous possibility of mass infection of HIV, in view of the obviously high level of bloodletting and the likelihood of the use of un-sterilized tools at such occasions. In addition, the manipulatively decreased sexual drive in circumcised women makes a more intense and vigorous sexual intercourse necessary to reach orgasm, thereby increasing the chances of epidermal laceration of the virginal favourable for HIV transmission.

Finally on the cultural note, the subject matter of sex is treated as sacred in Africa. The actual reason for this is uncertain. However, it is believed that religious and moral sentiments inform this attitude. This explains why sex is hardly publicly discussed in Africa, especially by women. For example, euphemistic words or phrases are employed to refer to sexual intercourse and sexual organs. This sacred and reserved attitude

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<sup>21</sup>Omohan, "African World View," 142.

<sup>22</sup>Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 91-92.

towards sex makes the indulgence in it a highly secretive act. This secretive mode of engaging in sexual affairs makes the keeping of many shrouded multiple sexual relationships, which are un-disclosed, un-discussed and possibly un-protected, likely to be common in Africa; and un-protected sex has been acknowledged as one of the principle medium of transmitting the HIV and spreading AIDS.

### 9. Social Inequality

Socially, women in Africa are largely discriminated against. Generally, the female folks are more to be seen than to be heard. In fact, the married women are almost treated as properties of their husbands, whom they are supposed to loyally and lovingly serve and if they do not, expected to be thrown out of the marriage; an institution which is believed to confer the highest honour and social value on the women in Africa. Hence, many Africans believe that women exist for the purpose of attending to the domestic, sexual and procreative needs of men. Women/girls are also commonly regarded as housekeepers and not economic, social or political drivers in African societies. To most Africans, the place of the women is the home and not public life. This perhaps explains why females are mostly the ones who are hired as house helpers, a phenomenon also known as domestic slavery. As house helpers, female children and young girls are often abused sexually, by the male members in such homes.<sup>23</sup> Thus, women become the most vulnerable segment of the society to HIV infection, occasioned by abuses arising largely from sentiments and attitudes born out of social inequality.

In Africa, it is wrongly believed that a man's social status and virility is evidenced by his philandering character while the women are branded as prostitutes if they attempt to relate with more than one man. In the campaign against HIV/AIDS in Africa, emphasis is placed on the use of condom by men. Female condoms are not popular and hardly available. The available male condoms are expected not to be found with or kept by women. Whenever a woman is found keeping condoms or request for its use in an intercourse, she is often quickly branded a whore. Thus, with the adverse attitude of Africans towards women keeping and using sexually protective devises such as condoms, the permissive and philandering attitude of the men becomes doubly dangerous.

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<sup>23</sup>D. O. Akhilomen, "Addressing Child Abuse in Southern Nigeria: The Role of the Church" in Alistair K. Ed. *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 12, pt 3, The Edinburgh Review of Theology and Religion, 2006.

Finally, the gender influence on social relations in virtually all African communities virtually assign the role of catering for the health and wellbeing of members of the homes, families and communities to the women. Gender role distinction or discrimination in this regard is widespread in Africa. Hence, women have had practically foisted on them, solely by virtue of their sex, the gender role of acting as nurses and caring for the sick. This social inequality of gender role discrimination becomes critical to the issue of HIV/AIDS in the area of the care and support for people living with the virus or the disease. In fact, women become the most affected group in the society not only because they constitute the bulk of those infected, but also because they become almost solely saddled with the responsibility of nursing those infected, and caring for those affected (for example, those orphaned) by the scourge.

#### **10. The Bahai Principle of Gender Equality to Combat HIV/AIDS**

The Bahai is a religion which seems to adopt exceptional attitude towards contemporary social problems. The faith's scriptures and the diverse activities of its membership speak to virtually every important trend in the world today; from new thinking about cultural diversity and environmental conservation to the decentralization of decision making; from a renewed commitment to family life and moral values to the call for social and economic justice in a globalizing world.<sup>24</sup> This, perhaps, also explains why the Bahai faith seems to have an inimitable stance on the question of gender inequality among humans.

