

# Safe haven no more: Children's home or lion's den?

THE BIG READ

BY GLORIA NAKAJUBI

When Jamillah was picked by a Good Samaritan from the street where, for nine months, she had lived under squalid conditions, and taken to a children's home in Wakiso, she had hope for a brighter future in a place she would comfortably call home. How wrong she was!

At just 11 years of age, Jamillah had fled her home in Nyendo, Masaka, and come to Kampala, where she lived on the streets. Having lost her mother at the tender age of five, she had lived with her stepmother, who made her life hell. "She refused me to go to school with other children and made me stay home and do all the work there was. On top of that, she would come back home, tie me with a rope, hang me on a tree branch and beat me with an electric cable, accusing me of being lazy and disobedient. She would also deny me food. As if that wasn't bad enough, my father would sneak in every day when my stepmother would be at work, drag me to his bedroom and force me to have sex with him. This went on for all the years I stayed with them until a neighbour advised me to run away. That is how I found myself on the Kampala streets," Jamillah narrates.

"After staying on the streets for nine months, a woman who was selling vegetables on the street where we used to sleep took us to a children's home in Wakiso. She told us there we would get free food and a chance to go to school, but this bliss was only short-lived. At the home, our keeper made us fetch water, dig and make bricks the whole day without food. We only had one meal of posho at 6:00pm and slept on rucksacks without blankets. At night, the male workers at the home would



Street children taken off the streets are taken to homes. Photo by Wilfred Sanya

sneak into the makeshift house where we slept and force us to have sex with them, and if you refused, they would not give you food the following day. Things went on like that until I ran away and to stay with a church priest, where I worked as a housemaid."

Children's homes are mushrooming in almost all corners of Uganda. These homes are supposed to be a safe haven for the homeless children, but this is not always the case. While many do not meet the required standards, in others the rate of abuse is high. Any wonder then that cases like the one of Bernhard Glaser, the founder of Sseso Humanitarian Services, currently on remand for allegations of sexually abusing children under his care, continue to surface?

A survey by the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development in 2012 on the state of institutional and alternative care in Uganda recommends urgent

interventions to save children in these institutions from abuse. With a total of 450 known children's homes countrywide, one would imagine that the children woes are sorted, but the higher the numbers of children's homes, the greater the challenges.

In Wakiso district, for instance, which currently has 54 childcare homes, it is reported that three childcare institutions open each month. In Jinja, at least five foreigners visit the district headquarters every week asking to set up childcare institutions.

"A worrying trend is that many of these institutions are being without the knowledge or permission of the gender ministry or district staff. Unless the situation is brought under control, Uganda will have the most childcare institutions per capita in Africa," the report states. During the survey, a number of issues such as health and safety, personnel, special needs provisions, counselling and

therapy were considered and these were measured in line with the available policies, strategies and guidelines, both international and domestic. Forty childcare institutions in the different regions were selected as representative for assessment.

#### HIV treatment provisions

According to the survey, 17.5% of the homes had no HIV treatment provisions with many of these not carrying out HIV/AIDS tests for their residents or the incoming children. Just 35% of these homes had what was rated as good HIV treatment provisions.

#### Counselling services

The survey established that many faith-based organisations offered spiritual guidance rather than professional counselling, while others had no such services. At least 25% of the assessed homes were rated as very poor in counselling and therapy services.

#### Special needs provision

It was established that some organisations chose not to admit children with severe special needs because they lack the facilities. However, in the homes where these children were being admitted, the assessment team noted some degree of child neglect.

#### Medical provisions

At least 15% of the assessed homes were found to have very poor medical provisions and this indicates that there is no onsite nurse at the home, and even when these are available, record keeping in is poor.

#### Governance and management

The survey reveals that more than 50% of homes assessed have very poor and inadequate governance and management. This is evident in the undefined and unofficial management teams and no evidence of management meetings.

