News



Members of Roho Msalaba Church in western Uganda pray for the Uganda government to revise the new sex education curriculum, on June 10.



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As he sat in the only chair in his living room in Kisenyi, an enormous slum on the outskirts of Kampala, Uganda, John Musisi lamented how government-mandated sex education courses in Catholic schools have harmed his 12-year-old son.

"Teachers are giving kids ideas of things that they had never thought of before," said Musisi, 43, a father of four. "It's our responsibility as parents to raise our children the way we want. It's embarrassing to see our kids start to think [about] and discuss sex."

Musisi, a catechism teacher, said sex education was encouraging sex among children by emphasizing pleasure rather than that sex exists for procreation.

"The teaching is against the word of God," he said. "Our children are not ready for such programs. The teachings will corrupt them. Satan will take the advantage to tempt them."

Musisi is among thousands of Catholics in this East African nation of 37.67 million who have rejected sex education in Catholic schools unless administrators change the curriculum to reflect traditional values.

Catholics make up the largest religious denomination in Uganda, with 39 percent of the population; around 32 percent are Anglican, and 14 percent are Muslim according to 2014 Census data. Thirty-three percent of the population is under the age of 19, according to Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports.

The government has introduced guidelines for sex education in all schools, including ones founded by faith-based organizations. The officials said the requirement was necessary because sexual crimes, unwanted pregnancies, teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases are common among school-age children.

"The graduation rate for Ugandan girls is still very low partly due to issues like early marriages, pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, which in most cases can be traced to a lack of a proper foundation in sexuality education," Janet Museveni, first lady and minister of education and sports said May 11 when she launched the program.

But parents began lamenting the effects of the program less than two months after it was introduced in schools, despite church protests.

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"My children are more interested in the topic [sex education] than the real education," said Gloria Mukasa, 36, a mother of three. "The program is doing more harm than good to our children. It's perfecting them to become experts in matters of sex. This is unacceptable. The church forbids it. The government should leave the issue of sex education to families."

The introduction of sex education in schools has been at odds with the religious ideologies in Uganda for the last two years. Many religious leaders claim that sex education puts unholy ideas and desires in children. Parents generally consider it taboo to talk about sex in front of children.

Catholic, Protestant and other religious leaders have demanded that their schools receive waivers from the requirement.

Archbishop John Baptist Odama of Gulu, who is also the chairman of the Uganda Episcopal Conference, said he would bar sexual education materials in their current form under the policy unless they meet Christian standards.

"Should the National Sexuality Education Framework remain unchanged, with provisions and directives contrary to our Christian values, the common position of the Catholic Church, shared by our brothers of the Church of Uganda and the Orthodox Church ... is that we shall not be able in conscience to have it introduced and taught in our Christian-founded schools," Odama said in a statement in July.

Religious leaders that have condemned the document say that sex education should not be introduced to children as young as 3 years old, adding that schools should introduce cultural and religious sex education to children who are over 12 years old. The leaders say that the role of the family teaching their children about sex is not considered, and also question if the teachers are qualified to teach sex education.

The government has ignored the demands of religious leaders and introduced adolescent health and sexuality education in schools on July 23. Teachers from Christian-founded schools are government employees.

The government funds 64 percent of primary schools and 43 percent of secondary schools in Uganda. The Ministry of Education and Sports reports that faith-based organizations founded most of the schools: "40% (pre-primary), 75% (primary), 56% (secondary) and 44% (tertiary institutions) are owned by these FBOs while [the]

government owns only 2% preprimary, 6% primary, 9% secondary and 26% tertiary institutions respectively."

Odama is adamant that the church will not accept the sexuality education content to be taught in their schools despite the government ignoring their calls and introducing it in all schools.

"Our position as a church still remains," he said Sept. 23. "We are not supporting the program in its current form. We need changes in the document. The government ignored the contributions of the Catholic experts on the issue. The document should be changed to meet our Christian values for it to be introduced in our schools."

The sex education curriculum has five stages, according to government officials.

Children between 3 and 5 years old are taught to "know" themselves, according to a government document. As they grow older, students learn acceptable and unacceptable touching, understanding the changes in their bodies during puberty and, finally, coping and avoiding risky behavior.

The framework also highlights the role of gender and power in relationships and seeks to make children aware of sexual predators and sexually transmitted diseases, officials said. The document also lists other information, such as teaching about disabilities, gender-based violence, domestic violence and critiquing media portrayals of love and lust.

But, religious leaders are furious and have continued to condemn the curriculum.

"What can you discuss about sex with a child of three years? What do you tell them about sexuality?" the Rev. William Ongeng of the Church of Uganda asked during a July press conference in Kampala. "The implementation part of the policy is causing problems and the age at which it is being introduced is worrying."

Fr. Ronald Okello, executive secretary of education in Uganda Catholic Secretariat, vowed to fight the government.

"We are not going to allow the content to be taught in our Catholic schools unless it's changed," Okello told NCR in Kampala. "The content of the policy document is not appropriate for our children, and we can't allow it in its current form."

Teachers and counselors have urged religious leaders in the country to consider their stand, saying the rate of teen pregnancy has skyrocketed due to a lack of sex education. According to UNICEF, based on 2012 data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics and ICF International, Uganda's national teenage pregnancy rate is 24 percent: "34% of teenage girls from the poorest households and 24% of rural girls become mothers compared with 16% of wealthier households and 21% of urban girls."

"There's nothing that will change in our children, even if we were to drop sexuality education curriculum in our schools," said Denis Mugisha, a teacher and counselor based in Kampala. "Our children have dropped out of school due to early pregnancies because we have ignored to teach them on sexuality in order to protect themselves through information."

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But Musisi disputed those claims, saying the introduction of sexuality education in schools will make matters worse. He wants the government to abolish the program or make some changes fit for children.

"Discussing the topic will lead to sexual arousal among our children," he said. "I have already seen it myself in this short while. It's better to remain the way it was before."

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