



**Unequal power.** It is important to understand the power and gender dynamics in a school environment. You have a teacher or administrator in higher authority and a girl. Higher in terms of authority and age."



# Schools must be a safe place for girls - MP Adeke

## Adeke's TAKE ON KEY ISSUES

**Interview.** Reports of sexual harassment in institutions of learning have been on the increase recently. Such is the problem of sexual abuse in the country that the government has borrowed \$40m (Shs144b) to the vice. Parliament has also approved a motion moved by National Youth MP Anna Adeke Ebaju calling for a Select Committee to look into the crisis of sexual violence and harassment in institutions of learning. **Solomon Arinaitwe** talked to Ms Adeke.

**F**rom your vantage point, how rampant do you think the problem of sexual harassment is in our learning institutions?

I would like to call it sexual violence because sexual violence is an all-encompassing term that includes harassment and things beyond harassment. It also factors into consideration the unequal bargaining power between the victim and the perpetrator and that is why I want to call it sexual violence. I think it is very rampant in institutions of learning and my focus on it was because institutions of learning should be a safe space for girls.

Some of the reasons why we advocate for girls to go to school is to keep them safe from early pregnancies and ultimately improve their quality of health and life. You know that the dangers associated with early pregnancies are health complications like fistula but also because it is difficult to break out of poverty if you have a high reproduction rate. If a girl starts giving birth at the age of 11, then she is probably going to give birth till 40. Those are about 20 children and so the quality of life for this woman and the children she will bear are affected. But also to factor in how to



### Uganda?

If you see instances of sexual harassment and sexual violence, yes. They are indicative of a failure on the part of schools. It is important to understand the power and gender dynamics in a school environment. You have a teacher or administrator in higher authority and a girl.

Higher in terms of authority and age. And then there is a fiduciary relationship. It should be based on trust and confidence that the adult, the one who is more superior should be able to afford an accommodative and safe environment for the younger and more vulnerable to achieve their goals. But many times, that relationship and power is abused and as a result, girls usually fall victim of sexual violence.

The perpetrators look at them as vulnerable, many times the victims of such violence are girls who are from financially impoverished homes and they use all those small niceties to woo them so that they can take advantage of them.

There is no equal bargaining power. And I just want to make this clear-even if the girl is willing, there is unequal bargaining power and where there is unequal bargaining, there are chances that it impugns on free consent.

Some people have argued that girls at university are of age and so they can freely consent to have sexual relations with lecturers.

My view is that because of the power imbalance, there are still vulnerable even if they are of age and of consent. It is still a decision made from an unequal footing making girls susceptible to being manipulated.

**You tabled a motion in Parliament -which was approved-demanding that a Parliamentary Select Committee be put in place to investigate sexual harassment in institutions of learning. What do you want this committee to investigate?**

We would like the committee to investigate the instances of sexual harassment in schools, find out the reasons why it happens, which ones are most affected and the loopholes in the criminal justice system.

All the findings of the committee should inform the Sexual Offences Bill and we would not like any aspect to be left out. We also want to find out which actors we can involve in curbing the vice of sexual violence and harassment in institutions of higher learning.

I believe at the end of the day we will try to create a safe-school environment for girls to study from.

**Would you argue that the government has not done enough to tackle the problem of sexual violence and harassment in institutions of learning?**

I think it is beyond the government. It is a variety of actors. Even the parents could be crippling the curbing of this vice.

For instance, there is a school in Oyam called Laro Primary School in Laro Sub-county. The head teacher of that school was notorious for sexually abusing girls but every time that happened, the parents would come in for a settlement. So even the parents must be included. Yes, the government has a bigger role because the criminal justice system is a government system and so the role of the government is very much considered.

But it is not only the government. Very many actors-even the girls themselves need to be enlightened, empowered and emotionally sensitised about instances of sexual harassment and how to avoid them and the mechanisms that are in place for them to report and get redress.

**And on the policy front, what can Parliament do in the long term to tackle this problem of sexual violence and harassment in institutions of learning?**

We hope to have legislation because our role is primarily legislative. If we can have legislation to criminalise some acts and also establish systems and different requirements for schools, for instance to have sexual harassment policies and to include them in the sexuality education policy. That is important.

On the policy front, it is important to have good monitoring mechanisms in place because many of these monitoring mechanisms that are in place are non-functional like school inspectors. I do not think they are as strong as they used to be.

I think it would be good to, at the policy front, strengthen the institutions that have been put in place and maybe legislatively, we can form new ones if there is need.

## PARLIAMENTARY SELECT COMMITTEE

### Motion in Parliament.

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**Sexual harassment.** National Youth MP Anna Adeke Ebaju is calling for a Select Committee to look into the crisis of sexual violence and harassment in institutions of learning.

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improve the lives of women and their ability to work.

So school is supposed to be a safe space, schools are a springboard for the strengthening and empowerment of women in this country and if women and girls are not safe while at school, then in the long run, it will affect women empowerment and emancipation. That is why we are focusing on making women and girls feeling safe in that space of school.

**So do you feel that institutions of learning have in one way or another let down the girl child in**