

wise woman >

# Caring for the World

## Fight Poverty With Power

by stacy hawkins adams

**W**ith a social worker for a mother and a father whose barber and beauty supply business served the heart of their Buffalo, New York, community, it wasn't farfetched for Helene D. Gayle, M.D., to grow up wanting to be a social activist. She found her path through health care, obtaining a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania and a master's degree in public health from Johns Hopkins University.

Dr. Gayle, 52, became a board certified pediatrician and began her career at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), just as the nation and world were being impacted by HIV and AIDS. During part of her 20-year tenure at the CDC, she served as the first director of the National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention.

Dr. Gayle also traveled the world to encourage HIV and AIDS awareness and became a sought after expert on the incurable disease. In 2005, she chaired the International AIDS Conference and recently completed a two-year term as president of the International AIDS Society.

In 2006, the *Wall Street Journal* recognized her as one of the nation's 50 top women leaders. That same year, Dr. Gayle left her dream job of directing the HIV and AIDS, TB and Reproductive Health Program for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to lead CARE, a humanitarian organization that fights poverty around the world.

The appointment made her the first woman, first physician and first African American to be named president and CEO of CARE, which works with peo-



ple in 66 countries to improve their access to education, food and water, agricultural output, health care and housing.

Since taking the helm of the organization, HIV and AIDS prevention have remained a core focus of her work. "The overall mission of CARE is to end global poverty," says Dr. Gayle, who is single and lives in Atlanta. "With more than 60 years in the field, CARE understands that the best way to fight poverty is to empower women. Women and girls make up 70 percent of the world's population that lives in extreme poverty, yet they represent our best chance for defeating it."

"When women are educated and given the means to support themselves, they invest in their families and communities; have fewer children and healthier families; and play a stronger role in determining the laws that govern their lives," Dr. Gayle says. "Empowered women also have a better chance of fighting HIV and AIDS, because they are in a position to dictate the terms of their sexual relationships; demand better access to health care; and are less likely to be forced to trade sex for income."

Awareness is increasing among Americans that women are the fastest-growing segment of the population contracting HIV and AIDS, and 64 percent

of women living with the disease are African American. Globally, Dr. Gayle says, the face of HIV and AIDS is also female, which makes CARE's efforts to assist women even more critical. "I've been especially rewarded when I visit CARE projects and see the amazing transformation that takes place when women are empowered," she says. "When I visited Afghanistan, I met women like Nasima, who by age 23 had four children under 5 and had suffered four miscarriages. I visited her with an

outreach worker trained by CARE, who is providing community health education that is giving women like Nasima a new chance."

Though her message resonates often in important circles, Dr. Gayle insists that eradicating poverty and, eventually, HIV and AIDS, is a community effort.

Find out how you can help by visiting [www.care.org](http://www.care.org). Then pick up your phone or your pen, Dr. Gayle says. "It's always important to let your legislators know that you care about the issue of HIV and AIDS. We need to do more in this country to exercise our civic responsibility." ♥

*Stacy Hawkins Adams is a Richmond, Virginia, freelance writer.*

**"Empowered women have a better chance of fighting HIV and AIDS."**

PHOTO: Valenda Cambell/CARE

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