



Charities, Voluntourism and Child Abuse: Is There a Link?

By Rasna Warah



Last year I wrote about Katie Meyler, a young American woman who set up an educational charity called More Than Me that ran a school for girls in Liberia and which became the site of sexual abuse perpetrated by one of its founders. It turned out that Meyler had no academic qualifications for teaching and her school, like many foreign NGOs and charities operating in Africa, was not sufficiently monitored by the Liberian authorities. It was only when a Liberian nurse at the school reported cases of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, among the students that the authorities took notice and when it became apparent that the girls in the school were being routinely raped by Meyler's close friend, a Liberian man who recruited the girls from Monrovia's poorest slums.

Now a similar case has emerged in Uganda. The case of Renee Bach has once again highlighted the dangers of allowing unregulated foreign charities to operate in poor countries. Bach's case might never have received media attention if two Ugandan women had not sued her and her religious non-profit organisation, Serving His Children, which was ostensibly set up to feed malnourished Ugandan children. Gimbo Zubeda and Kakai Annet claim that their sons died as a result of having been "treated" at the Serving His Children feeding centre in Masese, Jinja. They are suing Bach for negligence.

Zubeda's and Annet's children were not the only ones who died at the feeding centre. Between 2010 and 2015, some 105 children died there, according to Bach's own admission. Medics who have commented on the case say that many of these children were not just malnourished; they also suffered from other acute illnesses that Bach's centre could neither diagnose nor treat properly. They died because there was no trained medical practitioner at the centre who could either prescribe the right medicine or refer the children to another facility.

What is most astonishing about this case is that Bach apparently passed herself off as a doctor even though she had no medical training. And despite having no credentials to run a feeding programme for severely malnourished children, she managed, like Meyler, to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars from donors in the United States who believed that she was saving African lives.

Orphanage tourism

Like many young naïve white volunteers who come to Africa and then decide to stay - and fund their stay by forming a charity - Bach arrived in Uganda as an 18-year-old volunteer. Two years later, in 2009, this young American woman from Virginia registered an NGO in her home state that claimed to provide welfare to the needy and which also engaged in some Christian evangelism on the side. The area in Jinja where she set up her charity has high levels of illiteracy, particularly among women, and high levels of child malnutrition. This combination allowed her to hoodwink the local population and to pass herself off as a medical practitioner.

This particular initiative, which had deadly consequences, has once again raised the question of whether Africa needs more foreign charities and NGOs, and whether there is a direct link between what is often referred to as "voluntourism" and child abuse.

There is a growing awareness of the dangers of young volunteers from the West working for short periods of time in orphanages in poor parts of the world - in essence combining tourism with volunteer work. It appears that the number of orphanages in poor countries is growing in proportion to the number of volunteers. "Orphanage tourism" has now become a business, with tourists and volunteers paying large amounts of money to have an "orphanage experience". One study in Cambodia found that the number of orphanages in the country had increased by 75 per cent between 2005 and 2010 even though the number of children without parents had declined; the majority of these orphanages were in tourist areas.

Parents or caregivers who give up their children to many of these orphanages are promised better education for the children but very often the children are kept in poor conditions to attract donor funding. This also seems to be the case with local charities run by individuals or which are funded by the government. Recently, a famous children's home in Nairobi named after Kenya's first First Lady was criticised for mistreating children under its care.

Many children are, in fact, actively recruited into orphanages to meet the demand of tourists, donors and volunteers - a phenomenon defined as "orphanage trafficking". Sometimes one can accurately gauge the level of poverty in an area by the number of charities (especially orphanages) there. I once counted five orphanages in the short stretch between Malindi and Watamu, a tourist destination in Kenya that is known for both its high levels of poverty and its beautiful beaches. Is it possible that so many children in this part of Kenya's coastal region have no parents? I seriously doubt it.

Children's rights advocates have pointed out the lack of background checks on volunteers and say that the lack of child protection policies in many countries places vulnerable children at the risk of being sexually abused or trafficked by both locals and foreigners. Orphanages allow paedophiles

claiming to be volunteers easy access to children.

Mythomaniacs

Many critics of the aid industry say that aid is not so much about making the aid recipient's life better, but more about making the donor feel good about him or herself. That is why so many young white women, looking for adventure or redemption – or both – like Bach and Meyler, come to Africa when they could be helping poor or underprivileged communities in their own neighbourhoods back home.

The Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole dubbed this phenomenon “The White Saviour Industrial Complex”, which he says is not about justice but about having “a big emotional experience that validates privilege”. In an article published in *The Atlantic* in March 2012, Cole wrote: “Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can be conveniently projected. It is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike saviour or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied.”

