

Sexual Exploitation of Children, predators and supply factors in Kampala, Uganda

By Rogers Kasirye,

The child victims: When we were doing research in Kampala city at the beginning of the year 2010, little did we know that commercial sexual exploitation of children had spread rapidly in the city and that many children had become victims of this vice. Fifty percent of Uganda's 31 million populations is classified as young. Kampala's city population is estimated at around 3 million people. Young people are the majority and many live in disadvantaged positions and children's conditions have been made worse by the high levels of poverty, limited social service provisions, and high numbers orphans now growing up in the country. In fact, the HIV situation has made life worse in most of the villages we visited. In Masaka, Rakai and Lyantonde, we found many scores of children caring for their siblings as child-headed families and others caring for parents and grandparents. Girls and boys in urban and slum areas are at special risk, particularly in a city like Kampala with multiple challenges for young ones.

Over 20,000 street children and slum youth are estimated to be living in urban centers and cities of Uganda, with the highest concentration in Kampala, the capital. The majority of these youths are boys, outnumbering girls by 7 to 3 (Kasirye, Light foot 2002). Statistics from Kids In Need (KIN), an NGO that assists street children, indicates that approximately 80 percent of the boys and girls on the streets have lost parents or guardians due to AIDS related illnesses. Virtually all the boys and girls on the streets are at risk of HIV infection due to the independent lives they lead characterized by a lack of shelter, medical treatment and food. These problems are compounded further by survival crime and violence, continued harassment by law enforcement agencies, exposure to drugs and experimentation with sex at an early age.

The question that keeps haunting us is how children affected by these un-ending interruptions in life manage to cope. Initially, when a parent or guardian in a family becomes ill and can no longer contribute physically or financially to the household, there is a shortfall in income and domestic contribution. The income loss is magnified when the savings and assets that remain are needed to pay for medicine and care for an ill patient. Children will suffer diminishing returns in terms of standard of living, worsening health, nutritional care, and many will be forced out of school to care for the patient in their family. Children interviewed informed us that many times in such homes, young ones were often forced to drop out of school to care for their parents or to fill the gap left by the domestic career or the breadwinner (ILO, 200). Children under these life interruptions and in these circumstances are often subjected to stigma and discrimination from their peers, teachers, family members and others, which lead to increased social isolation, even homelessness. Children are increasingly separated from their sick parents and distributed among their relatives at, a critical stage in their growth and development, which can unsettle their emotional stability.

Does the extended family respond to the needs of orphaned children? In the absence of a social security system, the extended family takes care of the orphans, but now due to large families becoming over-stretched economically, they cannot meet the needs of extra children. In most interviews we carried out, children indicated that they were being exploited as laborers instead. Relatives who prefer to take children were either not well or worse off. Oftentimes, the homes children are living in are isolated, and children feel very desperate with nobody to care for them. Many children end up defending themselves in child-headed families or running away to the streets where they become easy targets for people who want to exploit them sexually and economically.

In a study of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) conducted by Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD) in 2003 and funded by ILO-IPEC, it was noted that out of the 728 children involved, 48 percent were vulnerable migrant village orphans seeking to fend for themselves and trying to survive. It is common for children, especially Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) who have been brought to the cities, to work initially as domestic servants, or to find themselves trapped in desperate situations such as homelessness, drug abuse, child prostitution and delinquency. Children who suffer from the effects of HIV in a household are consequently more vulnerable to exploitation in the worst forms of child labor. In such an environment prone to poverty, lack of education and physical, emotional and moral harm, these children are at a heightened risk of contracting HIV.

The predators: In Kampala specifically, we found many adults and children unconcerned about sexual exploitation of children; a case in point were the numerous bars, lodges and restaurants which employ underage children as a way to entice customers to seek sexual gratification for as long as they come to buy drinks and food. No single place had a minimal rule or code of conduct for employing children under such circumstances. These businesses were neither aware of the labor legislation that prohibits young people to work in such places, nor were they enforcing it. In fact, all of this was happening in the backyard of local leaders. Allowing children to work in such deplorable situations raises both legal and moral questions. Keeping silent or taking no action to help is condoned, regardless of whether the children involved belong to one's family or not. Every child counts and predators must not be given freedom to exploit children, no matter which family they belong to. We found such work places culpable of committing crimes against children because they fuel recruitment and exploitation of innocent children. Many of these enterprises should be fined (or prosecuted) and closed for exploiting children.

The other predators fuelling this phenomenon were the Karaoke groups that dance at over 60 nightclubs in Kampala, each averaging 18 children, for a total of 1080 children per single night. These nightclubs had developed a well woven network of recruiters who take children away from villages and supply them on a regular basis to replenish the Karaoke groups, characterized with deceit, harassment and abuse throughout out the transportation process, effectively transferring innocents to a form of slavery because children were literally sold in situations which are like slave markets in the slums. In Kawempe, Kampala, one child told us that *“apart from dancing, I was expected to go away with a patron every evening as part of my survival. If I refused I stood chances of being expelled from the group. I Remember when I was being recruited in the village, they told me they we going to take me to a famous dancing group and I was going to earn a lot of money and help my siblings left in the village.”* These incidences point out that bars, restaurants and karaoke groups recruited many children and were among the worst exploiters of children. In most cases these bars acted like mini-brothels for children and were located near a cheap lodge or even some had places of their own where exploiters sexually abused children. There are also incidences in the market, brothels,, car garages, carpentry workshops that also were in the business of using young children and exploiting them. Some children talked about cameramen and musicians who took photos of nude children and were selling movies or posting them on the net.

