

The First Lady and Minister of Education, Mrs Janet Museveni (wearing hat), and officials from various organisations and pupils take a selfie during the ceremony of the 'Girls and Women's Safety' walk in Kabalagala, Kampala on Saturday. PPU Photo



Education minister warns schools, parents over reporting time

By Cecilia Okoth

"Bad touches from bodaboda men is my worst experience." This is how Catherine Nanyunja, a pupil at St John Baptist Primary School, Kabalagala, Kikubamutwe in Makindye division, Kampala narrated her plight to the First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports, Mrs Janet Museveni.

Nanyunja, 12, is one of the millions of children who brave the cold mornings to risk the journey to school. She narrated her challenges when the First Lady was presiding over a mentorship session for adolescent slum dwellers.

"We go back home late from school and when we walk through the dark streets. We are harassed both physically and verbally. Some of the cyclists call us names such as 'baby', 'sweetie,' while others lure girls into sleeping with them in lodges," the pupil said.

Nanyunja pleaded with the First Lady to liaise with

the authorities to provide street lighting in the area to guarantee their safety as they go back home. Nanyunja, a Primary Seven pupil, said she sets off for school at 5:30am and leaves at 7:30pm after evening prep.

Warning

It is from this testimony that Mrs. Museveni warned both parents and schools to follow the education guidelines of having children go to school at 8:00am and return home at 5:00pm.

"I read an article in *Saturday Vision* about children going to school as early as 4:00am. This is unacceptable and must stop. There is no reason as to why children should be left to walk alone to school," Mrs. Museveni said.

Saturday Vision on April 21 exposed the suffering children go through going to and from school at 'ungodly' hours exposing them to risks of kidnap and defilement.

In response to Nanyunja's

plea, the First Lady said the Government was faced with a challenge of providing streetlights, saying this would require Kampala Capital City Authority, town councils and municipalities to pay for electricity.

"Meanwhile, I would advise that you plan to do things you must do during the day and get home before dark. That is a better strategy since we cannot afford the lighting for now," Mrs. Museveni said.

First Lady's experience

Ahumuza Atahira, a teenager, wanted to know how the First Lady coped as a teenager. "Life was a lot different. I grew up in a village and came to town at the age of 19. Unlike in the city, everybody in the rural area knew you. If you were found doing anything wrong, they would tell you to stop it and even punish you. Sometimes you would be dragged up to your home where the case would be reported to your parents," the First Lady said.

"But today, we see children going to school very early and alone. This did not happen when I was a child. People were protective and wanted children to grow up in a wonderful environment. Young men feared families and would not want to destroy the future of a young lady because they would be identified. But now we see so many young women pregnant. That is why I spend a lot of time talking to young people on how growing up should be like," Mrs Museveni added.

Last year, while interacting with the media, the First Lady stressed the need for parents to take responsibility and care for their children rather than waiting for the Government to do so.

"Weekends are days for children who attend day school to remain home. They should get a break. Many schools open early, which makes it difficult for children to wake up. There is a concern about this and it is not right. Parents seem

not to play a role in this," she said during the engagement she hosted at State Lodge, Nakasero in Kampala.

Mrs Museveni argued that due to the abnormal school calendars, parents were torturing children by waking them up as early as 4:00am.

The education minister added that by day schools closing late in the night, the pupils and students are exposed to various dangers.

Safe cities

Mrs. Museveni's engagement with teenagers was part of a programme dubbed "Safer Cities for Adolescent Girls" aimed at building safe, inclusive and accountable cities for adolescent girls.

The project is being implemented by Girls Forum International together with Plan International.

On Saturday, stakeholders including the UN resident co-ordinator Rosa Malango joined residents of Kisasizi in Makindye in a girls' safety

walk. The walk was meant to address the challenges adolescent girls face in slums.

Esther Wamboka, the executive director Girls Forum International, said whereas girls in the city had more opportunities to succeed than their counterparts in the rural setting, they face a number of issues pertaining to safety.

However, through the programme, Wamboka – said girls are empowered to identify key safety issues in their community.

"In Kampala, 45% of girls feel unsafe while using public transport, especially that of bodaboda cyclists, who take advantage of them, promising free transport," Wamboka noted.

Rashid Javed, the country director Plan International said: "One in every four girls in Uganda has begun childbearing and yet once a child becomes a mother at a tender age, her chances of completing school are