

Janet K. Museveni, Education minister

Status of National Sexuality Education Policy Framework

This is a Ministry of Education and Sports press statement on the status of the National Sexuality Education Policy Framework.

I am compelled once again to say something about the Sexuality Education Policy Framework launched recently by my ministry. This is in response to the remarks attributed to His Grace, the Most Reverend Dr. Cyprian Kizito Lwanga, where he was quoted by the media expressing discomfort with some aspects of the policy.

I must clarify at the onset that sexuality education is neither sex education nor just "teaching children about sex" or "matters of the bedroom" or "ebyokwegadanga" in Luganda.

While sex education has been defined as "a broad term used to describe education about human sexual anatomy, sexual reproduction, sexual intercourse and other aspects of this human behaviour", it is important to note that sexuality education aims at developing and strengthening the ability of children and young people to make conscious, right, healthy, deliberate, safe and respectful choices regarding emotional and physical health and boy/girl relationships. Keeping in mind the fact that they will live with the choices they make at this time of their lives.

Having said that, I must hasten to add that in today's world, there is a greater need more than ever before to aid the children and young people with the right information on this subject as early as possible, knowing that indeed this is the information age, and if the children do not get the correct information, timely and from the right places, they may get information alright from the many available resource centres. But what kind of information will it be and what direction will it lead them into?

Therefore, sexuality education delivered in a safe and protective environment is known to have a positive and lifelong effect on the health and well-being of young people. As has been testified by the many adults now who were children and young people of the early 90's, who went through the seminars of the Uganda Youth Forum in those years.

I was a young mother of teenagers at that time myself, my own children were part of the multitude of children who used to attend these youth conferences and I can testify, as I am sure other mothers and fathers of those children then now adults can, that we have never regretted that initiative. Instead, it equipped and empowered those young people with good information, skills and positive values to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS and dealing with other sexuality matters in a safe and satisfactory manner.

Presently, I happen to lead a ministry whose cardinal responsibility is to safely and appropriately guide the emotional and spiritual development of our children and, therefore, the future of our country. This is not a responsibility we take lightly.

We know that parents, guardians, relatives and other important stakeholders are important sources of learning about human relationships, including sexuality behaviour. However, we know that sometimes

cultures and extended family members do complicate the methods of passing on this information to the young people who desperately need it. Yet we know that this exercise must be inclusive of more concerned people rather than the ministry personnel.

That is why we resolved to at least ensure that we will take as much time as needed to stretch out and involve the religious leaders believing that they will not only represent all people of Uganda's concerns but, equally, they would bring on board the wisdom of the ages from the Holy books as to what builds nations.

This is because we believe in the education ministry that the responsibility we hold requires the trust of the people of Uganda, but as much as possible we need them to also play their part of that responsibility because as the saying goes, two heads are better than one and instead of only criticising the little we as representatives of the Ugandan families are trying to do, when you are asked to participate as all religious leaders have, not once but many times, I would hope to see some willingness to help.

These children and young people need all of us in these challenging times to hold hands together and create a safety net under them so that they can be saved. Otherwise, the more time we waste in disagreements, the higher the statistics go...statistics of teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexual abuse etc.

I, therefore, want to use this opportunity to inform the public that, I studied this Sexuality Education Policy Framework personally together with the team we had carefully put together to write it. After which I commissioned and launched it. I must add here that this Sexuality Education Policy Framework came into effect as a response to the country's outcry about a programme that had been smuggled into the country called "comprehensive sexuality education".

The people who were behind this programme still use some non-governmental organisations to do some secret seminars and they try to confuse the media that what they do may be known as Ministry of Education Sexuality Policy framework.

Therefore, it is important for the public to know that our programme is still in the making until we get all our stakeholders in agreement for the sake of our children. If there are aspects of this policy that we all agree are not good for the young people, then they can be re-considered for the good of us all.

I, therefore, want to assure the public, especially those who care to know the truth, that in formulating this policy framework, we have extensively consulted with a cross section of stakeholders. These include among others: religious leaders through their Council of Presidents (COP), the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU), the Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC), Uganda Muslim Supreme Council (UMSC), cultural leaders, government ministries responsible for health, local government, gender/youth, Members of Parliament, young people, Uganda National Association of Teachers Union (UNATU), Uganda AIDS



Commission, AIDS Development Partners, Civil Society Organisation, National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), UN-Joint Team and the private sector.

These consultations with the stakeholders generated consensus on overarching values including:

- (i) religious values relating to: piety, purity, morality, faith and hope;
- (ii) cultural values of integrity, honesty, respect, care, accountability and solidarity; and
- (iii) national ethical values such as respect for humanity, justice and fairness, hard work, national unity, patriotism and social responsibility.

It was also agreed that the Policy Framework would entrench the following fundamental principles:

- Nurturing children and young people who are God fearing as expressed in our national motto;
- Centrality of the family in child upbringing;
- Age appropriateness of the sexuality education messages;
- Risk avoidance through positive behaviour change; and
- Response and rehabilitation of learners to mitigate the negative impact on the infected and/or affected learners.

