



Debating Sex and Sovereignty: Uganda's New National Sexuality Education Policy

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Abstract

Introduction This article examines recent moral panics over sex education in Uganda from historical perspectives. Public outcry over comprehensive sexuality education erupted in 2016 over claims that children were being taught “homosexuality” by international NGOs. Subsequent debates over sex education revolved around defending what public figures claimed were national, religious, and cultural values from foreign infiltration.

Methods This paper is grounded in a survey of Uganda's two English-print national newspapers (2016–2018), archival research of newspapers held at Uganda's *Vision Group* media company (1985–2005), analyses of public rhetoric as reported in internationally and nationally circulating media, textual analysis of Uganda's National Sexuality Education Framework (2018), formal interviews with Ugandan NGO officers (3), and semi-structured interviews with Ugandan educators (3).

Results Uganda's current panic over sex education reignited longstanding anxieties over foreign interventions into the sexual health and rights of Ugandans. We argue that in the wake of a 35-year battle with HIV/AIDS and more recent controversies over LGBT rights, both of which brought international donor resources and governance, the issue of where and how to teach young people about sex became a new battleground over the state's authority to govern the health and economic prosperity of its citizens.

Conclusions Ethno- and religio-nationalist rhetoric used to oppose the state's new sexuality education policy was also used to justify sex education as a tool for economic development.

Policy Implications Analyzing rhetoric mobilized by both supporters and detractors of sex education reveals the contested political terrain policy advocates must navigate in Uganda and other postcolonial contexts.

Keywords Sex education · Moral panics · Sexuality politics · Nationalism · Global health · Uganda · Africa

Introduction

In 2016, Uganda erupted in blistering debates over sex education, referred to by one journalist as a “raging controversy among the public.” That year, the government banned sex education in school and non-school settings after public outcry over claims that children were being taught “homosexuality” in elite schools, specifically through a curriculum

provided by a Dutch aid organization (“At least 100 schools tricked,” *Daily Monitor*, 2016). In response to the notion that local schools were being “tricked” by foreigners, Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports launched its own sex education policy, the National Sexuality Education Framework (NSEF), in 2018. While the policy might have appeared to appease detractors by including strictures against same-sex relationships and emphasizing abstinence until marriage, it was widely rejected nonetheless. In a headline that appeared on the front page of Uganda's English-print daily newspapers, district-level political leaders claimed the framework would “ruin the lives of children” (Okello, 2018).

For scholars and advocates of global comprehensive sexuality education initiatives, these debates took a familiar form. Conservative religious and political leaders positioned sex education as promoting immoral sexual behavior while advocates stressed the rights of young people to

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scientifically accurate, evidence-based information about their sexual health. Such were the terms, for example, of the more than 800 local controversies over sex education that flared across the USA in the 1990s (Irvine, 2006; Kendall, 2013). Dubbed “moral panics,” scholars have shown how these controversies were fueled by the religious right, which mobilized carefully calculated, emotionally charged rhetoric to steer public anxieties over how sex is taught in schools toward conservative political ends (di Mauro & Joffe, 2007; Irvine, 2008).

“Moral panics,” a term coined in 1972 by the British criminologist Stanley Cohen, signal periods during which a condition, person, or group of persons become identified as a threat to a society’s morals or values. Borrowing Cohen’s formulation, sexuality theorists have argued that panics over sexuality, or sex panics, scapegoat sexual groups, practices, and policies—from abortion to gender-neutral bathrooms to sex education—for a host of unrelated political and economic issues (Herdt, 2009; Weeks, 1981). As Gayle Rubin has described, sex panics flare up at moments of great social and political stress, displacing anxieties of “no intrinsic connection” onto particular erotic communities. Fueled by the media and stoked by enterprising public figures with something to gain from the controversy, sex panics demonize their “phony targets” in the public imagination, thereby justifying the expansion of state power into new arenas of intimate behavior (Rubin, 1984, p. 163).

This article considers Uganda’s panic—its “raging controversy”—over sex education from historical and ethnographic perspectives. Beyond simply recapitulating the ideological divisions between religious conservatism and liberal progressivism that drove US sex panics in the 1990s, however, we show how Ugandan debates over sex education erupted in another register, one that aligned progressive gender and sexuality politics with neocolonialism. For example, during a 2019 Christmas address to the nation, the Archbishop of the Anglican Church of Uganda, Right Reverend Stanley Ntagali asserted,

We also have serious issues from the UN’s pro-promiscuity, pro-gay, pro-abortion sexual agenda that are trying to infiltrate Uganda. Such are sneaking into Uganda through rewriting government policies as well as through UN-funded NGOs. We continue to say ‘No’ to Comprehensive Sexuality Education. (“Archbishop Ntagali blames UN,” *SoftPower News*, 2019, para. 7)

Made at the time of year when thousands of Ugandans working abroad return home for the holidays, bringing with them both gifts and ideas gleaned from beyond national borders, the Archbishop’s statement crystallized 3 years of publicly mediated controversies over the purported foreignness of the concept of comprehensive sexuality education.

