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The Construction and Mediation of Sexuality and Gender Relations: Experiences of Girls and Boys in Secondary Schools in Uganda

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This article draws on qualitative data from observations, interviews, and focus-group discussions at seven secondary schools in the Wakiso district of the central region of Uganda. It shows that constructions of gender within the school environment include both overt and covert discourses on the interaction of sexual and gendered identities and behaviors that create a climate in which students are constructed simultaneously as “learners free of gendered and sexual identities” and as “girls/boys” deeply embedded within heterosexual trajectories. The study reveals a hierarchically ordered range of masculinities and femininities that constitute the students’ informal world (that is, an unregulated space for students’ natural, relaxed, casual, and informal gatherings) with activities organized around gendered notions of sexuality. Within this world, sexuality becomes a domain of control causing complex tensions and contradictions that are often reflected in the ubiquitous “sexualization” and “desexualization” of school events. Students interact through gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances, negotiating the lack of female sexual autonomy, compulsory heterosexuality, and the norms that locate girls as objects of male sexual desires. The article concludes that complex gendered sexual experiences position boys and girls differently, often causing gender inequalities reflected in girls’ limited participation in schooling.

Keywords: gender / schooling / sexual abuse / sexual identities / sexuality / sexualization / Uganda
Introduction

The school as an institution of socialization plays a significant role in shaping boys' and girls' sexual identities and gender relations (Thorne 1993). Schools are highly sexualized sites where sexual and other identities are developed, practiced, and actively produced through collective engagement operating at the level of the organizational setup and in peer networks (Mac an Ghaill 1994). According to some scholars in the North, sexualities within school are lived out through dynamics of control and resistance (Epstein and Johnson 1998), patterned by a particular gender code as a mode of transmission of gender relations (Arnot 2002; Thorne 1993). This gender code is manifested through constant gender classification and attribution through which a range of sexual messages are transmitted and a number of views of what it means to be a boy or a girl are demonstrated (Connell 1987).

Through the peer networks, a range of social and sexual identities are negotiated and produced. Young people not only learn the heterosexual codes that mark their right of passage into “manhood” and “womanhood” (Mac an Ghaill 1994), but they also establish themselves as appropriately feminine or masculine (Measor 1984). Although not necessarily in all contexts, this process involves boys frequently distancing themselves from girls and all that is feminine, while maintaining the social superiority of masculinity (Mac an Ghaill 1994). This creates power imbalances between boys and girls, which are translated into sexual behavior that demands that boys prove themselves in terms of heterosexuality, homophobia, and the attendant rejection of femininity.

Drawing on resources and cultural repertoires outside the school, which organize relations around heterosexuality, scholars from Africa note that boys’ engagement in sexual relationships is an expression of masculinity and one’s power over girls (Burns 2002; Mirembe and Davies 2001; Morrell et al. 2002; Thorpe 2002). Female sexuality is constructed as being nurturing, submissive, and emotional (Thorpe 2002). Studies from different African countries note that while girls are expected to be asexual, they experience similar pressures as boys in their peer groups to get boyfriends as proof of young women’s “normal” heterosexuality and more “grown-up” femininity (Harrison 2002; Morrell et al. 2002; Kinsman, Nyanzi, and Pool 2000). As this study aims to show, education institutions are critical socialization sites that overtly and covertly reinforce norms concerning gender and sexuality; they also have the potential of constructing and reproducing “new” norms that foster gender-equitable relationships (Arnot 2002).

This article interrogates the gendered school environment in the Republic of Uganda. We consider how this environment exerts influence on young people’s understanding and construction of their own and others’ sexualities, with particular focus on the organizational setup and the day-to-day interactions between and among students and teachers. The article further explores the ways
in which the school space as a gendered environment serves to legitimize the promotion of specific gendered forms of sexual identities, and it also examines the paradox of student interaction with sexuality used as a domain of control. The gender dynamics relating to the construction of sexuality, in which girls are perceived as objects of male sexual desires, and the associated consequences on girls’ schooling experiences are explored.

