

MWALIMU

Inside growing culture of indecency in schools

Parents, teachers offer solutions

For decades, schools have always fought hard to ensure that learners steer clear of sexually explicit language and actions. With the advent of social media, however, learners are gaining access to sexually explicit content and projecting in ways that startle both parents and teachers, writes **RICHARD ATEGEKA**

As scroll through social media through TikTok, a social media platform, will easily land you on a video of teenagers, some in school uniform, indulging in X-rated behaviour or using language that is considered vulgar. Sometimes, the parents of such teenagers usually rein them in and force them to apologise. But others get away with it, as if there is no problem with it.

One such example was a recent TikTok video, where a group of eight teenage girls from a school in Kampala took part in a "Once my boyfriend said..." challenge. They shared statements they claimed to have heard from their boyfriends. The statements were sexually explicit and what began as a light-hearted game soon drew outrage after it was shared on various social media platforms.

Amid mounting pressure, the video was taken down and the same group

later issued a public apology: "Our dear parents, we are sorry for the video we made on the boyfriend edition. It was done out of the school bounds."

Education experts that *Mwalimu* spoke to said beyond the outrage surrounding such videos lies a more complex issue that has been growing within school environments.

Teachers say some sexually suggestive phrases in classrooms, corridors and even during school activities are common.

Sawuyah Nalinya, a teacher at one of the primary schools in Kampala, says while many learners avoid using abusive or inappropriate language around parents, teachers and elders, their private interactions often reveal a worrying shift in behaviour among both boys and girls.

She attributes the growing vulgarity of learners to the media, which has exposed young people to explicit

content without presenting its negative consequences.

The problem is not limited to schools in urban areas. At Naweet Primary School in Nabilatuk district, the headteacher, Moses Eweru, says the influence is both visible and troubling.

"Vulgarity among learners is rising, driven by social media and exposure to smartphones," Eweru said.

Eweru says platforms such as TikTok have accelerated the spread of inappropriate behaviour, with learners imitating what they consume online.

"Learners are copying and pasting what is happening around the globe because of increased exposure to social media," he explained.

The school has documented several forms this behaviour takes, including sexually suggestive dance challenges, miming songs with explicit lyrics and modifying school uniforms to expose parts of the body.

Other cases involve learners imitating sexualised movements while walking around the school compound and openly discussing explicit films viewed online.

Eweru says in response to the trend, the school has adopted a combination of counselling and cautionary measures.

"We counsel implicated learners privately, but we also use assemblies

to publicly caution students and send a clear message that the behaviour is not allowed," he said.

While such measures help maintain order within the school, Eweru admits their impact is limited.

"Disciplinary measures may not be effective, but they can restrain behaviour at the school level," he explains.

Eweru argues that the problem extends beyond school boundaries.

"Communities outside school have failed to restrict vulgarity and instead see it as entertainment, especially among young people," Eweru added.

Nalinya agrees with Eweru, but emphasises that punishment alone cannot solve the problem.

She says that at her school, well-behaved students are publicly recognised during assemblies to inspire others to emulate them.

Nalinya urges parents and teachers to take greater responsibility in guiding children on what they should consume and learn, warning that failure to do so could leave more children vulnerable to moral decay.

SCHOOL EVENTS

School events have not been spared either, as cultural galas and entertainment days, which were once platforms for talent and creativity, are increasingly becoming stages for



Students prepare for an entertainment event at a secondary school. Such events can easily become avenues of unacceptable behaviour in schools without proper regulations

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PARENTING RAISE CHILDREN WHO CAN STAND ON THEIR OWN

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sexually suggestive dance routines.

"We have reached an extent of inviting indecently dressed musicians in schools to inappropriately dance with students of the opposite sex. Even female students nowadays stage provocative bum-shaking competitions in full view of both teachers and learners," Geoffrey Luswata, a secondary school teacher in Mukono municipality, says.

While such behaviour is not entirely new, many observers believe its frequency and boldness have intensified in the digital age, where trends spread rapidly and boundaries are constantly tested.

Uganda's growing digital access provides important context.

As of early 2025, about 14.2 million Ugandans were using the Internet, representing roughly 28% of the population.

Social media use has become highly influential, with platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok and YouTube dominating online engagement.

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PROBLEM BEGINS BEFORE CLASSROOM

Joseph Musoke, a retired municipal education officer in Kamuli district, says the problem often begins long before children step into classrooms.

"That issue comes in two-fold or even three-fold. One of them is upbringing at home, where some parents use vulgar language in front of their children or even direct it at them," he explains.

Accordingly, children tend to mirror what they are exposed to early in life.