Anticolonial objections to sexuality policy were not new in Uganda, a landlocked country in East Africa home to 34.63 million people. Rather, debates over the NSEF were only the most recent in a series of recurring moral panics that attach anxieties over economic neo-imperialism and postcolonial state sovereignty to the regulation of sex and sexuality. Sex became an object of public moral discourse in the 1990s as Uganda responded to a devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic at the same time that the country, as elsewhere in the global south, was undergoing the broad-scale political, economic, social, and technological changes associated with globalization. Amid an already ongoing influx of international commodities, funds, and people, HIV/AIDS brought hundreds of millions of dollars in global health monies, which reshaped not only national health infrastructure but the country’s political economic landscape. Beginning in the 2000s, Uganda’s nationalized HIV prevention initiatives became entangled with another growing global movement—Evangelical Christianity—which infused sexual and reproductive health campaigns with moralizing messages about abstinence and fidelity (Boyd, 2015; Epstein, 2007; Parikh, 2005, 2015). Most recently, global sexuality politics have brought Uganda into the international spotlight for its attempts to criminalize homosexuality, the starkest example being legislation proposed in 2009 (and again in 2019) that included a “gay death penalty” (Osborne, 2019). In the months surrounding the enactment of “Anti-Homosexuality Bill,” homophobia surged: tabloids outed gays and lesbians on their front covers and local vigilantes violently attacked LGBT-identified people, including the murder of prominent activist David Kato. Politicians, religious leaders, and public citizens alike have objected to same-sex relationships as un-African and as a threat to Uganda’s Christian values (Tamale, 2016).

Popular and scholarly critics analyzing these events have applied Cohen’s “moral panics” concept while pointing to the ironic involvement of foreign organizations in the construction and defense of so-called local sexual norms. For example, Roger Ross Williams’s (2013) documentary film *God Loves Uganda* depicts the outsized role American Evangelical missionaries played in inciting homophobia among Ugandans, even by helping to formulate the anti-homosexuality legislation. Similarly, anthropologist Kristen Cheney has characterized the rise of Ugandan homophobia as “postcolonial amnesia,” which “speaks to the success of the colonial-era missionary erasure of Africa’s history of sexual diversity and masks the neocolonial aspirations of the religious right to globalize the U.S. culture wars” (Cheney, 2012, p. 79–80; see also Chin, 2014). Critics debunk claims that Christian paradigms for sexual expression are “local traditions,” arguing instead that Uganda’s sex panics are political maneuvers intended to “appeal to the insecurities and worries of people

who don't have enough opportunities for education and work, and who aren't being served by their governments," as one journalist wrote (Okeowo, 2014). In this frame, state and nonstate actors "instrumentalize" or "exploit" concerns over sex and sexuality as a "strategic political power play" to generate political currency and to divert attention from other, more pressing issues (Vorhölter, 2017, p. 94; see also Kaur Hundle, 2015; Nyanzi & Karamagi, 2015).

In this article, we build from these insights to explore Uganda's recent panics over sex education, but we argue that they were far more than a political distraction. Rather, they revealed a much deeper underlying contestation, rooted in (post)colonialism, over the health and future of Uganda as a nation and likewise the authority of the state to manage it. We give context for this argument first by describing Uganda's long history with foreign-funded interventions into the sexual lives of its citizens, which set the terms of public debate over sex education policy as both opponents and advocates of the NSEF claimed to be defending national values. Second, we show how the state used the NSEF to assert authority over reproductive health as a way of governing Uganda's economic future. Paradoxically, the same nationalist rhetoric used to oppose sex education as part of "the UN's pro-promiscuity, pro-gay, pro-abortion sexual agenda," as Archbishop Ntagali described, provided a vocabulary justifying the policy by framing it as a tool to ensure sustainable population growth and therefore as the solution to a growing national crisis: widespread youth unemployment. Such was the mandate for a sex education policy designed to appease both international donors and a national public which, after a century of internationally funded interventions into sexual health and rights, is primed to regard any policy related to sexuality as a foreign imposition.