On the issue of gender inequality, the Bahai position is manifestly unambiguous, requiring no special reinterpretation or apologies in an era of increasing campaign for the equality of the sexes. As Jane Khan rightly said, “there is little sense of apology or justification. That is because the Bahai Faith not only explicitly upholds the spiritual equality of women and men in its sacred scriptures but also unequivocally states that this equality must today be ‘expressed in both individual and social practice.’<sup>25</sup> The Bahai position concerning gender inequality can be distinctly appreciated from the educational, social, cultural and economic perspectives as it affects the incidence of HIV/AIDS in Africa.

For a global society to flourish, Baha Allah said, it must be based on certain fundamental principles, which include: the elimination of all forms of

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<sup>24</sup>Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 188.

<sup>25</sup>Cited in “Reinterpreting Religion without Reference to Gender,” *One Country*, vol. 13. 3, October-December 2001.

prejudice; full equality between the sexes; the elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth; universal education; the harmony of science and religion; and the oneness of humanity.<sup>26</sup> The Bahai faith has a system of values that categorically upholds the principle of the equality of women and men in all areas of human endeavour. The Bahai faith's advocacy of the principle of gender equality is especially vital in those parts of the world, including Africa, where the rights of women are traditionally and persistently denied; negatively manifesting in sundry socio-economic problems and the very high incidence of HIV/AIDS in the-Saharan continent.

A key area where the Bahai holds the capacity for addressing the HIV/AIDS scourge in the African continent is in the call for gender equality in the field of education. Education has been generally acknowledged as a vital ingredient for human and societal development. In the Bahai faith, great emphasis is placed on education as a means also of promoting the advancement of women. As it is well known, education provides opportunity for the acquisition of knowledge and moral values conducive to social evolution, the development of the mind, and training in logical and analytical thinking, organizational, administrative and management skills, as well as enhanced self esteem and improved status within the community.<sup>27</sup> These many advantages which education confers, understandably explains why the Bahai religion advocates that girls and boys follow the same curriculum in school. Women are encouraged by the Bahai religion to study the arts, crafts, sciences and professions and to enter all fields of work, even those traditionally regarded as belonging to the exclusive province of men.<sup>28</sup> The Bahai religion does not only uphold the principle of universal education, it also accords priority to the education of girls and women when and where resources are limited. This "affirmative policy" or practice of "positive discrimination" in favour of the female gender by the Bahai teaching is justified with the argument that "it is only through educated mother that the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society," mothers being "the first educators of the next generation."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup><http://religionsmovements.lib.virginia.edu>, Retrieved on the 7/6/2007.

<sup>27</sup>C. Maduka, *Philosophy of General Concerns of Education*, Nigeria: Society for Social Philosophy Policy and Research, 1998, 33-36, 237.

<sup>28</sup>J. A. Khan, "Introduction." *The Greatness Which Might Be Theirs*. Beijing, China, Wilmette Bahai Publishing Trust, 1995, 1-2. see also <http://statements.bahai.org>

<sup>29</sup>"Two Wings of a Bird: A Statement on the Equality of Men and Women" by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahai's of the United States, [www.bahai.us](http://www.bahai.us)

The principle of gender equality in the field of education among other things, guarantees the enlightenment and acquisition of skills by women. Education, informed by the ideal of the equality of the sexes, holds the promise of equipping African women with increased knowledge of how to take care of themselves and others in the society, especially on the subject of HIV/AIDS. This point will perhaps become easier to appreciate when it is realized that the incidence of HIV/AIDS is inversely proportional to the level of education of the various communities in the world. This probably explains why the developed societies of Europe and America evidently have a lower incidence of HIV/AIDS than the less educated and developed communities in Africa and Asia.<sup>30</sup>