**Gender and Education in Uganda**

Uganda’s education structure follows a seven-four-two-three system: namely, seven years of primary school, four years of lower secondary (ordinary level), two years of upper secondary (advanced level/high school), and three to five years of university and other tertiary education. Pre-primary education is offered to children of ages 2–5, and age 6 is the official age for starting primary schooling (Republic of Uganda 1992). In Uganda, as in many sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries, gender inequalities characterize the education system. While access to schooling for boys and girls at the various levels of education has improved over the years, especially at the primary-school level after the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997, the completion rates remain low: 48 percent for girls, and 55 percent for boys (Republic of Uganda 2010). The gender disparities are more apparent at the post-primary education level, where girls’ schooling lags behind that of boys. For instance, the ratio of girls to boys was 0.84 in 2009 (ibid.), with an average gender gap of 13.2 percent across the four classes at the ordinary secondary level (UBOS 2010). Uganda’s overall performance data indicate trends that are similar in other SSA countries, with boys performing generally better than girls across all levels of schooling. These gender disparities in education are attributed to a number of factors, including negative social and cultural practices and attitudes toward female education, unfavorable education institutional environment, poverty, and political and administrative factors (Kwesiga 2002).

Attention to gender inequality in education in Uganda is one of the key areas of government intervention. The government has initiated several gender-responsive initiatives to expand and improve the education of girls, which include waivers of school fees, bursaries, abolition of school uniforms, flexible timetabling in pastoral communities, affirmative action, setting a minimum marriage age, the establishment of the gender unit and committee in the Ministry of Education and Sports, and the development of the National Strategy for Girls Education (NSGE), the Gender in Education Sector Policy, and a handbook for mainstreaming gender in education. Other interventions include gender and life-skills training for teachers, and the appointment of senior women and men teachers to guide and counsel students about various challenges they face, including academic, social, and sexual matters. In the Education Strategic Investment Plan (ESIP, 2008–2015), the government pledged its commitment
toward increasing the access, equity, and quality of education for all (Republic of Uganda 2008).

While there has been improvement in expanding education access, sexuality issues—namely, teenage pregnancies, sexual stereotypes, sexual abuse/harassment, sexual relationships, and sexual growth and development issues like menstruation and early marriage—remain major barriers to students' participation in education, especially girls' (Kisamba-Mugerwa 2003; Nakanyike, Kasente, and Balihuta 2002). To address these sexuality-related challenges, there are a number of interventions that have been implemented, including policy and program interventions such as the policies regarding HIV/AIDS, school health, gender in education, the life skills education program, the Presidential Initiative on AIDS Strategy for Communication to Youth (PIASCY), the sexual maturation project, and the counseling and guidance program. These government interventions have been supported by nongovernmental initiatives through the provision of family-life education, health education, life skills, counseling, and guidance targeting teachers and students in various schools nationwide. Schools are also encouraged to establish student anti-AIDS health clubs where life skills, such as self-esteem, assertiveness, peer resistance, and decision making, among other topics, are addressed by both teachers and outsiders.

Uganda, as in some other African countries, has no published pregnancy policy, but the general practice is that any girl found to be pregnant is expelled from school because of the view that such pregnancies promote immorality (Kwesiga 2002). Access to contraception for teenage girls is not guaranteed, since it is also viewed negatively as promoting promiscuity. Protection of girls from sexual abuse and harassment can be found in Ugandan laws, which state that age 18 begins the "age of consent." The Penal Code (Amendment) Act (CAP 120) 2007, section 129 stipulates that any person who performs a sexual act with another person below age 18 commits a felony (defilement) and is liable to life imprisonment. Meanwhile, Uganda's Teachers' Code of Conduct prohibits teachers from engaging in sexual relationships with students and provides for observance of the laws of Uganda in matters of sex and marriage, particularly the age of consent (Republic of Uganda 1996).

Uganda's current (2010) population is estimated to be 31.8 million, of which more than half (51 percent) is female (UBOS 2010). The total fertility rate is one of the highest in SSA, at 6.7 children per woman, which is attributed to high incidences of early marriages' and low contraceptive use. Uganda's population is predominantly rural-based (approximately 88 percent of the total) and relatively young, with 56.1 percent being under age 18. The country's life expectancy is currently estimated at 52 years for women and 48.8 years for men (ibid.).