"We say schools teach knowledge, but homes teach understanding. If the foundation at home is weak, the school may not do much," Musoke explains.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Beyond upbringing, Musoke highlights a psychological dimension that is often overlooked.

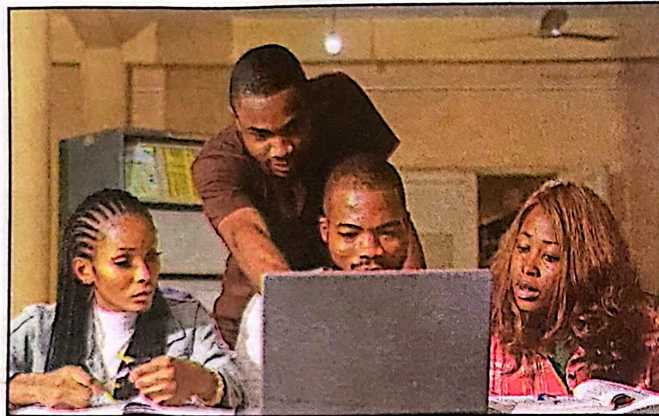
"There are psychological aspects like fixation and that is why you find some children writing vulgar things on walls, using faecal matter or constantly using obscene language," he says.

Such behaviour, he notes, may begin with one individual but quickly spreads through peer influence.

On entertainment influence, Musoke acknowledges the growing impact of digital platforms, describing social media as a major driver of vulgar expression among young people.

"Social media is a great deal of things you find online and wonder how people even say them. But because others laugh and follow, children also take it as entertainment," he says.

Musoke adds that the same



Students doing research on the Internet. The Internet has been flagged as one of the sources of bad behaviour among learners

influence is now visible in school events, where performances increasingly reflect what students consume online.

"When you see a child dancing in a vulgar way, it reflects the kind of community we are becoming," he explains.

PARENTING IN DIGITAL ERA

Lydia Nyesigomwe, the chief executive officer of Parenting and Early Childhood Care and Development, argues that many parents are struggling to keep pace with the changing environment in which children are growing up.

"We are in an era where we need to upgrade our parenting roles because the world is moving at a fast pace.

"If parents still think old solutions can address today's challenges, they are mistaken," she says.

Nyesigomwe adds that social media has fundamentally reshaped how children interact, learn and express themselves, often in ways that adults may not fully understand.

"Children want to be seen, heard and get immediate feedback. They want to stay informed about what is trending and do not want to be left behind," she explains.

This need for visibility, Nyesigomwe notes, has introduced new forms of pressure that go beyond traditional peer influence.

"Comments, likes, and followers have become a kind of validation, a yardstick for acceptance," she says.

SILENCE AT HOME

Nyesigomwe points out that one of the biggest gaps lies in communication between parents and children.

"Social media has become a place

ALGORITHMS

Hadijah Mwanje, a digital expert at High Sound for Children, warns that social media algorithms worsen the problem by continuously recommending similar content once a child interacts with inappropriate material.

"When a child accidentally comes across harmful material, the algorithm can make the situation worse by continuously suggesting similar content," she elaborates.

where children ask all types of questions and get instant answers, questions they find difficult to ask their parents."

"Unfortunately, many parents have failed to engage their children on issues like sex," she says.

This communication gap, she adds, leaves children to rely on unfiltered online spaces for guidance, often exposing them to inappropriate language and content.

The challenge is further complicated by the fact that parents themselves are navigating the same digital platforms sometimes without clear boundaries.

"Parents are also struggling with social media, so they cannot preach what they do not practice."

"Children are watching everything adults post. They learn by example and begin to think that is the normal or 'in' thing to do," she notes.

To address the growing concern,

Nyesigomwe emphasises the need for intentional parenting strategies that mirror the guidance children receive offline.

"Monitor usage, be present, and even be friends with them on social platforms. More importantly, discuss, guide and offer feedback."

Mable Nansubuga, a parent from Nakwero in Kasangati town council, Wakiso district, advises parents to be extremely vigilant.

"My children don't use phones before house chores or their studies and television has a programme guide control."

SOLUTIONS

Hadijah Mwanje, a digital expert at High Sound for Children, calls on social media companies to strengthen child protection systems by improving content moderation, enforcing age restrictions and creating safer recommendation algorithms.

"Social media platforms have a major responsibility to create safer digital spaces for children," she says.

"When harmful content is identified, it should be removed quickly and accounts promoting exploitation, cyberbullying, or dangerous trends should be restricted or banned."

She also emphasised the importance of digital literacy programmes in schools to help children think critically about the content they consume online.

She also advised parents to become more intentional about monitoring their children's digital lives through open communication and consistent guidance rather than relying entirely on technology.