

“Just Stop Having Sex!” Christian Activism and AIDS Education in Uganda

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Evangelical groups have invested sex education in Uganda since the 1990s. Their activities have developed in the early 2000, and they now have become a central actor of AIDS prevention, especially towards young people. Beyond AIDS prevention, Christian movements aim at changing Ugandan society. Young people are a privileged target, abstinence promotion being a mean to sensitize to the values of born-again Christians. Faith-based organizations elaborated a discourse articulating abstinence promotion to religious conversion, self-control, individual autonomy and responsibility. Behaviour change and AIDS prevention, the visible aim of these programmes, are thus entrenched in the making of a new kind of individual.

In order to contribute to change at individual and social level, Christian groups are strongly investing public space. Groups such as the Campus Alliance to Wipe Out AIDS, True Love Waits or the Uganda Youth Forum organize frequent abstinence parades, demonstrations against condoms. Their leaders regularly take stands on sexual behaviours in newspapers. They are also deeply involved within schools and universities, through sex education programmes, and target political and administrative leaders in order to influence policy strategies. This Christian activism is at the forefront of a controversy that took place in Uganda between 2003 and 2006 on abstinence promotion, where Christian groups opposed to proponents of human rights and sex education. This controversy strongly divided AIDS actors in Uganda, and beyond, aroused a public debate on morals and sexuality: sex before marriage, men having sex with men, pornography.

We seek to grasp the impact of evangelical groups regarding AIDS and sex education for young people. By what means do they participate to social transformation? What is their impact on young people? What is their impact AIDS awareness programmes in Uganda?

We show how Christian groups participated to build a new consensus on youth sexuality in Uganda, relying on self-control, self-consciousness, morals and individual responsibility. First contested by human rights activist, this Christian framing of youth sexuality gradually gained support from the government and donors, and has been adopted by most HIV education organizations working with the youth.

This paper relies on extensive fieldwork in Uganda. Over 100 interviews have been conducted with faith-based organizations, schools, NGOS, Ministries, and young people. Participative observation was conducted with faith-based organizations, particularly during sessions of sex education with young people.