Uganda is a patriarchal society, with a mixture of cultures that view men and women differently and that uphold notions of male hegemony and distinctive gender roles that privilege men's control over decision making in all spheres of social organization (Kwesiga 2002), and more so control over women's
sexuality (Tamale 2003). In Uganda, as in many parts of Africa, institutions like churches and mosques, schools, the family, and the law direct and control sexuality through legitimizing some forms of sexual expression, while suppressing others (ibid.). The majority of Ugandans are Christians, most of whom are Catholics (41.9 percent) and Protestants (35.9 percent); a minority of Ugandans practice Islam (12.1 percent) (UBOS 2005). Among the Christian and Muslim communities, sex is a moral issue, permitted within socially regulated space (marriage), and procreation is highly valued (Tamale 2003). These religious denominations inculcate values that encourage male domination and female submission in all aspects of life, including sexuality.

Sexual interaction between women and men in Uganda is assumed to be the only legitimate and normal expression of one’s sexuality, and any variation from heteronormativity in sexual activity is considered abnormal, sinful, evil, and pathological (ibid., 44). According to the country’s laws, homosexuality and lesbianism remain illegal and are criminal offenses. Moreover, while there is a law concerning the age of consent that supposedly is meant to protect vulnerable children, particularly girls, from sexual abuse and rape, it does not recognize the sociocultural realities of Ugandan society (Tamale 2001). For instance, girls and women are expected to refrain from premarital and extramarital relations and display patience, respect, and obedience in sexual encounters, while boys’ and men’s early engagements in single and multiple sexual relations are associated with positive masculinity and manhood (Brent, Blanc, and Gage 2000). These sociocultural realities cut across most communities in Uganda.

There has been a lot of activism to challenge these restrictive attitudes and practices, and to demand changes in the construction of sexuality in Ugandan society to reflect a more equitable arrangement between heterosexual men and women and gay and lesbian citizens. However, these advances have not changed the balance of power at the wider social level, where unequal gendered sexual expectations and power relations between males and females still prevail. The observable changes due to international influence on discriminatory social practices, government support through constitutional provisions, and increased women’s rights activism are undermined by the patriarchal ideologies that privilege men’s control over women’s sexuality. Drawing on qualitative data, this article interrogates the construction and mediation of sexuality and gender relations in the school space. The detailed methodology and scope are discussed in the section below.

Methods

This article is based on primary data collected between 2003 and 2004 from seven randomly selected secondary schools in the Wakiso district, which is located in the central region of Uganda. Five of the schools were coeducational and two were exclusively for either boys or girls, and all represented one of the
two main religions. Apart from the girls' secondary school, which was headed by a female, all the coeducational schools were headed by males (head teachers), who were assisted by females (assistants to the head teachers). These deputy head teachers were assisted by directors of studies, who were in charge of academic affairs and were all male, and heads of departments, 30 percent of whom were female. Using stratified and systematic random sampling, a total of fifty-five students (twenty-eight females and twenty-seven males) were interviewed, and a total of 129 students (sixty-five males and sixty-four females) participated in the focus-group discussions. Students who participated in the study were selected from the third and fourth years of the ordinary secondary education level and were unmarried. They were between the ages of 14 and 19, with the majority of the boys and girls being age 17 and 16, respectively. Of all the respondents, thirty-seven boys and thirty-five girls were Catholics, whereas thirty-three boys and thirty-five girls were Protestants; sixteen boys and eighteen girls were Muslims, while six boys and four girls were Pentecostal.

The study was qualitative and used multiple methods, including observations, in-depth and key-informant interviews, and focus-group discussions. Observations of co-curricular activities in each school gave us the opportunity to study the symbolic orders and sexual messages of masculine and feminine constructions that permeated the everyday life of students. In addition, outside classroom experiences were important in reading the broader terrain through which sexuality and gender relations were mediated and constructed in the school space. Thus, we observed students not only in the classroom, but also outside it as they went about their co-curricular activities. Aware of the sensitivity of the topic, the research team was comprised of two females and one male, who, respectively, interviewed the female and male students and teachers separately. This strategy helped to establish rapport, mutual trust, and confidence with the participants.

The main aim of the study was to explore the gender dynamics in school curriculum that address sexuality, and the challenges of teaching about sexuality in Uganda's secondary schools. Within this broad objective, the study interrogated the gender dynamics in the day-to-day process by which sexuality and gender relations are constructed within the school space. Students were asked to respond to questions like the following: What activities do boys and girls engage in? How do boys and girls interact with each other at the school? Does the school allow free interaction between boys and girls? What were their feelings about the dress code? What sexual issues arise for boys and girls in the school? Have they ever encountered any sexual advances/invitations by either a student or teacher? If so, how did they respond to such advances and what were the consequences of their response? What are the available institutional support mechanisms to address sexual concerns? Teachers were asked about their role in helping girls and boys to deal with sexuality-related concerns, the support given to them, and how sexuality issues were important in the participation of boys and girls.
in secondary education? Additional questions for teachers included: What is the nature of the interactions and gender relations between girls and boys? What sexual issues arise for their students? What available support mechanisms exist in the school, and does the school have a policy on pregnancy?