Methodology

Drawing from the anthropology of health policymaking, we present textual analyses of (1) Uganda's panics over sex education, as represented by national and international media, and (2) the National Sexuality Education Framework (NSEF), published in 2018 by Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports with support from the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). We situate these analyses in historical context in order to emphasize the "ways policies are populated with voices, experiences, memories, personalities, and future projects, even when these are made invisible in legal forms of policy" (Bernstein, 2017, p. 232; see also Briggs, 2004). This history reveals that Uganda's debates about sex education were populated with many of the same voices that dominated the country's earlier controversies over sex and sexuality. At the same time, we explore how the state used sex education

policy to stake its political authority over the size, structure, and growth of its nation. We do so by pointing to the NSEF's fresh "policy problematization," what Susan Greenhalgh describes as the ways in which policy frames the problem at hand, proposes a solution, and assesses its costs and benefits. As Greenhalgh argues, policy problematizations are "powerful things because they do not simply reflect a reality that exists in nature... A fresh and compelling problematization can radically reorient thinking about the nature and scope of a social problem, making people see the matter in completely new ways" (Greenhalgh, 2008, p. 10). By highlighting concerns with growing rates of unemployment among young people, the policy staked new ground from which to argue for sex education policy while recycling familiar anti-colonial objections to progressive sexuality politics.

Our analysis is drawn from an archive of publicly available national and international news media covering sexuality education in Uganda from 2016 to 2020, primarily from Uganda's two national English-print newspapers, *New Vision* and *Daily Monitor*; coverage of the AIDS epidemic printed in Uganda's state-run newspaper, *New Vision*, from 1985 to 2010, held at the *New Vision* archives in Uganda; international, regional, and national policy documents; NGO white papers; formal interviews with Uganda-based advocates for comprehensive sexuality education; and informal conversations with Ugandan educators, NGO officers, religious leaders, and community leaders based in Kampala, Uganda's capital and largest city, and in the rural Rakai district of southwestern Uganda in 2018 and 2019.

Foreign Interventions in Sexual Health and Rights: a Century of Collaborations and Contestations

Uganda's recent panics over sex education erupted in a political economic climate and discursive terrain shaped by the country's long history with missionization, colonialism, and international aid—a history which provides context for the anticolonial terms in which the sex education controversies erupted. As Cohen notes, new panics are always animated by old issues, "lying dormant perhaps...but invisibly creeping up the moral horizon" ([1972] 2002, vii). We historicize Uganda's recent sex panics following scholars who have argued that sexuality is not simply relevant to colonial and postcolonial state governance but rather one of its key domains (Adams & Pigg, 2005; Puri, 2016; Vaughan, 1991). These theorists draw from Michel Foucault's concept of "governmentality," or the notion that modern states exercise power not by meting violence upon citizens but through the "conduct of conducts," that is, by managing the total range of human behavior among the populations they govern (Foucault, 1994). Foucault saw children's sexuality in particular as a "privileged point of control" for the modern nation-state, as children became identified "not only as heirs

to their parents, but also to the national patrimony and to the race” (Stoler, 1995, p. 144). This historical lens illuminates how Uganda’s new policy on sex education, the NSEF, became a means through which the state asserted its authority to govern—to conduct the conduct—of its national population after more than a century of foreign interventions in the sexual health and rights of its citizenry.

In stark contrast to current efforts to reduce average family size, late nineteenth and early twentieth century missionaries to Uganda sought to reform marriage, gender relations, and sexual behavior in order to encourage families to have *more* children (Summers, 1991). Between 1900 and 1920, following the death of nearly 300,000 people from sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis) and needing to ensure continued access to a strong labor force, the British acted upon what they perceived as the “pathological diminishing of a ‘virile race’” (Musisi, 2002, p. 95). British doctors collaborated with local authorities to intervene in growing syphilis and gonorrhea epidemics, which they saw as an effect of the “uncontrollable sexual drive of the Baganda” (Musisi, 2002, p. 100). Local authorities required people diagnosed with sexually transmitted infections to report to both medical doctors and government officials and supported legal campaigns to curb prostitution by restraining unmarried women’s movement. Official British colonial policies on sexual health waned after 1925, though local medical research and healthcare delivery continued, and the decades following Uganda’s independence in 1962 saw a heyday for Ugandan biomedicine (Crane, 2013; Mika, 2021). As historian Shane Doyle has argued, the strength of Uganda’s national medical systems made Ugandans a “heavily medicalized society by the 1970s, one that had been habituated to health campaigns advocating behavioural change” well before the HIV/AIDS epidemic brought international health experts back into the folds of national sexual health interventions (2013 p. 330).

