

Outcry over 'saviour complex' fuelling exploitation of Kenyan children

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Campaigners say children from vulnerable families are being trafficked into institutions to satisfy demands of tourism.

Campaigners trying to fight the exploitation of children in Kenyan orphanages say they are being undermined by a "white saviour" complex among churches and other charitable groups.

The use of orphanages as "tourist attractions" in places like Mombasa is unethical and fuelling trafficking, child support organisations say.

Traffickers are feeding a market in children, supported by tourists' desire to visit institutions in places like Mombasa, said Michelle Oliel of the Stahili foundation, which combats child exploitation in [Kenya](#).

"Orphanages are sites of trafficking and that was recently recognised in the US [Trafficking in Persons report](#). There is now growing awareness of the fact that orphanages are damaging. [But] with cheaper air fares there is a proliferation of orphanages in tourist destinations. People see visiting an orphanage as part of a tourism experience like going on safari."

Oliel said: "I went to visit one orphanage as part of our work on ending the institutionalisation of children. As soon as the children saw me they began to dance for me. This is forced begging. They know that white people come with money."

Charity worker Sophie Otiende said she struggled to raise money for her work because she wouldn't let volunteers meet directly with vulnerable children.

"A lot of funding comes from churches and small groups and someone will want to pay \$1,200 [£940] to come and hug children for three months," said Otiende, of [Haart Kenya](#), a charity working to rehabilitate children trafficked into orphanages and return them their own families or communities. "I had someone offering me therapy for our girls. I asked, 'What qualifications would you need in your country to help a trauma victim? You would need a masters degree.'"

It sometimes means they have to turn down offers of money, she said. "There is a desperate need for funds but if you want to work ethically then you pay a price. We have a short-term rehabilitation shelter and we won't open our doors for people to come to it. We won't take volunteers."

In Kenya there are more than [800 registered orphanages](#), with an estimated 45, 000 children according to the government. Research suggests that the [vast majority of children](#) in orphanages have living parents.

"You have child finders who come into the community and take children from vulnerable families," said Otiende. "They are promised education, food and security in exchange for the child. The

families are not neglectful. This is a reality when there isn't enough support, when a country doesn't have a social protection system."

Joseph Mwuwara, 20, was trafficked into an orphanage as a child. Now he is being supported through an organisation based in Kenya called [Stahili](#).

He spoke in London last week at the Thomson Reuters Foundation's Trust conference on trafficking, alongside Otiende and Oliel.

He described being taken from his home to an orphanage. "A stranger came to my grandmother's home - my grandmother, who really loved us and still does. The outcome was my brother and I had to leave home and go to an orphanage. We were promised a good education and healthcare but this was not the case.

"On the first day and second day you are treated a bit well then things start getting worse. Sometimes I had to miss school because volunteers are coming, just to practise songs and dances. Once these volunteers were pleased with what we had done they would donate and give money. They would say, 'Buy something for these kids.' That was never done to us - everything that was bought was kept and sold."

Mwuwara was eventually taken back to his grandmother's by the trafficker, deeply traumatised by his experience. "My grandmother cried a lot when I came back, she was just ambushed. But today I am being helped by the Stahili foundation and they are supporting me in my training in mechanics. They have changed my life."

Oliel said potential funders are put off supporting the work Stahili does because they prefer to fund orphanages, despite research showing children are better off in a community setting.

"Family-based care is a sixth of the cost of an institution, but when we are working to close orphanages not everybody likes to hear that.

"It's entirely possible to get children back to their families. Typically we trace the family, then we work on psychosocial support. Nobody is suggesting getting the orphanages closed right away but if you slowly redirected the money towards family care it would be very easy."

For Otiende, there is too the question of why a "tourist" volunteer could do work that a local might be far better qualified for. "For the cost of a flight from the US to Kenya, we could pay for a senior psychotherapist to treat around 20 children and families a month.

"There are some great funders, UBS for example. Potential funders only want to support one child. They don't want to hear work you are doing with a family. We get letters that say, 'We would like to sponsor a little boy or girl so I can show my daughter how lucky she is.' Well, why does teaching values have to be at the expense of a vulnerable person?"

Otiende wants people to look at why they think they can help. "I ask people, 'Could you volunteer in your own country in this type of work?' No. You can't just come with a dose of optimism."

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The Guardian

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