All the interviews and focus-group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim into narrative reports. The transcribed information was then analyzed using template analysis as an initial framework (King 1998). This involved analysis of the information through the use of a guide comprising themes pertinent to the research questions (Crabtree and Miller 1992). The different data sets were analyzed separately and later compared through triangulation to classify common themes. The comparative technique facilitated the identification of common experiences among respondents (that is, male versus female, female versus female, and male versus male), as well as identifying individuals' unique experiences. A textual analysis of the interviews and focus-group reports provided a deeper understanding of the gendered discourses in sexuality through respondents' personal insights and anecdotes. In sum, there were strong commonalities in the different schools and among religious affiliations in the descriptions and meanings attached to the construction of boys' and girls' sexuality and their schooling experiences.

Findings

Sexuality and the Gendered School Environment

The school as a social institution is characterized by particular gender regimes. In the gendered school environment of Ugandan secondary schools, students face hierarchical gender arrangements manifested in the extensive segregation of boys and girls in various school activities and in the actual location of facilities as part of the everyday lived culture of the school. Within this broader environment of segregation, feminine and masculine subjectivities are constructed and negotiated and messages about gender and sexuality are transmitted.

The study revealed that the school space in these communities is characterized by the frequent gender segregation of students, starting with the school registers (for example, student records, attendance lists, and so on), school dress, and in co-curricular activities. Discourses of gender and sexuality that simultaneously circulate in these school spaces revealed particular meanings attached to the dress code and student/student and student/teacher interactions. For instance, students' comments about the dress code indicated that sexual connotations were attached to female teachers' and students' dress, especially tight slacks, short skirts, dresses, jewellery, and the use of makeup. In the Muslim school, girls dressed in long dresses and wore a hijab. Boys in all the schools dressed in shorts and trousers, with short- and long-sleeved shirts for ordinary and advanced levels, respectively. While the school dress code was overly targeted at "smartness," it was also associated with gender-appropriate
ideas about bodily appearances, which should downplay any notion of sexual attractiveness toward the opposite or the same sex. The following excerpts from interviews with teachers highlight these common views:

The reason behind [the dress code in schools] can be that, you know, these days there is a way girls get attracted towards one another and I don't know whether you have heard about that thing of lesbianism, homosexuality. There are some girls who have that weakness and they get attracted to one another. Then another thing also, as these girls, especially in single-sex schools, make up themselves, there is that fear that some male teachers may be attracted to them. . . . (interview with female teacher)

Decent dressing as you have seen them for us here, they wear long black skirts . . . we discourage “maddonas” “kundishows” [a short, skimpy blouse that falls just above the nipple and leaves the stomach and back uncovered]. Then wearing transparent clothes is not good for ladies. They should wear bras. Most of them are uncomfortable with bras. They wear “boob tubes.” You should ensure that your body is well covered, [not like these] leaving nothing to the imagination. Even when they wear trousers, they should avoid these trousers which stop here [indicating the middle of the hips] and the [under] pants are showing. . . . (interview with female teacher)

It is evident from the above that teachers' regulation of students' dressing and makeup was associated with homophobia and ideas about sexual harassment from male teachers. Girls' responses to such sexualization included things like wearing their socks high up, above the knees, to prevent boys and male teachers from being sexually attracted to them. Although boys also reported that their clothing choices were restricted, analyses of comments related to the dress code indicated that girls experienced the more stringent rules. Teachers justified this added strictness in terms of the social norms of decency for females to wear clothes that do not expose the body. With boys, the teachers professed to being more concerned with those behaviors generally perceived to be masculine, including their involvement with alcohol, smoking, drugs, fighting, using vulgar language, and their low self-respect and disrespect for others, especially elders, than with the dress code itself.