In 1986, Yoweri Museveni became president amidst a rapidly growing health crisis: the first case of HIV in Africa was discovered in southwestern Uganda in 1982 (Serwadda et al., 1985), and by the early 1990s Uganda’s HIV prevalence rates were among the highest in the world, nearing 15 percent of the national population (Iliffe, 2006). The Museveni government’s response to the epidemic, celebrated internationally as the most robust on the continent, relied on its strong centralist political structure and its military, which implemented the first national sero-survey in Africa in 1988 (Putzel, 2004; Tumuhube, 2006). Museveni also involved Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and other religious leaders in HIV prevention efforts and therefore could also rely on those institutions’ centralized authority structures to help disseminate national HIV/AIDS prevention messaging from the capital city to the Ugandan countryside. Initial prevention messaging centered around “zero grazing” (i.e. faithfulness)

and “ABC” (abstain, be faithful, condomize), messaging deemed so successful the World Health Organization exported it around the globe (*New Vision*, 1997). Further government support for condom use came from then-Vice President Specioza Kazibwe, who in 2000 chastised religious leaders for refusing to promote them (“SPE Raps Clergy on Condoms,” *New Vision*, 2000). According to most accounts, early in the epidemic the government embraced open dialogue around sexual health. As an AIDS educator remarked to reporters from *Human Rights Watch*, “It’s not true that Museveni talked about abstinence. What he did was give us complete freedom of the press. There were pictures of penises and vaginas everywhere” (HRW, 2005, p. 70).

In the decades that followed, fluctuations in the government’s approach to HIV prevention messaging tracked alongside both the growing Evangelical movement and changing international funding priorities—namely under PEPFAR, the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, launched by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2003. Between 2003 and 2007, Uganda received \$650 million from PEPFAR, which mandated 33% of funds be directed toward programs and policies promoting abstinence until marriage (Parkhurst, 2010; Santelli et al., 2013). PEPFAR funding reshaped Uganda’s national platform on HIV prevention messaging as well as the channels through which international funding flowed. Namely, PEPFAR routed funds directly to private NGOs and faith-based organizations, or FBOs, which have received the majority of AIDS prevention funding in Uganda to date (Boyd, 2015). According to the government-run newspaper *New Vision*, the number of NGOs providing care and treatment grew from 50 registered organizations in 1990 to more than 2,500 in 2003; in the fiscal year 2001–2002, international donors provided 91% of Uganda’s national budget to fight HIV/AIDS (World Bank, 2001). At that time, private NGOs provided 80% of HIV testing, 90% of post-test care, and 70% of ARV care and supplemental nutrition. Beginning in 2003, Uganda used PEPFAR funding to implement a program called the Presidential Initiative of AIDS Strategy for Communication to the Youth (PIASCY), which promoted abstinence until marriage along with lessons about hygiene, puberty, and life skills. In 2004, the Uganda AIDS Commission released a policy called “Abstinence and being faithful” (AB), which cautioned that “providing information about condoms alongside abstinence can be ‘confusing’ to young people” (Das, 2005, p. 263). Around that time, teachers reported to Human Rights Watch (2005) that they had been instructed by US contractors not to discuss condoms in schools. In other words, the Museveni government’s initial “ABC” approach lost its “C” (Epstein, 2004; Gusman, 2009). Despite objections from Parliament such as, “The country will regret dropping the condom use campaign in favor of abstinence and faithfulness” (Mubiru,

2004), President Museveni insisted that condoms were “unsafe” (Osike, 2004) and announced he would “open war on condom sellers” (Schoepf, 2004, p. 372). The same year, First Lady Janet Museveni led a march for virginity through the streets of Kampala (Epstein, 2005).

International HIV funding continues to circumvent government health agencies in favor of private organizations. In July 2018, Deborah Birx, the US global AIDS coordinator, committed to move PEPFAR funding to 70 percent “indigenous” organizations, a category that includes local religious agencies (Fallon, 2017). In Uganda, foreign-funded private organizations (those focused on health, development, and other issues) control at least 15% of the national budget (F. Kahiigwa, personal communication, July 15, 2015), half of which comes from foreign aid (Burki, 2014). Flush with international funding, private organizations have subsumed the provision of health and welfare services from the state, making them agents of governmentality in their own right, as scholars in critical development studies have argued (Bernal and Grewal, 2004; Ferguson, 2006). Whether by financially empowering non-state organizations or influencing shifts in government messaging, four decades of international HIV prevention funding brought the state’s sovereignty over the health and wellbeing of its citizens into question.