#### Financial management

The assessment report shows that only 20% of the homes had financial management accounts, with another 40% having no evidence of income/expenditure. Whereas 7.5% did not have any financial records of any kind, a number of homes had only receipts for their records. It is also quite shocking that less than 5% of the homes in Uganda have income-generating schemes, which therefore, leaves many at the mercy of donations.

#### Human resource

The assessment shows that 65% of homes have inadequate HR provisions with limited staff contracts or outdated contracts and no job descriptions, limited or unqualified staff yet less than 5% had staff training and appraisal programmes.

#### Ministry Responds

James Kabogozza Ssembatya, the assistant commissioner, Youth and Children Department at the gender ministry, says a number of interventions have been instituted based on the recommendations of the report.

The minister he says, has instituted a committee with guidelines on which children's homes must run. The committee will visit all the childcare homes and all those found lacking will be closed.

"We should have closed down these orphanages in poor conditions a long time ago, but the resources are not available hence making it quite hard," Kabogozza says.

Kabogozza cites underfunding for child protection as the major hindrance in fighting child abuse. He says the probation officers are not facilitated to carry out their mandate.

He says by the end of first quarter of 2014, they will have compiled a list of the approved homes and no home will be allowed to operate without approval.

Approval of children's homes is made by the minister with recommendation from the probation and chief administration officers, after a thorough assessment.

He says a move to adopt the alternative care framework, which recommends local adoption as opposed to international adoption and institutional care, is awaiting approval. "We believe every child can have a place to stay in their respective communities and a recent survey showed that. Unlike in the past, today Ugandans are willing to adopt children."

He further notes that the reviewed Children's Act currently under the parliamentary council, will go a long way to fight the increasing cases of child abuse as it will ensure easy inspection and policing.

## Child care

### Children protection policy still wanting

Over 50% of the homes assessed had inadequate childcare provisions with less than 10% meeting the 'Caretaker to child' ratio as per the regulations.

The survey shows that only 20% of the homes had a child protection policy and some homes were found to change children's identities on religious grounds.

It was also established that there was limited awareness of child attachment and child trauma issues, moroso childcare policies / procedures were non-existent.

#### Child record keeping

Over 60% of the homes had inadequate record keeping, which include child background, abandonment circumstances, child development reports and education. Counselling and therapy sessions, if carried out, were not recorded.

#### Health and safety

In the 30% of the homes with inadequate health and safety provisions, it was established that children had limited access to clean drinking water, had poor diet,

shared beds/cramped bedrooms, unqualified nurses or limited access to medical facilities, no health inspector report and a number of children looked malnourished.

#### Resettlement and alternative care

The national alternative care framework states that unless it is not in the child's best interests, or against their expressed wishes, all children in care should be returned to their original families or familiar caregivers. However, according to the survey, most of the children's homes prefer international adoption over domestic solution. And unless the probation officers advocate resettlement, it rarely happens.

It is ironic that in all the homes visited, they acknowledged the existence of family members for majority of the children in their care.

"Homes acknowledge resettlement and alternative care is not on the agenda of their western sponsors," the survey states.

Mariam Akiror, the programme manager advocacy, research and information, Uganda Child Rights NGO Network, notes that the report couldn't have been far

from the truth and this clearly brings out what actually happens in the residential homes.

She says many residential homes have recruited children who do not deserve to live there, especially those whose parents are still alive. The intention of such homes, it was noted, was to use these children to access more money from sponsors.

"We want the Government to strengthen kinship care, fostering or domestic adoption and residential care should strictly come as a last resort," Akiror says.

She urges Parliament to pass the Children Amendment Act that has been on the shelf since 2008 in order to sort out the legal gaps existing in trying to protect the children's rights.

Akiror also highlights the need to sensitise communities on the benefits of having children growing up with their families other than childcare homes. "Communities should be taught to not look at childcare homes as an alternative for raising children.

This will help people learn to appreciate the role of parents in children's upbringing and the likely effects when a child doesn't grow up with a parent," she says.

