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“Abstinence doesn’t work, so use condoms”: Critical responses to Christian youth sexualities and HIV prevention in Africa

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Sometime towards the end of May, this year, then-29 year-old Olympic athlete Lolo Jones revealed that she was *still* a virgin and she described this as the most difficult thing that she has ever done. Yes, she clarified, training for the Olympics was not nearly as difficult as remaining a virgin. A week following Lolo’s comments, a female guest on WNYC’s Tell Me More radio program, remarked that she did not understand what the big deal was since abstinence simply required one to “not have sex”.

The Lolo Jones issue and the female guest’s response, speak to two issues that I, as an HIV researcher and prevention practitioner, have been intrigued by for some time now. These are our limited understanding of the experiences of young people who choose to, and successfully, abstain from sex and the lack of HIV prevention interventions for sexually abstinent youth. Unfortunately, the concept of abstinence has become so politically incorrect and emotionally charged in the HIV world that there is great reluctance to acknowledge that every single day around the world young people are successfully delaying sexual debut—if not until they are married, for one more month or for one more year, and so on. However, these choices seem not to count for much in the dominant HIV prevention landscape with HIV researchers and practitioners often too quick to argue that “abstinence does not work”. This phrase typically means one of two things: abstinence is impossible, that is, we *all* succumb to our sexual urges before we marry; and abstinence-only messages are inadequate as an HIV prevention strategy. In this article, I argue that an HIV prevention response that is based on the belief that “abstinence does not work” is just as problematic as one that is based on abstinence-only messages.

Many years back I was involved in designing and implementing an HIV prevention program for university students in Zimbabwe. We faced major challenges attracting Christian students to our activities and I vividly recall numerous occasions when Christian students would ask us “So, are you saying we should use condoms?”. I often replied in the affirmative and

would then try to “show” these students the “folly” of remaining uninformed on correct condom use. I also recall literally forcing female students attending our workshops to *touch* and *feel* and even *smell* the male and female condoms that we brought along to these trainings. I was always exasperated by their unwillingness to touch a condom, which they seemed to associate with impurity and contagion. To further drive my sense of outrage home, I would usually close a session on correct condom use by moisturizing my lips with the lubrication from the condom.

In the intervening years since, in which I have primarily donned the hat of an HIV researcher rather than that of an HIV prevention educator/activist, I feel that I have a better grasp of Christian students’ concerns. I have learned that, for many Christian youth, pre-marital abstinence is not simply something that one does, but is what one is. Abstinence is not an action one performs or a “behavior”, but is an integral part of one’s identity as a Christian. A critical first step towards developing an appropriate HIV prevention response for sexually-abstinent youth, for me, therefore, is one that takes into account the fact that pre-marital sexual abstinence is, for some young people, deeply embedded into their sense of self. Such an approach would lead us down a substantially different path than an approach which views abstinence strictly as a behavior because the focus would not be on changing the behavior but on understanding what the behavior <u>means</u> or signifies for the individuals practicing it.

Scholars have noted that the term “identity” refers to that which an individual uniquely possesses (i.e. it is who one is or who one thinks they are) *and* that it also signifies and is embedded in broader social relationships. Identities therefore have both individual and social aspects. In this vein, therefore, the ideology of pre-marital sexual abstinence must be seen as providing some Christian youth with an opportunity to exercise sexual agency while also simultaneously strengthening their place within the broader Christian community that they are a part of. It is this dual character of the self and the self-embedded in others that, in my opinion, complicates Christian youth sexualities and makes the “abstinence is difficult, so use condoms” approach to HIV prevention with this group doomed to fail.

When abstinence is viewed as a core part of one’s Christian identity, succumbing to “sexual temptation”—a commonly used term among this population—means that one’s sense of self is disrupted, resulting in a deep sense of “guilt” in the youth who has failed to abstain. None of our HIV prevention interventions thus far attend to the issue of “guilt” in any meaningful way. What I see, instead, is a naïve belief that educating Christian youth on HIV and on correct condom use constitutes an effective HIV prevention response and no attempt is made to truly engage with the guilt and sense of personal failure that studies show Christian youth often

experience when they engage in pre-marital sex. Guilt, as we all know, is a complex psycho-social phenomenon and more complex response than we have offered thus far. Under these circumstances, telling Christian youth that “abstinence does not work, so use condoms” is a pretty pathetic response. Thrusting condoms in the faces of Christian youth adds a second layer of psychological distress to these youth who, in most cases, are still trying to figure out who they are as “Christians” once they engage in premarital sex. These complications are what I think Lolo Jones was trying to get at when she stated that remaining a virgin was way more difficult than training for the Olympics. Whatever her reasons and motivations for not engaging in pre-marital sex, it is clear that this decision represents something of extremely great value to her and that she is committed to putting in the hard work that is involved. The general response to Lolo Jones, unfortunately, has been to trivialize her decision (What’s the big deal?) or even mock her for it. No one seems interested in learning about how she has successfully abstained and what she has to share about her journey in this regard.

As a society, our default position on abstinence is that it is a ludicrous and impossible expectation. While this is true in some contexts, it is not true in all contexts. Our failure and refusal to accept and support young people’s decisions to remain sexually abstinent until marriage must be viewed as a failure to recognize and support a specific type of youth sexual agency.

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