

DIGNITY, FREEDOM,  
AND GRACE



# DIGNITY, FREEDOM, AND GRACE

Christian Perspectives on HIV,  
AIDS, and Human Rights

Edited by Gillian Paterson and Callie Long



**World Council  
of Churches**  
Publications

DIGNITY, FREEDOM, AND GRACE:  
Christian Perspectives on HIV, AIDS, and Human Rights  
Edited by Gillian Paterson and Callie Long

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## Preface

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“By 2020, 90% of all people living with HIV will know their HIV status. By 2020, 90% of all people with diagnosed HIV infection will receive sustained antiretroviral therapy. By 2020, 90% of all people receiving antiretroviral therapy will have viral suppression.”

– UNAIDS Target of “90-90-90”

The aim of this book is to provide background, context, and theological “tools” to support individuals and faith communities seeking to explore the role of human rights in their responses to HIV.

Engaging with this epidemic has been a learning experience, especially for faith communities. In particular, it is now widely accepted that biomedical approaches to epidemics alone are inadequate. This is particularly true when social and structural inequalities increase vulnerability to HIV infection, when people living with HIV or AIDS face stigmatization and discrimination, and when groups or individuals who are particularly vulnerable to HIV are ostracized or treated as criminals. Communities of faith play important roles in setting and changing social norms and influencing public policy and legislation. This influence has played out in both positive and negative ways in the response to HIV.

At the global level, the HIV response is articulated within a framework of human rights. There is increasing consensus that for progress to be made

toward targets like 90-90-90, or toward the ultimate goal of zero new infections and zero AIDS-related deaths, it is necessary for responses to HIV and AIDS to be clearly rooted in a human rights approach. This framing has exposed sharp differences and sparked, on occasion, confrontation and condemnation from all sides. At times, this has been accompanied by a refusal to dialogue, listen, or seek to understand.

Now, more than ever, with the urgency to scale up HIV testing and linkage to care, there is no single approach that will achieve the targets alone. It will take collaboration across all the sectors and the active engagement of social and religious actors to address not only the biomedical challenges, but also the socio-cultural and structural challenges that increase vulnerability and block progress.

Beginning in 2011, therefore, the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) has been seeking to address increasing polarization of positions through a series of face-to-face international consultations. An ecumenical initiative of the World Council of Churches, the EAA is a global network of churches and related organizations committed to campaigning together on common concerns for justice and human dignity. These consultations have recognized sensitivities on all sides but also pointed to common ground between the human rights framework and theological concepts of justice and human dignity, shared commitments, and the need to foster open dialogue at local and national levels. The present volume is one outcome of that process.

Addressing emotive and potentially divisive topics in a sensitive way through dialogue is a difficult task in itself, and the development of this publication has been more like a journey than a writing assignment with a pre-determined end. A major challenge has been that while EAA's campaign on HIV has a strong foundation in upholding and protecting human rights, we recognize that within EAA's participating organizations there are different attitudes, language, approaches, and responses based on theology, history, and context.

In this publication, we have brought together a wide variety of perspectives. These can only reflect in part the full range of positions and issues raised by the nexus of human rights, HIV, and faith. What has united all of the contributors and input from the meetings is the common belief in a loving, creator God, and the compassionate Christ, ever standing in solidarity with those made vulnerable and marginalized from communities. However, do not expect that our authors will agree with each other, or that you will agree with all of them. The articles and essays in this publication reflect the particular experience and perspectives of the writers themselves. Some may inspire you, some may make

you uncomfortable, and some could make you angry. We hope, in fact, that at least some of this happens. Our aim here is to raise the key issues, promote honest, respectful discussion, and help to bring people together in the ongoing search for resources to assist dialogue and action.

On behalf of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, I wish to express our great appreciation to those who have made this book possible:

Gillian Paterson and Callie Long, who accepted the invitation to co-edit the publication in its concept stage, and whose skills, experience, knowledge, and patience have shaped all the creative, diverse input into a sensible and inspiring whole;

Our expert editorial committee – Ezra Chitando, Julie Clague, Nontando Hadebe, J. P. Mokgethi-Heath, and Sally Smith – which helped to guide the initial framework and process for the publication, contributed key articles, and provided wise and invaluable advice throughout the process;

Lyn van Rooyen, who agreed to our request to organize the resources section before the size of the task became apparent, and who, through her expertise and experience, has honed the lists at the back of this book into a usable format;

The many participants in EAA's consultations on human rights, HIV, and faith, with special thanks for their willingness to bring their experiences of pain, conviction, compassion, and dignity to the task of sharpening a common vision of what is needed in order to overcome HIV-related stigma and discrimination;

The participants of the October 2014 colloquium, whose incredible inspiration and insight have turned the idea of a publication into a living reality and whose rich contributions could have filled several more books;

Former EAA staff who have shepherded this process over many years, particularly Peter Prove, Ruth Foley, and Anne-Laure Jan;

Those organizations that have made the publication possible through their financial contributions: UNAIDS and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) through the "EAA, World YWCA and WCC-EHAIA Consortium";

And finally, to you, the reader, for being willing to enter the dialogue.