However, in spite of consensus reached, concerns were raised within some religious circles soon after the launch. This prompted me to constitute a special Team led by Aggrey David Kibenge, the undersecretary, to re-engage with the different religious institutions with a view to conclusively address any such concerns. To date, five top religious leaders and their technical persons have interacted with this team as follows:

- September 5, 2018, with Church of Uganda, headed by His Grace the Most Rev. Stanley Ntagali;
- September 10, 2018, with the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA), headed by Pr Dr Daniel Matte;
- September 14, 2018, with the Uganda Orthodox Church (UOC), headed by His Eminence Metropolitan Jonah Lwanga;
- October 12, 2018, with the Born-Again Faith in Uganda headed by Apostle Dr Joseph Serwadda; and
- October 26, 2018, with Uganda Muslim Supreme Council headed by his His Eminence Sheikh Shaban Ramadhan Mubaje, who is also Chairperson of Inter-Religious Council of Uganda.

The team was, unfortunately, not able to meet with His Grace the Most Rev. Dr Cyprian Kizito Lwanga, the chairperson UJCC and Uganda Episcopal Conference on his appointed date of November 2,

2018. A new date is yet to be fixed, as promised. Even the request for a similar meeting with His Grace John Baptist Odama, the chairperson of Uganda Episcopal Conference, awaits confirmation of his preferred date, according to the secretary general, Msgr. John B. Kauta.

The above notwithstanding, the team has had constructive discussions with the various religious leaders and institutions. The main outstanding issues are:

- 1) Coverage of the Framework that includes 3-5 year olds being contentious, even when earlier consultations recommended it; I would like to explain here that this came about as a realisation from one young lady's story, documented in a book titled Bad touches, where she laboured to explain how she was abused at such tender age and the abuse continued until she was old enough to raise an alarm to her guardians because she grew up as an orphan.

That is how our eyes were opened to the fact that even those little girls are susceptible to abuse even in those places called "home", where there are extended family members who may not care that much. Hence, the realisation that at least if the little girl is aware what bad or wrong touches are, she can inform those who care in the family.

- 2) The title/name of the framework that includes sexuality education, which is believed to convey a "negative meaning" and several other options preferred such as Moral Education, Ethical Behaviour, Values Education among others; and
- 3) Representation by two members from each religious institution on the technical team of the ministry that would develop detailed implementation plan(s) and guidelines. (Nominations from all the five groups met have been made to the ministry: from Church of Uganda, Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, Uganda Orthodox Uganda Adventist Church and the Born Again Faith in Uganda).

It was envisaged that I would convene a second and also final meeting of the Council of Presidents (or heads of the various religious institutions) plus any other key stakeholders to address these and any pending issues in order that we generate concurrence on the National Sexuality Education Policy Framework prior to its full scale implementation, preferably within this year (2019).

I find the following excerpts from statements made by key stakeholders at the launch of this policy framework (on May 11, 2018) instructive:

Inter-Religious Council of Uganda

A) As religious leaders, we note the unbecoming trend of increased pregnancies, high rate of school dropout of girl-children, increased HIV and AIDS cases among the teenagers largely caused by inadequate sexuality education by parents and relaxed awareness about the dangers of premarital sex. Similarly, poverty and cultural practices continue to force girls into early marriages.

B) As chairperson of IRCU Council of Presidents, I take this opportunity to call upon all faith communities to move beyond silence about sexuality because young people pay too high a price when those of us in religious communities ignore

our responsibility to help them understand, affirm and embrace sexuality. We urge you to play your role in helping children and young people understand their evolving sexuality and help them make responsible sexual choices, now and in their future.

C) The IRCU commits to integrate sexuality education in our routine services to ensure young people learn about and understand their own sexuality, not primarily from their peers or the media, but from their parents, religious institutions, sacred texts and school and community programmes.

(Presented by the Rev. Can. William Ongeng, Provincial Secretary, CoU on behalf of His Eminence Sheikh Shaban Ramadhan Mubajje)

Ministry of Health

The Ministry of Health is mandated to ensure a healthy and productive population that contributes to economic growth and national development. As a sector, we commit to support increased access to age appropriate health information and education materials...build capacity of the health service providers with learning institutions to provide age appropriate sexuality education...support provision of preventive and curative services in learning institutions as stipulated by the National School Health Policy [and] set guidelines and standards for quality health services for a safe and health learning environment.

(Presented by Dr Ivan Muruta on behalf of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health)

Ministry of Local Government

Commits to "support, promote and ensure that the National Sexuality Education Framework will be at the core of local government interventions in enhancing Sexuality Education in the local governments".

(Presented by Mr Emmanuel Tugabiirwe on behalf of the permanent secretary, Ministry of Local Government)

Gender ministry

Commits to emphasise age appropriate, information education and communication in line with the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda and the laws there under [and also to] review our sector HIV/AIDS strategic plan to cater for this framework...The framework shall be aligned with the Children's Act 2016 (as amended), the Child Justice Strategy, Regulations and Guidelines thereunder, to ensure that the Child's Best Interest Welfare Principle enshrined in the Constitution is promoted and protected in line with my Ministry's mandate.

(Presented by Mr Bernard Mujuni on behalf of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development)

I once more, appeal to all stakeholders and the general public to take time and read the National Sexuality Education Framework, which can be accessed on the ministry website at www.education.go.ug, for an informed discussion.

I wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year. God bless you all.

The writer is First Lady and education minister