During school activities, students' participation was linked to gendered sexuality associated with physiological and biological changes in bodies, menstruation (ironically called a “disease”), and other sexual issues, such as girls maintaining virginity and dignity. While most boys appeared to be unconvinced that such sexuality concerns would deter girls from participating in school activities, the girls indicated that such experiences interrupted their involvement because they caused fear and embarrassment, absenteeism, and a lack of concentration in class. They expressed anxiety about the implications of menstruation and maintaining virginity, and therefore they avoided
activities that required jumping and running to prevent teasing and harassment from boys. The teachers also generally approached questions of participation in school activities through biological discourses about the body, noting that girls' participation in school activities was constrained by the nature of their “developing” and “changing” bodies in a way inapplicable to boys. They also acknowledged that body changes like menstruation and growing breasts make girls feel uncomfortable and unable to participate freely in activities, such as running, netball, and swimming.

The location of resources in the institutional space, including toilets, the playground/field in which football and netball are played, and boarding facilities, constructs gendered space. There was an extensive spatial separation between boys and girls in school activities and locations of facilities, which students routinely spoke of “girls' end” and “boys' end.” This segregated community provided opportunities for the construction of gender-specific cultures for the transmission of messages about gender and sexuality, particularly the prescription of separate spheres for boys and girls as a protective measure against sexual attraction and engagement.

The Paradox of Students’ Interaction: Sexuality as a Domain of Control
Drawing on notions of protection, the data suggest that sexuality in schools is used as a domain of control through engaging discourses that forbid expressions of sexuality, especially for the girls. Consequently, although students described some degree of mixed, unsupervised interactions, particularly for academic purposes, students' interactions in and outside the classroom were highly restricted and policed by teachers. Physical displays of affection between males and females (by students or teachers), such as hugging, holding hands, and kissing, were considered inappropriate in the schools. These restrictions by teachers, as well as their monitoring and policing of students' interactions included surveillance of individual boys and girls who spent time together, those sitting with a student of the opposite sex outside the classroom (in coeducational schools), and those seen in isolated places like dark corners at night. Similar to Thomas and Rugambwa's article in this special issue, students noted that any interactions between a boy and a girl were interpreted by teachers and fellow students as being an unacceptable sexual relationship:

The thing is that when teachers see you with a girl they may get a wrong impression, sometimes you are just good friends—like how one would be with a fellow boy. But sometimes it's taken that there is a relationship or something. So rumors spread, then it brings in that tension. . . . We fear. The moment you become a friend with someone for a certain period of time, keep on relating, swinging around, going to their class, rumors spread—that's one problem. They follow you up and investigate and yet you are just friends. (focus group with male students)
Students in all the schools expressed tension and concern over teachers’ restrictions and overt sexualization of boy/girl interactions within the school space. Girls reported that any form of interaction involving students of the opposite sex was associated with “coupling” and “parking” that could result in punishments, such as caning, “slashing the compound” (mowing the grass), and suspension, all of which students felt were unfair. Girls reported that many of them had been falsely accused and punished for “pairing up” with boys. Other prohibited interactions included girls having boyfriends (lovers) and girls practicing football with boys. Students stated that they were also being monitored by fellow students through what students in four of the schools described as the “spy network,” meaning a group of students who secretly monitored their fellow students and reported any inappropriate behaviors to the school administration. Data suggests that students (both boys and girls) living in fear and tension in their seemingly free day-to-day interactions at school experienced negative affects on their education.

While teachers overall noted that co-curricular activities offered avenues for students’ interactions and socialization, paradoxically, these interactions were restricted and monitored to ensure that students did not engage in sexual relationships. In the Muslim school, students as well as teachers reported that free interaction was not allowed, because the Islamic faith (particularly, Sharia law) does not encourage the mixing of girls and boys, as it contradicts the Islamic principles of respecting separate spheres for males and females:

Here we have what we call Sharia law. In any congregation, even in class, girls separate from boys. For instance, in class girls sit there (at the right corner of the class), and boys sit at the back and left-hand corner. When it comes to matters such as discussions and class work, there we can come together, but again, there has to be some other people [present] to monitor your interaction. If say you are two people and the teacher finds you together, she/he will say you are “parking.” . . . Here, when students of the opposite sex meet for three to four minutes, that’s parking. Even one is not allowed to touch girls in the hands in Islam unless she is your sister. (focus group with male students)

Teachers believed that interactions between boys and girls were highly sexualized and needed to be controlled to prevent engagement in premarital sexual relationships. Consequently, they justified their surveillance and control of students’ interactivity across gendered borders, monitoring their presence in “compromising situations.” Therefore, although the students were “free” to interact, it was, in fact, openly restricted by the teachers.