—*Sara Speicher*

*World Council of Churches – Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance*



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**DR GILLIAN PATERSON** is co-editor of this book. She is a research fellow and visiting lecturer at Heythrop College, University of London, and co-ordinates the Catholic Network for Population and Development. She has worked in the field of HIV and AIDS since the mid-1990s, often with the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance and World Council of Churches. She is the author of books and articles on faith and health, especially in relation to HIV.

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# Abbreviations

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AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
BHESP	Bar Hostess Empowerment & Support Programme
CAFOD	Catholic Fund for Overseas Development
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CONIC	National Council of Christian Churches of Brazil
EAA	Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance
EHAIA	Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy (formerly Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa)
FBOs	faith-based organizations
GIN-SSOGIE	Global Interfaith Network for People of all Sexes, Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Expressions
GNP+	Global Network of People Living with HIV
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
HPV	human papilloma virus
ICAAP	International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific
ILGA	International Lesbian and Gay Association
INERELA+	International network of religious leaders living with or personally affected by HIV or AIDS
INPUD	International Network of People Who Use Drugs

LGBTI	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex
MSM	men who have sex with men
NGO	non-governmental organization
PLHIV	People living with HIV
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
SSDDIM	stigma, shame, denial, discrimination, inaction, mis-action
STD	sexually transmitted disease
UCCP	United Church of Christ in the Philippines
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
WCC	World Council of Churches
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

“Key populations” is often used to refer to both vulnerable and most-at-risk populations. These include people living with HIV, men who have sex with men, transgender people, people who inject drugs, and sex workers. This also includes groups who are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection in certain situations or contexts, such as adolescents (particularly adolescent girls), orphans, street children, people in closed settings (such as prisons), people with disabilities, and migrant and mobile workers.

# Human Rights: Nothing to Be Afraid Of

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*Gillian Paterson*

“We have created a false dichotomy between faith and human rights. The human rights discourse began with ‘in His image He created them.’ No human being stands outside this image.”

– Participant in the October 2014 colloquium

## Why this book?

The idea of human rights is perhaps the most influential philosophical and political idea of our time. “Rights,” understood as attributes that every human being possesses simply by virtue of being human, have become the foundation stone of much international discourse.

Christians, in recent history, have a fine record in championing this idea. For example, the World Council of Churches (WCC) was involved in the drafting of the original United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, while John Paul II insisted on their crucial place in the struggle for freedom. In the process, the concept of rights, which started out as a philosophical basis for political

organization and change, has become a part of Christian moral discourse: for many Christians, a fundamental ingredient of God's moral purposes. Today, indeed, human rights principles may claim for themselves a quasi-religious universality that in turn can seem to take precedence over all other claims to truth. In Chapter 1 (*What's Wrong with Rights?*) Julie Clague gives an account how this came to be.

However, this understanding of human rights is neither unanimously nor universally endorsed. By some people, Christians and otherwise, the human rights agenda is viewed as a tool of secular Western imperialism, designed to be a vehicle for Western consumerism and materialism, to undermine faith and to destabilize local cultural values and structures of authority. For example, promoting rights for women and girls, which is a fundamental principle of UN thinking, may be interpreted as an attack on local cultures, authority structures, and in particular on the integrity of the traditional family. Religious belief is sometimes used as an argument for denying human rights to some groups of individuals. For example, in the name of religion gay men have been persecuted, imprisoned, or murdered, and "key populations" are excluded from community. Appeals for access by sex workers to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) advice, or by drug injectors to harm-reduction facilities, have been resisted as tools of morally bankrupt Western liberalism intent on colonizing the rest of the world with its sinful beliefs. Even in societies where there is, at community level, a strong sense of mutual responsibility and commitment, the idea that individual rights should ever take precedence over community rights has sometimes been interpreted as a manifestation of an alien individualism.