From the social perspective, the principle of the equality of the sexes which is based upon the more fundamental Bahai principle of the "oneness of humankind" also holds the prospects of aiding in the war against HIV/AIDS in Africa. This is especially true in the areas of prevention, care and support. In the Bahai faith, it is taught that the recognition of the basic "oneness of humankind" is a prerequisite to social evolution and the future well-being of the earth and its peoples. Fundamental to this concept of the oneness of humanity is the principle of the equality of the sexes. According to Baha Allah, "women and men have been and will always be equal in the sight of God."<sup>31</sup> The imperatives of gender equality and the interdependence of the sexes is further expressed in the Bahai writing with the image of humanity as a bird in which one wing is women and the other man. Unless both wings are strong and well-developed, the bird will not be able to fly.<sup>32</sup> This Bahai analogy is consistent with that expressed by Nigeria's former foreign affairs minister, Prof (Mrs.) Joy Ogwu, OFR who described women as the right leg of a man, whose co-operation and support is crucial for man's ability to walk or run.<sup>33</sup> The development of women is therefore considered vital to the full development of men and is seen by the Bahai as a prerequisite to peace and development.

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/node/123, Retrieved on the 8/6/2007 "The Impact of Racism on Women," written statement submitted by the Bahai international Community to the 45<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, New York, U.S.A., 6-16 March, 2001.

<sup>30</sup>"Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome" in *Microsoft Encarta Reference Library*, 2002.

<sup>31</sup><http://www.bahai.us/node/123>. Retrieved on the 11/6/2007.

<sup>32</sup><http://www.bahai.us/node/123>; "Selections from the Writings of Abdul-Baha," 227, 302 (Women 16) Retrieved on the 2/11/2007.

<sup>33</sup>Joy Ogwu, Nigeria Presidential Inauguration Lecture, Nigerian Television Authority's Live Telecast, 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2007.

The principle of equality, as advocated by the Bahais, has profound implications for the definition of the roles of women and men; a major area for the expression of the discriminatory gender conception in today's world. The application of the principle of equality requires a change in many traditional habits and practices which will lead to a sincere and non-hypocritical rejection of the rigid role delineation between the male and female sexes. This is particularly important in the care of those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS (the People Living with HIV/AIDS, and those orphaned by the disease) in Africa where patriarchal manipulated stereotyped gender role distinction appears to abandon the care and support of those infected and affected to the women. The direct effect of the Bahai principle of gender equality on the problem of HIV/AIDS in the African continent would be the reduction of the social evils which negatively influences the spread of the disease and the care and support of those infected and affected by the scourge. In this regard, the social disadvantages of gender exploitation and stigmatization which sometimes seems to encourage the spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa would be virtually eliminated. Men would then, no longer look upon the women as inferior beings meant only to be exploited for their own pleasure as deemed fit. With this change of social attitude engendered by the Bahai principles of gender equality an enhanced sense of self-worth, boosting self-confidence, would be infused into the psyche of women, thereby helping to immunize them against the many self-abnegation and male abuses often culminating in HIV/AIDS afflictions in Africa.

The Bahai principle of gender equality also seems to be capable of effecting cultural transformations likely to facilitate the successful crusade against HIV/AIDS in Africa. As we have hinted earlier, unlike the African culture which is dominantly patriarchal, advocating the superiority of the male over the female, the Bahai religion emphatically stresses the equality of the sexes. The adoption of the Bahai principle of gender equality is capable of significantly helping to alter the existing patterns of domination and arbitrary decision-making by patriarchal structured social, political and economic arrangements which are especially prominent in Africa. The acceptance and wholehearted application of this principle of equality will strengthen the calls for women to be welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour thereby allowing for the evolution of the roles of both men and women even as they relate to the incidence of HIV/AIDS in Africa. In addition, the Bahai faith appears also to discourage all forms of sexual immorality, polygamy in marriage and the practice of female



genital mutilation otherwise known as female circumcision; all of which have the tendency to encourage the spread of HIV/AIDS. More importantly, in the Bahai religion, men and women are considered equal.<sup>34</sup> Hence dialogue and consultation between the sexes are encouraged, even on the subject of sexuality. In this respect therefore, a woman can say "no" to unwanted sexual intercourse or relationship.