Despite this strict control and regulation through surveillance, it was noted that such methods do not deter students from expressing their sexual desires through various physical displays of affection, such as hugging, parking, and coupling during revision/reading time at night, after classes, in dark corners, or during games. Most students reported that girls and boys were engaged in both
heterosexual and same-sex relationships that were both “casual” and “deep,” platonic and nonplatonic, single and multiple relationships. For boys, these were often with fellow peers and older men—teachers and community men and women commonly known as, respectively “sugar daddies” and “mummies.” In some schools, especially single-sex schools, a few students (both male and female) spoke of some who had been expelled on suspicion of homosexuality and lesbianism. In all the schools visited, more than half of the females and half of the male students identified pregnancy cases that had occurred in their schools during the previous year. It was reported that some of these girls attempted to terminate their pregnancies. Such experiences, of course, place girls both at physical risk and academic disadvantage compared to their partners, who are allowed to continue with their educations. Some girls spoke of pregnant girls who had left school either on their own or else had been expelled because of their condition. These sexual issues suggest that overt proscriptions in themselves promote an interest in the taboo, and therefore surveillance is not an effective strategy for regulating and controlling students’ sexual activity. Their engagement in relationships was reported to negatively impact their educations, especially girls’, through lack of concentration in class and missed lessons, which result in a decline in performance and dropping out of school.

Girls as Objects of Male Sexual Desires

Students’ gendered constructions of sexuality were further explored through understanding the ways in which sexual desire and pleasure were experienced and expressed within the school space. As noted in the previous section, it is clear that overt displays of sexual desire were suppressed, at least by teachers, although the data suggest it was less so among students. However, in addition to physical displays of affection, students expressed their sexual desire through writing love letters. According to the interviews and focus-group discussions, the majority of girls reported having encountered sexual advances from peers in their schools. A few boys also spoke of having such sexual advances, although they felt that boys should be the ones initiating sexual engagements with girls. There was much debate, laughter, and astonishment about tales of girls taking the initiative sexually. The following, from a focus-group discussion, represents the typical views of boys:

It’s very rare—instead, it’s the boys who do that to the girls. . . . When a girl approaches you that, you know, Anthony I love you. I get scared. The first thing I think about is that this girl is a victim (sick of AIDS). How can a girl approach me that “I love you”? That’s being so unserious. . . . I fear that one, I just run even if she is okay . . . you can have doubts about her health status and seriousness . . . we, the boys, believe that boys are the ones supposed to con girls, to say “I love you” and not the girls to say “I love you.” . . . We men traditionally are the ones supposed to choose the girl. . . . The girls have no
choice . . . in the Bible man was created first, so men are supposed to control
each and everything, to have desires for different things, it's cultural . . . but
it's abnormal for a girl to tell a boy that “I love you” . . . it's the boy [that is]
supposed to do that. . . . If a girl tells me “I love you,” I just think that this
one is a prostitute, desperate.

These responses suggest that girls’ expressions of their sexual desires are
linked to sickness (AIDS), prostitution, desperation, or lack of seriousness. The
boys associated their beliefs with traditional and cultural beliefs and socializa-
tion that “men are the ones to suggest first,” and they used biblical teachings
about the Creation to justify their supremacy and control of sexual encounters.
According to most of the boys, it is abnormal and funny for girls to initiate
sexual relationships. They further associated girls’ quick acceptance of their own
sexual invitations with frivolity, sickness, and economic concerns.

Students’ accounts reveal apparent sexual double standards, contradictions,
and taken-for-granted attitudes among the boys’ about girls’ responses to their
sexual initiatives. For instance, while girls were not expected to give a quick
acceptance, at the same time, this seeming rejection of boys’ advances in most
cases led to hostility or harassment of the girls involved, with some boys noting
that “it’s very annoying” when a girl rejects a boy’s invitation for a sexual rela-
tionship. Comments from individual interviewees and group discussions with
girls demonstrate how boys typically exert pressure on them for greater sexual
activity. As one girl in an interview stated: “I have had cases where some people
[boys] have abused me. Some threaten you that they are going to bewitch you
or do something bad to you. One may say ‘I have already had sex with that girl.’
. . . Just spoiling your name.” In a focus-group discussion, others added:

You know, these boys they get angry. It’s like they think when they come to
you, it’s an automatic “Yes.” I wonder why? . . . The guy started saying “You
are ugly, with small legs, ugly lips.” . . . Some boys may tell you that you are
“bumless.” . . . It hurts, but sometimes you have nothing you can do. . . . In
my former school I experienced it. There was some friend of mine, some boy
approached her and told her that “I love you” and the girl didn’t do anything.
She refused him. This boy went talking bad things about the girl and all the
boys were against her; she was disgusted and changed schools. So when you
refuse to love any of them they all hate you, as in that they are gossiping about
you. Everything they do is to embarrass you in front of your friends and even
in the class. You can’t even feel at ease, you start falling sick and start missing
class and in the end you are fed up with yourself. . . . To me, it can affect my
studies, because it hurts and the moment someone abuses me for those two
weeks I can’t read . . . I even feel sick.

The above statements suggest the boys’ taking-things-for-granted attitude
about controlling girls’ sexuality, in that girls’ rejections of their sexual advances
are met with harassment and disparagement of girls’ bodies. Such hostility caused anxiety, stress, lack of concentration in class, absenteeism, and self-disgust among girls, which, in turn, affected their studies. Some girls spoke of their friends having to change schools because of boys’ persistent and aggressive hostility. Some female students also reported hostility and harassment when they rejected sexual invitations from teachers and adult men in the community. Sexual harassment of girls, especially that resulting from rejection of boys’ and men’s sexual initiatives, reflects the perception and belief that girls are objects of male sexual desire, and consequently, according to girls, inhibits their schooling.

Discussion

The school is a gendered place through which young people acquire important values, beliefs, and norms that are critical in shaping boys’ and girls’ sexual identities and gender relations, making it an important agent of socialization. As students negotiate their way through daily life at school, gender and sexuality constitute the organizing principles of social relations and significantly influence their schooling experiences. A gender code serves as a mode of transmitting a range of messages and views of what it means to be a boy or a girl. Through a process of gender attribution, concepts of masculinity and femininity that are thought to be appropriate to each gender are recontextualized, and messages about gender and sexuality are transmitted.

The prescribed boundaries of appropriate and acceptable male and female behaviors in these schools were embedded in a moral order in which the students were not only monitored by school personnel, but they also learned to monitor themselves within a regime of normalizing practices involving the deployment of gender and sexuality through student-peer networks known as the spy network. Through this network, students reported any form of behavior that did not conform to school expectations.

The study shows complex contradictions often reflected in the ubiquitous “sexualization” and “desexualization” of school events through extensive gender segregation and/or teacher surveillance and moral supervision, especially of female students. Discourses of sexualization and desexualization were manifested in the schools’ emphasis on decency, but were also manifested in the sexualization of female dress, which required female students to either wear long skirts or else to pull up their socks over the knees when wearing short skirts. Such sexualization of female dress, in particular socks—knee-high stockings—has also been noted in research in Tanzania, which indicates that many people in the Kilimanjaro region regard legs and thighs as the most sexualized parts of the female body, and thus “good girls” keep their legs covered (Stambach 2000).

In our study, students’ and teachers’ descriptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and interactions reflect how norms of compulsory heterosexuality and attendant homophobia pervade students’ everyday lives in both
coeducational and single-sex schools. The constructions of gender within the school environment, therefore, include both overt and covert discourses on the interaction of sexual and gendered identities and behaviors that create a climate in which students are constructed simultaneously as learners free of gendered and sexual identities and as girls/boys deeply embedded within heterosexual trajectories. The participants noted that tension and anxiety created through such sexualization led to a lack of concentration in class and limited students’ consultations and teachers’ support, both resulting in poor school performance.

Despite an overt discouragement of sexual activity through teachers’ desexualization of students’ social interaction within the school space, students’ responses revealed active engagement in sexual behaviors and practices. A number of studies in Africa from both north and south indicate high levels of early and unsafe sexual activity among young people, which often starts in their early teenage years (Neema, Ahmed, Kibombo, and Bankole 2006; Warenius et al. 2007; WHO 1998). Studies further report that premarital sexual activities with multiple and casual partners are more prevalent among males than females. This raises doubts about the meaning of protection for girls (within traditional cultural ideas of gender/sex), and the meaning of responsible sexuality for both girls and boys, which are important education issues.