From Health Governance to Rights Interventions

In a context where foreign organizations were already playing a major role in health governance, international donors further challenged state authority over sexual health and rights by intervening in Uganda’s attempts to criminalize homosexuality. In 2009, Uganda became infamous on the international stage for its so-called anti-gay bill, accompanied by the “Anti-Pornography” bill, dubbed by the media as a ban on miniskirts, and for the homophobia and misogyny that surged after the bills’ introduction (Moore, 2020; Tamale, 2016). After years of controversy over LGBT rights, President Museveni enacted the official “Anti-Homosexuality Act” in February 2014, only to rescind it months later after western donors, including the USA and the World Bank, suspended nearly \$118 million in foreign aid (Golooba-Mutebi, 2014; “Uganda hit with foreign aid cuts,” 2014; “Uganda says healthcare is for all,” 2014). For many observers, these events suggested the Ugandan state’s autonomy was being compromised by international organizations.

In turn, in public speeches and at media events, public figures buoyed the withdrawal of foreign aid into political support by articulating opposition to LGBT lifestyles in precisely the same anticolonial rhetoric used to object to sex education. For example, in 2012 when Uganda’s Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga was criticized in Quebec for the anti-gay bill, she responded, “We are not a colony

or protectorate of Canada. ...Please respect our sovereign rights, our cultural values and societal norms” (quoted in Nyanzi & Karamagi, 2015, p. 31). Other Ugandan politicians have argued that the government should support the anti-gay bill, “even if it meant withdrawing from international treaties and conventions or losing donor funding” (Rice, 2009, para. 8). Expressed in the explicit language of sovereignty, Uganda’s homophobic panics framed heterosexual norms as “local” to Uganda, setting the terms for debates over sex education that erupted a decade later.

International Debates over National Values

As with Uganda’s national crises over the anti-homosexuality legislation as well as its HIV/AIDS interventions, international organizations were actively involved on both sides of Uganda’s sex education debates. Objections to comprehensive sexuality education initially revolved around the notion that local schools had been “tricked” by foreigners: “At least 100 schools have been duped into training disguised homosexuality to their teachers and students,” announced a headline in the *Daily Monitor*, one of Uganda’s two nationally circulating English-print newspapers, which sparked the initial crisis over sex education (“At Least 100 Schools Tricked,” 2016, para. 1). Following a series of media reports suggesting that materials smuggled into Ugandan schools by foreign aid agencies painted homosexuality and masturbation in a natural light, Ethics Minister Simon Lokodo ordered officials to raid schools and seize the offending materials. During the raid, government investigators discovered a computer-based curriculum, developed by Dutch NGOs and linked to UNESCO’s *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, first issued in 2009, that included lessons such as “People are homosexual not by choice but by birth.” The curriculum reportedly made its way into Ugandan schools through a collaboration with SchoolNet Uganda, an NGO housed within the Ministry of Education’s headquarters—an arrangement typical in Uganda, where the government relies on public–private partnerships to provide social services and where many government buildings house UN and NGO offices alongside state functionaries.

Not only blamed as the source of controversial curriculum, foreign organizations collaborated with local NGOs to advocate for government response—both to develop a new sex education policy and to oppose sex education altogether. In opposition, the Ugandan branch of the American Evangelical organization The Family, which had earlier supported Uganda’s anti-gay bill (Blake, 2014), petitioned Parliament to ban comprehensive sexuality education. As a result, in October 2016 Uganda’s Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development issued an official ban on sex education in school and non-school settings.

Advocates for sex education, including envoys from the Netherlands and other donor countries, publicly condemned the ban and helped local NGOs to organize a protest event attended by over 3,000 young people (Kato, 2016). Shortly thereafter, international donor organizations Save the Children and the International Planned Parenthood Federation supported the Center for Health, Human Rights, and Development, a Ugandan NGO, in filing suit against the government. In response to the suit, government officials acknowledged what they described as “the urgent need” for a national policy on sex education. To develop the policy, the government accepted financial support and technical expertise from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Embassy of Sweden, including funds to send officials from the Ministry of Education to Zambia for consultation.

