

# BLESSED are the WOMEN

Linda Bales

**F**reedom is something about which millions of women around the world dream. Freedom from fear. Freedom from disease. Freedom from oppression and hunger. In an ideal world, all of God's people would have such freedom. But we know this isn't the case. Our hearts break and our souls cry when thinking of the death sentence faced by so many due to the AIDS pandemic. Many women are now paying the ultimate price and are innocent victims contracting the virus from their most intimate partners. Marriage is no longer a guaranteed safe place.

## ***Multiple Partners Fuel AIDS Pandemic***

The cultural practice of multiple wives and/or female partners is fueling this pandemic in untold ways. According to UNAIDS, 39.5 million people have the HIV virus as of 2006, and 17.7 million are women, an increase of one million since 2004. In the United States, statistics are on the rise for African American and Latina women. Ironically, the factors are similar between women in sub-Saharan Africa and the U.S.—women are contracting HIV from their partners.

Millions of men do not know their AIDS status and have sex with multiple women then sex with their wives. Tragically, many women live in areas where they have few if any rights. They are unable, due to culture and/or violence to say “no” to sex and are left with little to no options.

## ***Making Communities Safer For Women***

Through education, some women are beginning to question this practice of multiple partners with the hope of making their communities safer for women. One such place is Mozambique. “We have to do something about this!” proclaimed Enia, after listening to a conversation about men having multiple wives or partners. Enia was one of 20 women participating in a General Board of Church and Society Social Principles Seminar held this year in Maputo, Mozambique. Participants spoke candidly about the lack of open discussion about sexuality and the transmission of disease. According to one participant, women can talk about sex, but when a man enters the room, the conversation stops.

These 20 spirit-filled women face an uphill battle in their desire to correct some of the injustices happening in their country given the dire statistics. Mozambique has a population of 19 million and is twice the geographic size of California. On the United Nations Human Development Index, Mozambique ranks last out of all the countries in sub-Saharan Africa having a literacy rate of 48% and only 50% of its women are educated.<sup>1</sup> Life expectancy has dropped from 43 in 1990 to 39 years of age in 2006<sup>2</sup> due to the

AIDS pandemic. An estimated 1,800,000 persons in Mozambique have the HIV virus, and over half are women.

In spite of laws protecting women against domestic violence and guaranteeing inheritance rights, these laws are rarely enforced. Women are routinely discriminated against either through patriarchal systems in place or denial of basic rights. As experienced by the women in Mozambique, education about AIDS is crucial. Many girls and women, however, never see the light of a classroom. Fortunately advocacy efforts are underway to reverse this trend. Mozambique now ensures free primary education for all girls. Other nations, such as Kenya, are taking similar steps.

## ***Health Challenges Facing Young Girls***

Early marriage is another reality faced by millions of young girls. A University of Chicago study in Kenya and Zambia found that among 15- to 19-year-old girls who are sexually active, being married increased their chances of having HIV by more than 75 percent.<sup>3</sup> This harmful traditional practice is resulting in not only the spread of AIDS but also debilitating health conditions such as obstetric fistula. Obstetric fistula results when a young mother's vagina, bladder and/or rectum tear during childbirth, a condition

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that causes urine and feces leakage. It can occur when a young woman with underdeveloped physiology gives birth. Fistula patients are commonly poor women, ages 15 to 20.<sup>4</sup>

Shortages of medical personnel are exacerbating the health crisis for women. One such place is Ethiopia. In a country of 77 million people, there are only 104 obstetricians. Some are leaving their practices out of fear of AIDS. One such physician is Dr. Tekle-Ab Mekbib who believed that if he remained in his practice, he'd contract the AIDS virus due to lack of adequate obstetric equipment. He said, “When a doctor in Ethiopia delivers a baby from an AIDS infected mother, the doctor has only wrist high gloves for protection. In the U.S. doctors have full gowns, arm-length gloves, goggles and boots. None of that exists in Ethiopia.” The risks are too high.

## Giving Voice To Women With No Voice

We know as Christians that Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as preaching, teaching, encountering, and healing among women. Yet, in the world of biblical studies, women in the Bible are often overlooked as incidental or of minimum importance. Since the very beginning of Christianity, women have been leaders as disciples and apostles of Jesus. Many have taken risks and defied social and cultural norms. The provocative parable of the widow and the unjust judge is one such example. This feisty woman repeatedly begs the judge for justice until she is granted her wish (Luke 18:1-8). Jesus uses this parable to illustrate the importance of persistent faith, but it can also inspire us to take on the corrupt policies and practices that keep people in subservient, dangerous situations. We are called as Christians to speak truth to power and work for justice which includes speaking for those who have no voice. Our brothers and sisters in lands where AIDS is thriving are begging support in their efforts to eradicate the HIV virus forever. Please take action now.

### What can we do?

- Advocate for increased U.S. funding for assistance to help women gain full access to education and health care. (Contact Linda Bales at General Board of Church & Society, 202-488-5649 or [lbales@umc-gbcs.org](mailto:lbales@umc-gbcs.org))
- Design a joint educational session between United Methodist Women and your youth group to discuss the issue of AIDS

and women. Contact local AIDS groups for assistance and/or your local health department.

- We need to make sure our young people in our local churches are receiving comprehensive sex education including a strong dose of AIDS prevention. (Contact the General Board of Discipleship for human sexuality resources: 1-877-899-2780)
- Contribute to the UMC Global AIDS Fund – **Advance Special #982345**
  1. UN Development Program, Human Development Index 2006
  2. CIA, *Fact Book*, 2006
  3. Clark, S. (2004), "Early Marriage and HIV Risk in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Studies in Family Planning* 35(3), 149-160.
  4. United National Population Fund (2003) *Obstetric Fistula Needs Assessment Report Findings from Nine African Countries* (UNFPA: New York).



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