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

BY GLORIA MAKAJJIE

When Jamilah was picked by a Good Samaritan from the street for, she said, her mother had lived under spurious conditions, and taken to a children’s home where her mother had hoped for a brighter future in a place she would comfortably live. How wrong she was!

At just 11 years of age, Jamilah had fled her home in Nyendo, Makena, 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 ‘hades’. She, therefore, had no other option than to go to school with other children and made her way to the streets to do all the work there was. On top of that, she would come back home, sit in the house, hang on a tree branch, and beat me with an electric cord, accusing me of being lazy and demanding food. She would also deny me food. If that wasn’t bad enough, my father would make me work every day when my stepmother would be at work. Driving me to his car to 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,” Jamilah narrates.

"After staying on the streets for a while, a woman for nine years was selling vegetables on the street where we used to sleep took to a children’s home in Nakasongola. She told us there 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 wash and dig and make bricks the whole day for food. We could never get one meal of posho at 6:00pm and sleep on the floor in blankets. At night, the male workers at the home would sneak into the kitchen house where we slept and dare us to have sex with them. And if you refused, they would not give you food. 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 not always the case. Many do not meet the required standards, and in other times, it is nothing but abuse. High. Any wonder then that cases like the one of Bernard Genser, the founder of Soce 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 46 known children’s homes in Uganda, it is reported that three children institutions opened each month. In June, at least five foreigner visit the district headquarters every week asking to set up childcare institutions.

"It is worrying that almost all these institutions are being run without the knowledge or permission of the gender ministry or district units. Whenever the situation is brought under control, Uganda will have the most childcare institutions per capital in Africa, the report states. During the survey, the number of issues such as health and safety, personnel, special needs, provisions, counseling 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, 17.9% 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 25% of these homes had what was rated as good HIV treatment provisions.

Counselling services

The survey established that many faith-based organizations 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.

Ministry Responds

James Kabatopiza, the children’s rights commissioner, says a number of interventions have been put in place on the recommendations of the report. The ministry has been in a continuous engagement with the religious organizations where children’s homes must run. The committee will visit all the children’s homes and all those that are not meeting the standards will be closed. The children’s homes have closed down these places under poor conditions at any time, but the resources are not available hand in making it quite hard,” Kabatopiza says. Kabatopiza cited lack of funding for child protection as the major hindrance in fighting child rights violations as the protection officers are not facilitated to carry out their duties. He says by the end of first quarter of 2014, they had compiled a list of the approved homes and no home will be allowed to operate without approval. A number of homes have been closed down by the minister with the assistance from the protection and chief administrative officers after a thorough assessment.

Financial management

The findings also reveal that more than 50% of homes have inadequate IR planning, and 42% of homes have limited or unqualified staff or had trained staff and appraisal programmes.

Child care

Children protection policy still wanting

Over 50% of the homes assessed had inadequate childcare provisions with less than 10% meeting the ‘Caeskeller 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 idents without written permission.

It was also established that there was limited awareness of child rights issues, as well as inadequate policies. In addition, there was limited sharing of findings from reports and education. Counselling and therapy services, if carried out, were not recorded.

Health and safety

In the 100 homes with inadequate health and safety provisions, it was established that children had limited access to clean drinking water, had poor diet, shared bedding/rooming beds, unqualified nurses or limited access to medical facilities, with 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, the child is not expected to wish to be sent to their original family or foster carers. However, according to the survey, most of the children’s homes prefer institutional adoption over domestic solution. And unless the probation officers advocate resettlement, it rarely happens. If it is true that in all the homes visited, they acknowledged the existence of family members for majority of the children in the homes. ‘Homes acknowledge resettlement and alternative care is not on the agenda of their workers’, the survey states.

Michael Akamu, the programme manager advocacy, research and information, Uganda’s Child Rights (UCR) 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 want to live there, especially those whose parents are still alive. The majority of such homes, it was noted, was used to these children to access money from sponsors.

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

She urges Parliament to pass the Children’s Rights 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.

Akamu also highlights the need to sensitize communities on the benefits of having children being brought up with their families rather than in children’s homes. Communities should be taught to not look at children’s homes as places to bring the children. This will help people to learn about the role of parents in children’s upbringing and the likely effects when a child doesn’t grow up with a parent," she says.