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Child abuse in Kenya

Breaking the silence: Stopping the men who prey on orphans

<http://www.economist.com/news/21689493-stopping-men-who-prey-orphans-breaking-silence-over-sexual-abuse>

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A GROUP of girls are playing catch. They could be ordinary children; but some are cradling babies, and they are surrounded by high walls topped with barbed wire. They are in a refuge, in the city of Meru near Mount Kenya, which houses survivors of sexual abuse. Nearly a third of girls and 18% of boys in Kenya suffer some form of sexual violence before they are 18, according to a study published in 2010 by the UN Children's Fund (Unicef). Though data barely exist in many poor countries and researchers rarely use comparable methodology, surveys in other African countries, including Tanzania and Swaziland, have found similarly high rates. The World Health Organisation (WHO) puts the global prevalence at 20% among girls and 5-10% for boys.

Assuming the data are correct, why is the problem worse in Africa? In the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic that swept across the continent in the 2000s, many researchers at first thought child rape was perpetrated by men who believed the myth that sex with a virgin would cure them. But the evidence suggests otherwise.

A more chilling effect of HIV/AIDS was to leave many children orphaned and vulnerable to predatory adults, a problem exacerbated in many African societies by the strict obedience expected of children. All around the world, poor children are more likely to be physically or

sexually abused, says Christopher Mikton of the WHO. Unemployed, uprooted men are also more likely to violate children. In South Africa, where more than half of young adults are jobless, a survey of 15- to 17-year-olds found that 19% of girls and 20% of boys had been sexually abused. “Periods of rapid social and economic change...appear to be at least correlated” with violence against women and children, says Cynthia Bowman of Cornell University.

As in most of the world, a huge stigma is attached to such crimes in Kenya. But even when children plucked up the courage to tell an adult or go to the police, rather than let their parents take the traditional route of resolving things behind closed doors, the crimes were never investigated properly, says Mercy Chidi, who set up the Meru shelter in 2006. “You had to give them money to even leave their desks,” she says.

In 2012, helped by a Canadian NGO called the Equality Effect, Ms Chidi filed claims against police in Meru for violating the rights of more than 240 children by not investigating their allegations properly. The high court ruled in the girls’ favour in 2013. Since then, more than 80% of their cases have been successfully prosecuted. Others are still in the courts, or the suspects have fled.

But in most Kenyan communities where the NGOs operate, people were “somewhat resigned” to having paedophiles in their midst, says Fiona Sampson of the Equality Effect. They wanted to protect the children, but they did not know how. So the two organisations have expanded their training of police in Kenya as part of a six-month pilot programme. During one school session 140 children danced on tables, singing “No, no, no to children rape.”