

The education crisis that we aren't talking enough about

TWASIIMA PATRICIA BIGIRWA > REGULATION

The holidays are fast coming to an end and soon many parents will be taking their children to schools, after paying millions in tuition, administrative costs, uniforms, building fees, and all kinds of other payments. As many attest, it costs a small fortune to educate a child in any of Uganda's competitive schools. The school, which has received so much money to take care of the child, is therefore tasked with ensuring their safety and general wellbeing.

Let's start with the basics of where these children sleep. Many parents will confess that they have not seen their children's lodgings. In many schools, it is against the rules for parents and other school "outsiders" to visit the dormitories with no explanation. They don't get to see the horrors of students sleeping head to feet in dormitories housing twice the number they're designed to. For those built for 20, there are 40 students and their luggage fitting into the room with triple decker-beds if needed. In the classroom, rooms meant for 50 learners sit 70. You see, we are now in the business of profiteering.

From the mandatory payments for school trips, to mandatory contributions towards new administrative blocks and pools whose construction takes years, to the weekend and holiday classes that come at an extra cost, right down to where your children are sleeping and what they are eating.

Some of these problems are the result of a demographic boom; we have a larger school-going age population than before being served by a small number of schools. But who regulates the schools? Especially in an environment when those tasked with the regulation double as the school owners who are out to make an extra buck. The expectation, given the existence of a ministry for Education, is that complaints would be addressed to them but the reality is a little more complicated. For example, do you report the schools where the proprietor is the Minister for Higher Education? Who holds school directors accountable when the ministers and commissioners have a direct interest in the profit of the schools? Should those tasked with regulation double as the school owners?

> **Harassment.** There are many accounts of manipulation of students, particularly girls, for sex and punishment of those who refuse, forced abortions and payment of bribes to silence parents.

There is another matter that is not addressed enough: the sexual harassment and assault that is happening in many of our schools. Last year, many of us were greatly disturbed by the allegations of abuse of power to garner sexual favours from students that surrounded the death of Prof Lawrence Mukiibi, proprietor of St Lawrence Schools.

I expected at least a full investigation into the schools, if for nothing else, then to put the naysayers to rest, and declare that the allegations were untrue. Instead, we got nothing but silence from those whose job it is to carry out such investigations, with dismissals of our concerns that detailed "how patriotic" the late proprietor was.

Months later, we are dealing with another sexual assault story involving the headmaster of Kibuli SSS. These are just two examples and I have no doubt there are countless others.

There are many accounts of manipulation of students, particularly girls, for sex and punishment of those who refuse, forced abortions and payment of bribes to silence parents, and so many others. With the systems being less proactive, the onus returns to parents to have honest conversations with their children and make them feel safe enough to stand up against such treatment and share their experiences. Many parents would be appalled by what they learn.

Parents, you are going to have to take more action. Since you are paying millions to send your child to school, it should be unspeakable that you can be denied access, at least once a term to see their dormitories and assess for yourself their living conditions.

This doesn't mean that the regulatory bodies should remain lax but as you prepare to take your children back to school and stress about where the money is coming from, ask more from these schools, and demand that your children's full humanity be recognised, respected and protected as they get an education.

Ms Bigirwa is a feminist lawyer currently working with Chapter Four Uganda.