Despite foreign involvement on both sides of the dispute, opponents and advocates of sex education both claimed to be defending national values from foreign “infiltration.” For example, when Minister of Gender Janet Mukwaya officially banned sex education in 2016, she cited “the likely dangers of having the (sex education) training infiltrated with the dangerous vices that are inconsistent with the national values, norms and morality” (Nabimanya, 2018, para. 4). Similar rhetoric was used to defend the policy, officially launched by the Ministry of Education and Sports in May 2018 as the National Sexuality Education Framework, or the NSEF. For example, in the foreword to the policy, First Lady and Minister of Education Janet Museveni positioned the framework as “home-grown...developed in line with existing national policies and commitments” (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, p. ii). In both usages, the terms “national values” and “national policies and commitments” refer to Uganda’s existing policy agreements, such as to the Eastern and Southern African Ministerial Commitment on Sexuality Education (2013), the National School Health Policy (2015), and the National Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS (2015/16–2019/20). They also serve as implicit codes for prohibitions against homosexuality that had been mobilized in earlier Ugandan debates over sexuality politics. That both sides of the debates over Uganda’s new sex education policy framed their positions in defense of national values illustrates how overdetermined these debates were by the rhetoric of postcolonial sovereignty.

Authors and advocates of the NSEF also drew sharp distinctions between “sexuality education,” which they supported, and “comprehensive sexuality education,” which they did not. For example, in justifying the NSEF, Minister Museveni mobilized the language of attack, describing comprehensive sexuality education as an outside “threat.” As she put it,

I was deeply disturbed to discover that sexuality education initiatives were unregulated, unguided. I soon

discovered there were active threats targeting our schools, even primary schools. My first stand against this threat was to firmly reject the concept of Comprehensive Sexuality Education, which includes ideas like sexual rights, sexual tolerance, sexual choices, sexual differences and non-judgmental attitude to any sexual orientation. (Ahimbisibwe, 2018, para. 4)

Museveni’s dismissal of “the concept of comprehensive sexuality education” along with “ideas like sexual rights, sexual tolerance, sexual choices, sexual differences” suggests how the term had become associated with the progressive gender and sexuality politics that many prominent public figures had for the past decade labeled as western threats to Ugandan values.

While Minister Museveni and other advocates of the NSEF strived to delineate between the policy’s approach to “sexuality education” versus “Comprehensive Sexuality Education,” soon many Ugandan politicians and religious leaders began opposing the premise of the policy altogether. These rejections framed sex (or sexuality) education a metonym for reproductive rights and sexual freedoms more generally, and therefore as a violation of Uganda’s Christian values and cultural norms. For example, Father Silvester Arinaitwe, a representative from the Uganda Joint Christian Council, condemned sex education, “saying it was destined to destroy Christian values on whose foundation the country is built” (“At Least 100 Schools Tricked,” 2016, para. 16). President Museveni, during a speech at a World Population Day event in 2016, proclaimed, “Do not engage children in sex education. Sex education in school? Are schools maternity wards? My view of bringing up children is that there is a time for everything as it is indicated in the Book of Ecclesiastes,” referring to a Christian philosophy of abstention from earthly pleasures (Ssendendo, 2016). Member of Parliament Lucy Akello objected to sexuality education in culturalist terms. “In Africa,” she claimed, “we have ways of educating our children about matters relating to sex without compromising our values” (Arinaitwe, 2016, para. 8). As these public statements indicate, many political and religious leaders widely disavowed sexuality education as un-Christian, un-Ugandan, and un-African—both a symbol and product of western sexual immorality.

Reframing Sex Education: from Reproductive Health to Economic Development

In a discursive context where conversations about sexuality policy were framed as a matter of protecting of national values from foreign infiltration, the authors of the NSEF were faced with a challenge: they had to justify the policy as a “home-grown” project that upholds “national” cultural and religious values and likewise the state’s authority to regulate

sex and sexuality. To do so, the NSEF, with a front cover printed in the yellow, red, and black of Uganda's flag and stamped with the national seal, deploys explicit religious-nationalist rhetoric. For example, the policy lists "God-fearing" as a guiding principle, which "ensures that religious and cultural values will provide the compass of what is to be taught on matters of sexuality education. This is because Uganda is a God-fearing nation with morals and virtues of an African setting" (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, p. 5). The policy also lists "national unity" and "national consciousness and patriotism" under the "Ugandan National Ethical Values" that the policy promises to uphold (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, p. 6). Even the policy's definition of "sexuality education" makes the concept specific to Uganda. The definition reads:

A lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values about vital issues such as sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles. It addresses the sociocultural, biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of sexuality by providing information; exploring feelings, values, and attitudes; and developing communication skills, decision-making, and critical-thinking skills in accordance with the laws and policies of Uganda. (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, p. x)

Like the term "national values," the phrase "the laws and policies of Uganda" signals both legislation and social sanctions on homosexuality, pornography, and marriage and divorce.