It must equally be admitted that the language of rights has become, to some extent, debased, as for example when it is used (as it often is) to advocate for entitlements that involve disregarding the needs of others and the basic demands of justice: what Julie Clague, in her essay, describes as "an epidemic of rightsism." It is interesting that Pope Francis, whose commitment to the poor and downtrodden is not in question, has been cautious in his use of the language of rights, taking more interest in structural problems that talk of individual rights cannot solve, and may indeed make worse. Human rights, by his interpretation, are to be used less for promoting human freedom or the concerns of individuals than for achieving social justice. He said, in 2013: "Sadly, even human rights can be used as a justification of the inordinate defense of individual rights or the rights of the richer peoples. . . . To speak properly of our own rights, we need to broaden our perspective and to hear the cry of other peoples and other regions than our own country."<sup>1</sup>

In 2011, with the support and participation of UN agencies, the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) and its global partners initiated an international process of reflection designed to explore faith perspectives on HIV, AIDS, and human rights. Bringing together people living with, working with, researching on, or personally affected by HIV or AIDS, EAA invited them to share and record their own thoughts and experiences. These conversations were always lively, sometimes uncomfortable, and often deeply moving. Nevertheless, they provided confirmation of the view that there is indeed a problem.

The present publication is one outcome of this process. Written out of a particular faith tradition (Christianity), it makes no claim to be representative of other faiths, although many of the issues it addresses are encountered in similar ways within other faith traditions. Its starting point lies in the realities of the lived experience of people who are, themselves, subject to the human rights abuses we are seeking to address. It has brought together a team of writers, all living with, personally affected by, or working in the field of HIV and AIDS, most of them Christian, in the hope that their stories will be a resource and a source of encouragement to organizations, groups, and individuals working in both fields.

## What to expect

Part One explores some overarching issues, starting with Julie Clague's careful account (already mentioned) of the development of modern human rights thinking. In Chapter 2, Sally Smith speaks from her position as Senior Advisor on Religion at UNAIDS, giving a powerful personal account of her experience of "standing in the gap," brokering conversations between two sets of values. On the one hand, she says, there is the discourse of faith, with its own set of values and beliefs; on the other, there is the discourse of human rights and of sexual and reproductive health. One of the fault-lines exposed by the HIV epidemic, she suggests, has been the distrust and fear that exists between these two discourses and the cultures and beliefs they support.

Meanwhile, abuses of human rights have severely undermined the capacity of societies to respond to HIV and AIDS. She cites the neglect and stigmatization of orphans, the refusal to provide realistic, truthful education, or gender rules that deny to women the right to say "no" to sex encounters or to influence decisions on family size. Often, she says, this is reinforced by moral teaching that assumes an ideal of family and community life that does not, in fact, exist,

which may be accompanied by a communal silence on the subject of abuses, even when it is common knowledge that they are taking place.

Most of our writers have stressed the toxic effects of HIV-related stigma, joining their voices to those who already urge faith groups to review their own teachings and practices. Chapter 3, in particular, is a moving personal account of one woman's personal and professional encounters with stigma, written by Suzette Moses-Burton, former executive director of GNP+ (the Global Network of People living with HIV or AIDS). Then in Chapter 4, Hendrica Okondo discusses the particular vulnerability of young women and girls, and describes how her own organization, the World YWCA, has made a difference.

In Chapter 5, "Health Care, HIV and Human Rights: An Approach That Works," my co-editor, Callie Long, argues that religion, though it may be part of the problem, is also part of the solution. Some of the earliest responses to the epidemic came from faith-based organizations active in health care. Christian churches, in particular, have an honourable history in this respect. But they have also, sometimes, been responsible for stigma-driven attitudes that failed to acknowledge the reality of vulnerability based on gender or sexual orientation. When healthcare providers (or others) encourage people to view HIV as a moral issue rather than a virus, it undermines public health initiatives and discourages people from being tested, seeking treatment, or changing behaviour.

Within the formal healthcare agenda, too, there are conflicting approaches to rights, with many international policy-makers arguing that a traditional public health approach (which is to do with protecting the population at large through compulsory testing and notification of contacts) should outweigh a strictly medical one (where the primary duty is toward the individual patient and the principles of confidentiality that come with that commitment). In justifying this latter approach, the notion of "AIDS-exceptionalism" has been widely (though not universally) promoted to urge a degree of exemption, for HIV and AIDS, from routine approaches to communicable infection.

It must be stressed that the present publication is not attempting to take a particular position on these arguments, but simply to point out their impact on the issues we are addressing: namely Christian perspectives on HIV, AIDS, and human rights. For it often turns out that effective HIV control ends up by offending both the above groups within the medical establishment, and also many religiously motivated groups. For example, condoms and clean syringes are important elements in prevention strategies, even if many people oppose them; and the tracing of sexual partners is a significant part of public health strategy, even if human rights advocates resist it.

Again, the concept of the “key populations” is commonly used to refer to groups of individuals who are particularly vulnerable to infection, and good public health practice suggests they should be particularly encouraged to seek help. When sex workers, injecting drug users, and men who have sex with men are stigmatized or treated as criminals, it is likely to have the reverse effect.

