

On the speculations about the causes of increased condom use in Africa

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We have read with interest the letter about increased use of condoms by Catholics in some countries from Sub-Saharan Africa during Pope Benedict XVI's tenure [1]. The author suggests that this increase could be the result of the Pope's statement about condom use in November 2010 [2,3]. But this assumption is not supported by the data provided in De Neve's letter. In addition to methodological problems common to descriptive studies or ecological analysis, De Neve's study presents other important limitations which he has not even addressed.

Firstly, the author only compares data about condom use from 2004, 2005 or 2006 (depending on the country), with data from 2011. We do not know which factors other than the Pope's statement may have influenced condom use in that period. In fact, according to the last UNAIDS report, other preventive measures such as HIV testing, voluntary male circumcision, reduction in the number of sexual partners, delay in sexual debut and also condom use in the last sexual relationship, have increased in many countries during last decade, including African countries [4].

In addition, De Neve does not provide enough data to evaluate the tendency in condom use before the Pope's statement in 2010. For example, in Mozambique, from 2003 to 2009, condom use among people with more than one sexual partner rose, and so did condom use during last paid sex in the same period [5].

Furthermore, the Pope's statement about condom use was published in November 2010, but the data from the 2011 Demographic Health Surveys in Rwanda and Zimbabwe were collected from September 2010 to March 2011. This invalidates the idea that the Pope may have influenced on the use of condoms in these countries. In the other countries, data were collected from January to August 2011 (Cameroon) and from June to November 2011 (Mozambique and Uganda). It is still not reasonable to think that the Pope's message had such a big impact in Africans' sexual behavior in that short period of time.

Also, it has to be pointed out that, according to De Neve's letter, condom use among Catholics was similar to other religious groups, and that the increase in condom use was not specific to Catholics. In fact, Protestants, who do not follow the Pope's teachings, also showed an increase in condom use (see figure 1 in De Neve's letter). Both facts show a lack of association between the Pope's statement and the behavior change among Catholic Africans. Moreover, in Uganda, when the reason for not using a condom at last sex was asked in the AIDS National Survey, only 1.5% of men and 1.4% of women reported religious beliefs [6].

In conclusion, there is no evidence to say that increase in condom use in some African countries could be related to Pope Benedict XVI's message, as De Neve suggests. Rigorous scientific studies are needed to assess the impact of prevention campaigns in a really dramatic health problem such as the HIV pandemic.

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