The study also revealed an environment wherein students interacted through gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances. In this gendered environment, learners negotiate the lack of female sexual autonomy in relationships, compulsory heterosexuality, and norms involving the cultural and political exploitation of females as reflected in boys’ response to girls’ active engagement with their sexuality. Boys believed that their masculinity entailed sexual control of heterosexual interactions, locating desire as a male emotion and choice of partners at will as a masculine privilege. Consequently, girls are imagined as passive recipients of boys’ sexual advances and obliged to meet boys’ sexual desires, thus locating girls as objects of male sexual desire. The boys’ accounts illustrate the existence of normalized double standards: namely, girls are simultaneously expected to both accept and reject boys. This double standard concerned female students being taken for granted sexually, and being consistently the object both of male sexual desires and male regulation and/or control over their sexuality. Such double standards have been identified by research in the North (Delamont 1990) and in Uganda (Mirembe and Davies 2001), and they serve to legitimize subtle forms of sexualized gender inequality (FHI 1997; Measor and Sikes 1992). Measor and Sikes (1992) argue that such a discourse not only negatively affects boy/girl relationships, but also impacts girls’ sense of autonomy, independence, and their ability to succeed in the world.

Sexual harassment of girls, especially that resulting from the rejection of boys’ sexual invitations, acts as legitimation for, and articulation of, masculine power and female subordination. A number of studies attest to the apparent cases of sexual harassment and exploitation in the form of transactional sex in
schools (Jones and Norton 2007; Leach and Humphreys 2007; Neema, Ahmed, Kibombo, and Bankole 2006; Warenius et al. 2007). Sexual harassment strains girls’ participation in school, contributes to poor academic performance, and may lead to truancy, change of schools, and even the eventual dropping out of school. Girls in this study reported on friends who had changed schools due to harassment from boys and teachers. It is clear from this study that sexuality affects the overall experiences of schooling for girls differently from boys; experiences, including male domination, female marginalization, sexual abuse and harassment, pregnancy, and lack of self-esteem, all serve to undermine girls’ schooling.

To address these gender and sexual tensions and contradictions, young people need to be empowered with the necessary knowledge and life skills to enable them to face the challenges of adolescent development and sexuality. The provision of comprehensive sex education is an important strategy for building students’ self-esteem, confidence, values of respect and teamwork, and other life skills that will enable them to take control of their own bodies and resist abuse and exploitation, as well as gain the ability to manage their sexuality. With greater self-esteem and confidence, menstruation and relationships, which girls reported were major concerns, might be easier to manage. It is to be hoped that gendered sex education will help young people develop an understanding about relations of gender and power and egalitarian and nonviolent forms of sexual behavior.

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Florence Kyoheirwe Muhanguzi is a lecturer in the School of Women and Gender Studies, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. She teaches in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and her research focus is on gender, health and sexuality, women’s education, and population and development issues. She is also a gender trainer and activist and participates in NGO programs to improve the status of women, girls and boys. She can be reached at fmuhanguzi@ss.mak.ac.ug or floramuha@yahoo.com.

Jane Bennett is a professor of gender and women’s studies and head of the African Gender Institute at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. She is the author of articles and books in the areas of sexualities, gender, and violence, and works as a teacher, writer, and organizational activist. She authored the Southern African Higher Educational Institution’s Challenging Sexual Violence/Sexual Harassment: A Handbook of Resources (2000) and edited the volume Killing a Virus
with Stones (2005), among others. She can be reached at jane.bennett@uct.ac.za or jforessb@gmail.com.

**Hosea R. D. Muhanguzi** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Science and Technical Education, College of Education and Extra-Mural Studies at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. He teaches in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and his research focus is on ecology, gender, science and environmental conservation, and education. He can be reached at hmuhanguzi@dosate.mak.ac.ug.

**Notes**

1. We use “gender code” to mean a socially constructed system that defines what males and females should do and how they should behave, and a “gender regime” is the configuration of gender relations within a particular setting, such as the school.
2. More than half (55 percent) of the women are married by age 18 (UBOS 2010).
3. In Uganda, 77.7 percent of the teachers are male (UBOS 2010).
4. This group of students was considered to be more articulate on sexual matters and in the sexually active age group.
5. “Parking” is a term used to mean a boy and a girl in a love relationship.

**References**


Feminist Formations 23.2