And the writer Paul Theroux observed, “Because Africa seems unfinished and so different from the rest of the world, a landscape on which a person can sketch a new personality, it attracts mythomaniacs.”

Why come all the way to Africa when you could be helping your own people? Well, one reason is that it's easier for a person in the United States to set up a charity claiming to be helping Africans in a country that a donor might never visit than it is to set up a non-profit for homeless people or drug addicts in your own neighbourhood, which might be monitored more closely by the authorities. Such monitoring and oversight is lacking in most African countries, especially countries that are experiencing conflict or natural disaster.

Secondly, it is easier to get away with all kinds of malpractices in Africa if you are white. Being white guarantees immunity from scrutiny. The women who came to Bach's feeding centre referred to her as “doctor” simply because she was white. Iris Martor, the nurse who worked at the More Than Me Academy in Monrovia explained how white privilege allowed Meyler to get away with things that would have not been tolerated if she had been a black Liberian. “They think we are stupid, with little or no education, and our system is fragile, and they can get away with things because their skin is white,” she said.

Then there is the huge power imbalance. My friend Lara Pawson, a former BBC journalist, says that when she worked as a foreign correspondent in Africa she rarely saw white people treating Africans as equals. This is partly the Africans' fault. White people in most former colonies in Africa are still treated like gods. They get the best tables at restaurants and are treated with utmost respect in public spaces. Just being white is enough to guarantee you various privileges.

And when they arrive here, they find that their standard of living improves considerably. A working class white kid from the wrong side of the tracks in Philadelphia or London will find that her UN or NGO job (which she got purely on the basis of skin colour) can afford her a big house in the nicest neighbourhoods – plus cooks and chauffeurs. Who would not want to live in Africa?

What no one asks is why we need a 20-something from Philadelphia to help us with problems that we should be solving ourselves.

The aid myth

Some of the fiercest critics of the aid industry have been from the African continent. Dambisa

Moyo's *Dead Aid* became a bestseller because she debunked the myth that aid benefits the poor. The Kenyan columnist Sunny Bindra has talked of how aid dependency erodes people's dignity and self-respect. Maina Mwangi had called aid a "blunt instrument". The Tanzanian scholar Issa Shivji has argued that when donors come to an African country, they establish a neoliberal agenda that essentially wrenches policy-making out of the hands of the African state. He says that the rapid rise of NGOs in Africa is part of a neoliberal offensive where the African state is demonised and the NGO is celebrated. Firoze Manji has often accused NGOs of "depoliticising poverty" by casting poverty, rather than social injustice, as the main problem facing so-called developing countries. Once poverty is depoliticised, it is delinked from the real causes of poverty - including corruption and exploitation of African resources by foreign multinationals. (You can read their brilliant essays on this topic in *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits*, an anthology I edited.)

With so much opposition to aid by none other than Africans, why is it that these NGOs and charities keep coming to Africa? Well, it's partly because we let them. African governments are only too happy to let charities and NGOs do the work that they should ideally be doing. And if the NGO or charity is run by a white person, all the better because not only will donor funds be guaranteed, but the government will also save its own resources (which can then be diverted to personal projects or can be embezzled).

How do we extricate ourselves from these do-gooders? Well, for one, by putting in place more stringent measures to vet and monitor them. The More Than Me Academy in Liberia had American teachers and volunteers with no experience in education. Both Bach's and Meyler's charities did not have boards that were located in the country where their NGOs were operating, which meant that there wasn't sufficient oversight of their operations. Government inspectors did not come to the Meyler's school or to Bach's feeding centre to see if they met the required standards. No one was watching, so the abuse continued.

More importantly, African countries need to wean themselves off aid. NGOs can never replace governments when it comes to providing basic services - they simply do not have the mandate or the kind of resources to undertake service provision on a national scale. Only a government, or its agencies, can provide universal healthcare and education. Only a government can pass laws, regulations and oversight mechanisms that can ensure that NGOs are accountable to the people they purport to serve.

This is not to say that African governments can be relied on to do what is best for their citizens or to do what is in the public interest (as we in Kenya know too well) but to leave entire populations at the mercy of foreign charities and NGOs that are not accountable to anyone is highly irresponsible - and can be extremely dangerous, as the cases in Uganda and Liberia illustrate.

I don't think all charities and donor organisations are doing harm; on the contrary, many have been crucial during emergency situations. But I do think that there must be more scrutiny of their operations and of their founders' intentions. African countries should not be fulfilling the misplaced fantasies of naïve and confused white men and women who come to the continent to find themselves, and in the process end up harming those they claim to be helping.

Many countries are now waking up to the risks posed by voluntourism, especially as they relate to children's charities and orphanages. Last year, Australia became the first country to recognise "orphanage trafficking" as a form of modern slavery. African countries should do the same.

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