Recruitment of children was much disguised and predators tend to operate at night as seen in bars and those on the roadside as well. We also located one man whose karaoke group of over 60 children had disguised itself as young people learning to train in dance. Many of these teenage girls had been uprooted from schools because someone wanted to make money from these rather uninformed and innocent children. We were informed that boys in such groups considered some of these girls as their wives, leading to a secondary high risk sexual behaviors and use of multiple partners. Interviews also showed that local celebrities were taking advantage of the children in what they dubbed as auditions pre-trail dancing. . Many girls came to register for

the dance troupe, but this provided a sexual spree for their exploiters who used sex as a basis for recruitment. The whole situation promotes sexual promiscuity and abuse of innocent girls.

In the study, we found these children had inadequate skills to protect themselves from such challenging situations. Many had no place of abode and meals were difficult to come by, yet they wanted to lead a decent life. The Uganda Aids Commission in its mode of transmission study of 2007 noted that HIV prevalence in the most risky population was way above the national average - 15%, compared to the national average of 6.5%. Someone needs to come in to protect these children, whatever the cost may be. Lack of employable skills among these children does not mean children should be abused. Campaigns are necessary to fight this vice and more needs to be done. One lady working with a local NGO observed the number of children entering CSEC has increased, mainly orphan or impoverished girls, or children displaced in the war or living in IDP camps. Children as young as 11 years old have been rehabilitated from such situations. Some of these were recruited by former commercial sexual workers (CSWs), others were being forced to participate because of violence and poverty at home. Some of the girls grew up in homes where relatives and parents were involved in CSW, and children found themselves trapped in it as well. Alcohol and drugs like marijuana play a very important role in facilitating the behavior during the CSEC to woo clients and also as the belief that drugs will attract more men. Some of the girls report being raped and defiled; others are not paid and end up facing violence from clients. The police also abuse them in the slums and once arrested, some demand sex. Lack of employable skills, poverty and orphanhood are major issues that push children into prostitution. Brothels have emerged in addition to street sex based work.

“Children involved in CSEC mirror societal problems which imply dysfunctional families in a society which have not been addressed; families can no longer cope due to many challenges including HIV/AIDS, wars, poverty and early assumption of adult roles” observed a university professor at Makerere University, Kampala. A local pastor noted, “I have also advocated to policymakers and seek solutions to curbing pornography. Our drop-in center receives close to 50 young people every week but between 20-30 cases are affected by drugs and pornography, which represents 60% of cases. Parents do not know what to do”; he added that in prostitution there are many girls in lodges that are constructed every day. Our field experience also showed girls involved in prostitution are moved from other places and are usually trafficked from Lyantonde, Rakia, Masaka, Sembabule or other towns. There are many truck drivers who need places to rest; hence, that’s are why lodges are everywhere. Gatekeepers and security girls also have good information about child prostitution. When children run away from home and reach their destination, they get stuck, and end up working in a bar. It was also noted that some parents give consent when traffickers approach them to hand over their children due to good promises made to them such as good jobs, gifts like soap, sugar bread etc.

Some bar and lodge owners take these young girls with the aim of exploiting them sexually. During the interview it was mentioned that there was a woman known as Namagembe who was one of the most active pimps in the Lyantonde area. She recruits children and distributes them to bars and lodges to work as sex workers. She also had contacts in Kampala who requested girls to work in bars. Interestingly, this woman is known to the law enforcement body, but nothing has ever been done to halt her behavior. Some girls who work are neither paid nor given food; they face a lot of verbal abuse. Those who work in the bars are given strict instructions such as wearing indecent short clothing, accepting sexual arousal touches as a way of appeasing customers and managers to get more money. Customers also sweet talk them and make a lot of unfulfilled promises. Other risks include rape, HIV, AIDS unwanted pregnancy. These children often have no fathers, are overworked without pay; much of time they are told that customers are the ones to pay them.

These girls are between the ages of 15-18 and their customers include long distance truck drivers, single men, married men and the recently RCC migrant laborers working on the Mbarara-Masaka road construction. Furthermore, many of these exploiters facilitate children to leave their home villages and move to the cities. At night over 100 trucks and small cars on the Kamapla, Masaka Mbarara-Kigali highway park to take advantage of the booming child sexual activities which has also attracted secondary school students as part-timers in a bid to secure extra money to meet school needs. Others argue that some parents do not take responsibilities to protect their children and others are hungry for money and send children to look for men who end up taking advantage of the situation.

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