Part Two of this book, therefore, consists of a series of moving accounts, some of them highly personal, which speak to us of the contextual struggles individuals and communities of faith have taken on in responding to HIV. We open with the experience of individuals from Africa, Asia, and Europe who are themselves living with or particularly vulnerable to HIV or AIDS, and with those regional and international organizations which embody that experience. We have two very different Orthodox perspectives: first, from India, a discussion of the notion of Just Care; then an account, from Armenia, of a service for people living with HIV, their families, and their survivors, which embodies the best principles of human rights without ever using the phrase itself. We hear from African contexts about how the epidemic is influenced by its political context in post-apartheid South Africa as well as in the wider context of post-colonial Africa.

Also emphasizing the importance of political and intellectual context, we hear from the Philippines, from Brazil, and from the Caribbean. An Anglican priest speaks of the struggle to keep faith in a sometimes-hostile social and ecclesial situation, and a Namibian living in Sweden of the particularly acute challenges faced by people with diverse sexualities. We are deeply grateful to this remarkable group of people for sharing their thoughts and experience so honestly with us.

For Part Three, we asked three Christian theologians to explore some of the contributions that Christian theology can make to our understanding of human rights in relation to HIV and AIDS. All three of them have made major personal contributions, over the years, to their churches’ responses to AIDS. The Rev. Michael Schuenemeyer, executive director of the United Church of Christ AIDS programme in the USA, analyzes the undermining effects of a theological focus on sin upon a community’s approach to human rights. The Rev. Ijeoma Ajibade, working with African communities in Britain, reflects on the relevance to her work of the idea of “*imago Dei*,” the image of God. In South Africa, Dr Nontando Hadebe, teaching at a Catholic theological college in Johannesburg, turns to the theology of the Trinity for a rights-based model of community.

As we worked together on this book, we became aware that we were not able to include the full rich range of personal stories and insights that people brought to the table. To give some flavour of this richness we have included, at the beginning of each section, some of the thoughts and statements, many of them very personal, that people shared in the 2014 colloquium which gave a concrete shape to this publication. And because we hope that what we have done may be useable in parish or college settings, we have, at the end of each chapter, suggested a couple of questions with which readers might like to lead off their own discussions.

The final section has been coordinated by Lyn van Rooyen, director of CABSA (the Christian AIDS Bureau of Southern Africa). It opens with a special section devoted to essential reference material on the background to human rights, which would be invaluable for anyone wishing to make a serious study of the subject from an international perspective. We have, in addition, invited all the writers of this book to suggest accessible publications, links, and resources that offer valuable perspectives on HIV and human rights, in the hope that such a list may be of value to readers in their work.

## Sin and fear

“You’re going into the lions’ den this time!” commented one colleague, when I said I had agreed to edit this book. “I hope you come out alive.”

This is a difficult arena to enter, and she was only partly joking. The tendency to define HIV as a badge of immorality, not a communicable infection, has resulted in development of no-go areas in the discourse on HIV, and consequently increased the stigmatization and victimization of those affected. In these pages, especially in Part Two, there are many contextual examples. But as we write, the particularly sensitive no-go areas in the rights-versus-faith debate are those that relate to sexuality and sexual orientation. We should be deeply concerned that, in some parts of the world, men who have sex with men live in fear of being criminalized, hunted, beaten, or killed by people who believe the outlawing of gay men is necessary in order to protect marriage and the family and to defend the morals of the community. Just what are their persecutors afraid of?

Now fear is something that characterizes the early days of any epidemic, and AIDS was no exception. People fear what they do not know. Since then, over the years, public education has reduced (though not dispelled) the more irrational fears. But still, in terms of human rights, leaders are afraid that if

they offer sanctuary to women and girls who are inappropriately pregnant, or if they accept the rights of gay men to live and love, then they are giving tacit approval to activities they believe to be immoral. So the theme of fear comes up again and again in these pages. And yet “Do not be afraid,” or “Have no fear” are among the most frequently repeated instructions in our scriptures. We hear them from the angels who visit Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, from the shepherds in the fields on the night of Jesus’ birth, and on numerous occasions in the course of his ministry. “Do not be afraid, little flock,” he says, “for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

So we do not need to be afraid. Honouring the rights of another does not mean I approve of what they do. It does not mean that I like them. Neither am I required to behave stupidly, and where there are rational grounds for taking suitable precautions, it is right to take them. What it does mean is that I recognize that we share a common humanity, and this means that whatever I think, or you think, we are, all of us, children of God, made in God’s image, and as such we have, all of us, an inalienable right to be treated with dignity.

### Questions for discussion

- Do you consider that human rights are an important issue in relation to HIV?
- Can you think of contexts in which it might be considered better to avoid talk of human rights?