

Religions play positive role in African AIDS crisis

September 11 2012

While the Western press often targets religious groups for their roles in handling the African AIDS crisis, these groups tend to play positive—and critical—roles in fighting the epidemic, according to sociologists.

"There's no doubt that religions have done some good and some bad confronting AIDS in Africa," said Jenny Trinitapoli, assistant professor of sociology, religious studies and [demography](#). "But the negative side is often exaggerated, while the good that religious groups do is often overlooked."

Trinitapoli said that several criticisms of how religious groups are mishandling the epidemic are inaccurate and overstated.

The researchers conducted extensive [fieldwork](#) in Malawi, made shorter visits to other [African countries](#), including Kenya, Ghana, Mozambique and Tanzania, and analyzed survey data from 30 African countries. During research trips to Africa, they and their research assistants visited more than 200 congregations and conducted hundreds of interviews with religious leaders, lay people and parishioners.

Some religious groups in Africa are criticized for prohibiting condom use, a practice that can prevent the transmission HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. However, most people do not avoid condoms because of religious teachings, according to the researchers, who report their findings in "Religion and AIDS in Africa" (2012, Oxford University

Press).

During interviews, people frequently complained that condoms diminish [sexual pleasure](#), but seldom attributed any reluctance to use them to their religious beliefs, Trinitapoli said.

The researchers' analysis of condom use data from the African Demographic and Health Surveys also points to a lack of religious motivation for condom avoidance. Despite the Catholic Church's prohibitions against condoms, African Catholics are no less likely to report using condoms than Protestants, whose religious leaders do not prohibit their use. Condom use tends to be lowest among Muslims even though there is no prohibition against condom use among mainstream Muslim leaders.

While religious leaders told the researchers they prefer abstinence and faithfulness in halting the spread of HIV, they had more complex stances on condom use. They recognized the importance of condoms, but also expressed concern that their church members would not consistently use condoms.

"When we talked to religious leaders about [condom use](#) we heard answers that were complex and ambivalent, but not always based on any religious doctrine," said Trinitapoli. "They were based on skepticism that their congregants would actually use condoms. It's not dogmatic, just pragmatic and probably accurate to say that most people would rather not use condoms."

Trinitapoli, who wrote the book with Alexander Weinreb, associate professor of sociology, University of Texas, said religious groups are also accused of condemning AIDS patients. She said this criticism is incomplete.

"In many parts of Africa, you will hear public messages and sermons arguing that AIDS was sent by God as some form of a punishment," said Trinitapoli. "But these messages are usually geared to the collective and do not reflect how individuals with HIV are treated in their communities."

The view of AIDS as a curse from God is not often directly applied to individuals because these people are family members and friends, said Trinitapoli.

Another faulty impression in the Western press is the myth that religious beliefs prevent Africans from seeking medical treatment for AIDS-related conditions. The researchers found that, on the contrary, many religious groups actively promote medical solutions. One religious leader from a rural community took parishioners on a field trip to a medical clinic to have the whole congregation tested for HIV, Trinitapoli said.

"People may attend a faith healing service and go to medical clinics for help," said Trinitapoli. "They engage both faith and biomedical solutions at the same time."

[Religious groups](#) in Africa, particularly Christian congregations, have also played a critical role as care-giving organizations during the AIDS epidemic in Africa. Government and volunteer programs are incapable of meeting the demand to provide care for the millions of people living with [AIDS](#) across Africa.

"Besides the family network, religious communities are the most effective and important providers of care for the sick," said Trinitapoli.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Religions play positive role in African AIDS crisis (2012, September 11) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-09-religions-positive-role-african-aids.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.