In addition to explicitly invoking cultural and religious values as "national" values, the NSEF asserts the authority of the state to govern sexual health and rights by reframing sexuality education as not just a matter of individual health but of national economic development. It does so by presenting a new policy problematization (Greenhalgh, 2008) that positions young people's sexuality as the lynchpin between individual behavioral change and sustainable population growth. For example, the policy's Executive Summary opens by putting the policy in the context of the government's statement of overarching development commitments, referred to as "Uganda's Vision 2040." This policy statement promotes "a transformed Ugandan society from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country in 30 years" through programs with "the goal of the reduction of fertility among Ugandan women to about 4 children per women" (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, p. xi, p. 47). In the sentences following its references to Uganda's Vision 2040, the NSEF posits young people as both a problem and solution to the economic threat of unsustainable population growth. On the one hand, the NSEF frames Uganda's youthful population as a resource. The policy reads,

In this aspiration, sustainable human resource is the single most important factor. In this regard, Uganda has an estimated population of 34,634,650, and 33% of this population is made up of young people below the age of 19. This youthful population is a potential opportunity and asset for driving, accelerating and sustaining economic growth and transformation envisaged in the national vision. (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, p. 1).

On the other hand, the NSEF also suggests that the unchecked sexuality of Uganda's youthful population presents a potential danger to economic sustainability by promising to address "modernization challenges," or "the issues of survival, transition, and unemployment rates that have links with sexuality" (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, pp. 1–2). In so doing, the NSEF justifies sex education as a strategy with "the goal of the reduction of fertility" (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, p. 2), and connects that goal to Uganda's rising rates of unemployment.

As the world's "youngest" country with 78% of its population under the age of 30 (Bwambale, 2013), establishing a "more sustainable age structure" (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, p. 47) has emerged as one of Uganda's top economic priorities. The NSEF claims that unrestrained population growth is a threat to the sustainability of the domestic economy in statements such as, "...every year a total of 400,000 youths are released into the job market after graduating. This job market is only able to provide employment to 90,000 of the 400,000 youths that graduated, resulting in a youth unemployment rate of 22.3%" (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, pp. 1–2). The NSEF does not suggest extreme infringements on individual reproductive self-determination that have characterized overt "population control" efforts, which have since 1974 been decried by the global health community (Hodgson & Watkins, 1997). Yet, it does employ population control rhetoric: by overlaying population figures with employment statistics, the policy effectively articulates the state's intention to use sexuality education to reduce fertility, and therefore its workforce, in order to sustain levels of employment and therefore the national economy. Far from unique to Uganda, that young people are on the cusp of reproduction and therefore key to controlling population growth is a longstanding premise of development economics (Murphy, 2017). By mobilizing the language of national economic development, the NSEF justified the authority of the state to intervene in young people's sexuality as a matter of economic sustainability.

At the same time, because Christianity had already been attached to the "local" in Uganda's sex education debates, the NSEF's solution to unsustainable population growth was nonetheless posed in the moralizing terms of individual behavioral change. The policy's authors made case that

young people do not currently possess appropriate “motivation” to make the right decisions when it comes to sex and sexuality, writing that “moral decadence is rampant among the population and is slowly spilling to the young people” (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2018, p. 2). The key life-skill the policy proposes to develop is individualized sexual restraint, or “self-control,” a phrase that appears fifty-six times throughout the proposal, more than virginity (32), pregnancy (53), or fertility (4), but less than abstinence (59), nation (120), and God (213). The policy ultimately proposes to redress moral decadence by cultivating a love of God and country and likewise a fear of sex.

An Ideological Litmus Test: Continuing Debates over Sex Education Policy

Despite the NSEF’s emphasis on “preserving purity,” “sexual abstinence,” and “marital faithfulness,” a coalition of Catholic, Anglican, and Muslim leaders nonetheless rejected the policy outright—and with it the notion of teaching sexuality education in schools altogether. The Interreligious Council’s objection to the policy was significant because faith-based organizations oversee the majority of educational institutions in Uganda, including 75% of primary schools and 56% of secondary schools. In the months following the NSEF’s launch, hardly a day went by without sexuality education appearing in newspapers or on radio programs, and eventually even everyday citizens became embroiled in debates over sex education. For example, an interview with a prominent businessman printed in the *Daily Monitor* in October 2018 concluded its questions on chicken-farming with a question about whether he supported sexuality education for his children (he did not). In the media, sexuality education had become an ideological litmus test—a policy toward which one publicly oriented as either “for” or “against.”

