Numbers that

drive the bold

campaigns for

condom use

Preaching

chastity

until

marriage,

especially

to the

young

generation,

is like

trying to

cut a rock

using a

machete

**BY PETER ODUOR**

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book — *A Man of the*

*People* — was being

studied in Kenyan

high schools in 2004 as one of the

examinable literature texts, a war of

words ensued between the Catholic

Church in Kenya and the panel that

had selected the book. Teachers and

parents joined the debate over whether

the book was the right content to be

studied in school.

The discussion was ignited by

a scene in the book where one of

Achebe’s characters, a university student

nicknamed ‘Irre’, the short form

of the word irresponsible, walks out of

his hostel room glistening with sweat

and holding a used condom. It is to

prove to his friends that he has bedded

the most “impossible” woman to

take to bed.

Leaders of the Catholic Church did

not like the scene. They voiced their

objection to the book, arguing that it

encouraged immorality. They also said

something about family values and sex

outside marriage. Nonetheless, the

book, parents, and the teachers won.

In the same year (2004), then

Catholic head in Kenya, Archbishop

Ndingi Mwana a’Nzeki, dismissed

the use of the condom as protection

against HIV infection. He said during

an interview: “For me, a condom is not

the answer. In fact, in this country, I

would say without fear that the use of

condoms has been the greatest means

of increasing the cases of Aids. Take

our university students, students in

schools of higher studies, where condoms

are available upon demand. It’s

like saying, ‘my son or daughter, you

are free.’ And they do it.”

Two years later during a religious

leader’s conference, Archbishop Ndingi

urged the government to ban advertising

and distribution of condoms. His

reasons where that the easy access to

them encouraged promiscuity.

Catholic leaders in the country have

since remained adamant on their stand

about the use of condoms. It is a big

No for them, but a section of the faithful,

as explored yesterday in our sister

publication, *Lifestyle*, is rebelling. It

is not that they haven’t been, only

that this time round, the boldness by

which they are doing so is out there

for all to see.

It comes through a lobby group

going by the name Catholics for Choice

(CFC), and the huge billboards they

erected recently in the country to urge

Catholics to use condoms as a preventive

mechanism against HIV. “Good

Catholics Use Condoms,” screamed

the message.

Based in the US, Catholics for

Choice describe themselves as “part

of the great majority of the faithful in

the Catholic Church who disagree with

the dictates of the Vatican on matters

related to sex, marriage, family life,

and motherhood”.

The message they put up on the

billboards could have rubbed Catholic

leaders in the country the wrong way,

but the lobby group insists that their

stand is pegged on realities around

the trends in the HIV figures and the

huge numbers that make the Catholic

community.

Some statistics were displayed

recently after another controversial

condom campaign, *Weka Condom*

*Mpangoni,* was criticised by men of

the cloth in general, and not only

Catholic leaders.

The campaign was sponsored by

Population Services International

(PSI). The message, loosely translated

as “have the condom in mind”, was

directed at married couples. It was to

advise them to always have a condom

at hand should they be tempted to go

astray.

Religious leaders, both Christian

and Muslim, criticised it for promoting

infidelity and for make a joke of the

sacred institution of marriage. They

demanded for its withdrawal from the

television screens.

In response, the promoters

explained that the campaign was informed

by the reality that as much a