

Highway creates sex trade in Kumi

BY MOSES NAMPALA

It was supposed to be a leisurely stroll around Kumi, the fast-developing trading centre on the Malaba-Lira highway, a short distance from Kumi town.

As we passed by a long queue of stationary truck haulers, a young girl stepped out and said: "Hey! Looking for babe to take you through the night?"

In matter of seconds, two other girls appeared. It was the gleam headlamp light of an arriving cargo truck that revealed they were young girls; so young that their breasts had barely formed. I was shocked!

However, George Obalemo, my host and a resident of Kumi district, seemed neither surprised nor puzzled.

"Welcome to Kumi highway brothel, our fast-flourishing brothel in Kumi district," Obalemo, who is a girl-child activist, whispered to me under his breath.

The tallest of the girls blurted to us in Kiswahili: "I hope you do not mind me speaking to you when I am smoking; the night is too chilly! We charge sh30,000 for short and sh60,000 for a night."

As we made a hurried retreat, abuses, curses, tongue clicks, swearing and obscene words were hurled at us. That is the new Kumi, courtesy of the new South Sudan shortcut.

According to Obalemo, Kumi-Soroti-Lira highway is part of the newly established eastern route linking Malaba border to South Sudan, through Tororo, Mbale, Soroti and Lira. The new road connects the eastern borders to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan. Previously, trucks going to Northern Uganda, DR Congo and South Sudan had to pass through Kampala. Now they use this shortcut, sometimes making queues as long as 2-3km.

"Between 300 and 500 trucks make a stopover here in Kumi, every evening, especially those belonging to Inter-state cargo which park on either side of the Kumi-Soroti-Lira highway in Kumi district. And that has caused a spring up of prostitution around the previously quiet centre," Obalemo says.

IMMORALITY

Dr John Opolot, the Kumi district health officer, says the district health office is grappling with challenges amid constraints of a small resource envelop.

Kumi district has a population of 254,333 people.

"A recent HIV prevalence survey revealed that Kumi district has 10,529 people living with HIV. With the challenge of trucks parking here every evening, I am afraid the HIV prevalence rate is bound to scale up from the current 4.6%," Opolot says.

He explains that although the district is aware of the influx of sex workers in Kumi, the officials have not found a solution.

"My office had mandated Baylor Uganda, a development health partner, to cater for the sex workers community because they fall under their line of duty. Unfortunately, the



Trucks parked on the roadside in Kumi town. The business has attracted more youthful drivers

What they say



DR JOHN OPOLOT, KUMI DISTRICT HEALTH OFFICER

A recent HIV prevalence survey reveals that Kumi district has 10,529 people living with HIV. With trucks pitching camp here every evening, the HIV prevalence rate is bound to scale up from the current 4.6%.



DR MICHAEL EMUSUGUT, OFFICER IN CHARGE OF KUMI HEALTH CENTRE

The Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) clinic has 428 patients under active ARV care. Only four out of the 428 patients have confessed to being part of the sex workers community.

tenure for Baylor Uganda elapsed and the officer in charge has not furnished me with any report about the sex workers community," Opolot says.

INTERVENTION

So, with a meagre budget that his office operates on, Opolot says he has tried to carry out outreach HIV services, especially moonlight testing.

"This is a special arrangement of HIV testing specifically designed to target the sex workers community.

The service is usually carried out at night at designated brothel spots," he says.

Baylor Uganda co-ordinator refused to comment on the subject.

Together with five field volunteers, Obalemo founded and is the director of a local non-government organisation called Friends Of Kumi Sex Workers Community. He says although it is still in its formative stage, the organisation has got closer to the sex workers community in Kumi.

"We have recruited female

adolescents to be part of our team because they can easily get us through to these girls," he says. "Through them, we have discovered that some of these adolescent girls join the trade in the hope of making money, but end up sustaining grave injuries, trauma and sexually transmitted diseases."

Obalemo says his room acts as a temporary sanctuary for victims of such trauma. He says many of the sex workers in Kumi came from Mbale, Soroti, Lira, Arua, Gulu, Jinja, Mbarara, Mukono and Kampala. He says eight out of every 10 are teenage girls.

"These young girls are not a match for truck drivers sexually, but the lure of making money gets them into the fray," he says. "Our organisation is not abetting the vice, but these interactions have enabled us appreciate the dangers of the vice."

Obalemo says truck driving has attracted more youthful drivers. "Previously, the trucks would be driven by men aged between 38 and 65 because, maybe, the engines were manual and sluggish and needed patient and mature drivers. New technology brought in trucks with fast cruising automatic engines, which are easy to operate and attractive to younger drivers," he says.

Obalemo says this explains why the cargo truck drivers are mostly young Somali men aged between 18 and 30. "Their preference is young adolescent girls and that is why older women are fast losing market in this business," he says.

Friends of Kumi Sex Workers Community was able to mobilise

Their story

Isabela (not real name), 18, says she is a single mother of two. She says unlike most of her fellow sex workers who did not know their HIV status, she was living with HIV, but on ARVs.

"Most girls prefer to live in ignorance until they disappear," she says. "When you do not hear from a particular girl for more than two months, then just know she is either bed-ridden or dead. Yet the majority of truck drivers like unprotected sex."

Another sex worker, Martha (not real name), 18, says she dropped out of school in Primary Five and ran from home to elope with a man who abandoned her later in a rented house when she was seven months pregnant.

"I have never seen him again. When I tried to return home, my parents chased me away. That is how I ended up here. My baby girl is now seven months old. I need money to look after her. She may be fatherless, but she is a lovely baby," Martha says.

Sylvia, 19, lost her mother to HIV hardly two months ago. She was also a sex worker. She says she has never seen her father. Sylvia became a sex worker at 15.

A day for the young sex workers begins with a few personal chores at their place of residence. In the afternoon, they come to Kumi brothel and, for some of them, that involves a taxi from Lira.

"On a good night, you can return home with sh20,000 and sh30,000 on a bad night," Isabella says. The girls say the Inter-state cargo drivers are their main clients, although bodaboda riders and married men are among their alternatives.

six sex workers aged between 15 and 19, for a chat. The girls had long lost their maiden modesty and the nature of their facial make up and outfit were awkward.

According to Dr Michael Emusugut, the officer in charge of Kumi Health centre that is hardly 10 metres away from Kumi highway brothel, the Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) clinic has 428 patients under active ARV care. Four out of the 428 patients have confessed to being part of the sex workers community, he says.

CHALLENGES

Most of the prostitution is done in the cabins of the trucks. Some drivers are rude and cruel; sometimes they beat up girls and other times drivers refuse to pay.

Obalemo calls upon relevant officials in the Government to swing in action for Kumi highway brothel before the spirited efforts of fighting HIV in the area is put to waste.