While national media attention to sexuality education subsided for the most part in the years since the policy’s launch, religious leaders and government officials continued to debate the NSEF behind closed doors, creating what one advocate described as a “rollercoaster of back and forth” on the issue (I. Batambuze, personal communication, January 11, 2020). For example, while President Museveni publicly rejected sexuality education in 2016 and remained “quiet” on the policy at the time of its launch, at the International Conference on Population and Development in Nairobi in November 2019, Museveni committed to “operationalizing” the NSEF in 2020, commenting, “We will do this while upholding positive cultural and religious values of our countries” (UNFPA, 2019). Further nationalistic support for the policy came from Miss Uganda 2019, who adopted sex education as her advocacy platform (“Nakakande to promote

sex education,” *The Observer*, 2019). NGOs and policymakers continue to advocate for religious leaders’ approval for the NSEF, and some were particularly worried the policy would become further embroiled in political debates leading up to the 2021 presidential elections.

Meanwhile, advocates continue to gather data that indicates popular support for school-based sex education among parents, teachers, and religious leaders. In surveys conducted in 2019, researchers from the Ugandan NGO Reach a Hand Uganda found overwhelming support for sex education policy from parents and local community leaders, and young Ugandans themselves have also expressed desire for school-based sexuality education. For example, Florence Kyoheirwe Muhanguzi and Anna Ninsiima (2011) found that teenagers in secondary schools in urban Uganda appreciated learning about sexuality from teachers whom they respected and saw it as an opportunity for personal and intellectual empowerment. Most recently, in its insert for young people the *Daily Monitor* published letters from school children voicing the need for sex education in schools. The young letter-writers argued that sex education would help them to understand the dangers of engaging in sexual activity while still young, avoid pornography, learn about sexually transmitted infections, and develop skills to know when and how to say no. More than just a testament of youth support, the letters demonstrate that young people are adopting the medical-moral categories that have long defined the terms of public conversation about sex to make demands for Uganda’s sex education policy.

Conclusion

This essay has shown how Uganda’s new sex education policy became the grounds for vitriolic public debates, or moral panics, during which both advocates and opponents of sex education expressed concerns with protecting the country’s national sovereignty and imagined futures. As most observers would agree, Uganda’s sex education debates reflect the strong influence of the religious right, which has driven ostensibly local objections to progressive gender and sexuality politics all over the world. Particularly in the global south, concepts such as feminism and LGBT rights have been framed as imports and impositions from the west—as “Ebola from Brussels,” referring to the seat of the European Union (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018), or “That Beijing Thing,” referring to the UN’s 1995 World Conference on Women (Ssewakiryanga, 2002; see also Cole & Moore, 2020). This rhetoric has been traced to such well-resourced metropolises as Colorado Springs, home to Focus on the Family, a key opponent of comprehensive sexuality education, and the Vatican (Butler, 2004; Case, 2016). Pope Francis, for example, has repeatedly mobilized the language of anti-colonialism in

his public pronouncements against “gender,” or the idea that feminism and LGBT rights threaten the God-given notion of sexual difference. That the Pope mobilizes anticolonial rhetoric opposing progressive gender and sexuality politics reveals that the “local” nature of these claims is, in fact, a chimera—such claims come from globally circulating discourses that name concepts such as comprehensive sexuality education as “foreign” and Christian religious values as autochthonous.

Yet, pointing to the foreign origins of these objections only begins to explain why and in what terms panics erupted over sex education in Uganda. As Cohen notes, panics “are damaging *in themselves*—but also merely *warning signs* of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition” (1972 [2002], p. viii). By describing Uganda’s longer history of foreign-local collaborations and contestations over sexual health and rights, we have shown that what is at stake in Uganda’s recurring sex panics are very real concerns with the physical and economic health and future of Uganda as a nation and likewise the authority of the state to manage it. It is on this contested and shifting terrain that advocates—including Miss Uganda, NGOs, parents, teachers, and young people—continue their efforts for better sex education policy for Ugandan young people. For global advocates of comprehensive sexuality education, our case study shows the importance of understanding the historical contexts in which debates over sex education unfold, particularly in areas of the world where long histories of colonial intervention set the terms of state and public response.

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Data Availability Most of the data referenced in this article are publicly available via the New Vision and Daily Monitor websites. Data from newspapers printed earlier than 2010 are held at the Vision Group archives in Kampala, Uganda. Interview transcripts with NGO offices and data from field notes could be made available upon request.

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