The expected effects of a cultural revolution influenced by the Bahai religious principles of gender equality on HIV/AIDS incidence in Africa would therefore include: an enhanced respect and value for women, the reduction of the possibility of multiple infections in multiple sexual relationship as operating in polygamous marriages popular in Africa, and the decreased exploitation of women as tools for pleasure in the hands of men in the society. Above all, the Bahai principle of the "oneness of humankind" generally engenders a culture of non-discrimination; a culture which is particularly fundamental to healthy social attitudes towards the people living with HIV/AIDS who are often discriminated against and stigmatized.

Finally, the Bahai philosophy of compulsory universal education and skill acquisition in an atmosphere of gender equality enhances, in no small measure, the economic empowerment of women. In Bahai communities, women strive to attain the highest they can possibly be, thereby becoming economically empowered. It is instructive to remark at this point that the principle of equality is also capable of influencing the manner in which the advancement of women is fostered. For example, members of the 'Bahai' community, individually and institutionally, share a strong commitment to the practice of the principle of equality in all aspects of social and civic life. Individuals and social institutions in the Bahai community collaborate in encouraging the development and emancipation of women and in designing and implementing programs to enhance their spiritual, social and economic development.<sup>35</sup> Economic empowerment programmes and skill acquisition training schemes are sometimes organized to strengthen the socio-economic potentials of women.<sup>36</sup> Through the economic

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<sup>34</sup>O. A. Oderinde, "Reaching out of Power: Nigeria Women and Church Leadership," in Dopamu, A. P., Abubakre R. D. et al eds., *Religion, Leadership and Society: Focus on Nigeria*, Nigerian Association for the study of Religion, 2004, 109.

<sup>35</sup><http://www.bahai.us> advancement of women, Retrieved on the 2/6/2007.

<sup>36</sup>"Strategies for the Advancement of Women in Africa", *Statement to the Fourth Regional Conference on the Integration of Women in Development and on the Implementation of the Arusha Strategies for the Advancement of Women in Africa*, Agenda item 5: Implementation of the Arusha Strategies for the Advancement

advantages gained, the women grow to become more objectively independent of men, thus emerging less subject to the manipulation and exploitations of the men. By the economic empowerment of women engendered by the Bahai religious ideas, prostitution is discouraged and therefore reduced, girl child labour and human trafficking, along with their attendant social and health implications are minimized, and a more responsible and self determined attitudes in women is promoted-leading to a reduced incidence of HIV/AIDS which often results from such deprived circumstances. In addition, a generally improved economic situation which could result from unfettered economic relations among the sexes as extolled in the Bahai faith, will certainly engender improved welfare and better health in the African communities whose immune capacities and capabilities would be boosted.

## 11. Conclusion

In this paper, we have endeavoured to demonstrate that there is a gender dimension to the epidemic level of HIV/AIDS scourge in Africa. In it we sought to establish that the very high incidence of the disease in the continent, especially the predominant cases of female inflections and the gender role distinction which largely abandons the care of those infected and affected by the disease to the females can be accounted for by the factor of gender inequality, strengthened by cultural and social, economic and religious practices founded on patriarchy, reinforced by stereotypes. From our expositions above, it is contended that the comprehensive and genuine adoption of the Bahai religious principles of gender equality, founded on the "oneness of humanity," would help to systematically eliminate the socio-cultural evils of gender discrimination which this paper believes provides the festering platform for the phenomenal spread of HIV/AIDS in Africa. Thus, the principle of gender equality as enunciated in the Bahai faith seems to hold the possibility of effectively ameliorating the HIV/AIDS challenge in Africa while at the same time, addressing and uprooting the socio-cultural evil of discriminations; a vice which accounts for gender inequality and the discrimination and stigmatization of People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in our communities.

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of Women in Africa Beyond the End of the United Nations Decade for Women: Regional Perspectives, Abuja, Nigeria. 6-10 November, 1989.