

## PEOPLE

## KIBUKU HOME HEALS UGANDA'S BROKEN CHILDREN

PHOTOS BY MOSES NAMPALA

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In rural eastern Uganda, where child abuse, neglect and stigma often hide behind family walls, Ebenezer Children's Ministry has become a sanctuary for the most vulnerable. Located in Namawondo, Kibuku district, the home was not born from charity tourism but from lived encounters with suffering. At its centre is Sylvia Katooko Kooli, a social worker whose calling grew out of trauma. Since 2010, she and her husband, George Kooli, have opened their home and lives to children broken by violence, illness and abandonment.

Katooko, 38, remembers a phone call she received on the morning of August 6, 2022. The officer in charge of the Child and Family Protection Unit at Kibuku Central Police Station asked her to urgently come and take in a severely abused toddler. At the station, she found Ann (not her real name), a four-year-old girl who had just been rescued from her stepmother. Police records show the child had been starved for two months.

Ann's rescue followed the intervention of a passer-by. While walking on a footpath, he saw a woman dragging a weak child from a semi-permanent house towards a small structure. He watched as the child was pushed inside and the tin door bolted shut. Horrified, the passer-by reported the incident to Police, who rescued the girl. The suspect was later arrested, convicted and is now serving a sentence at Kibuku Government Prison.

Katooko recalls Ann's condition with disbelief.

"She was severely emaciated. You could count every rib," she says.

When Ann looked up at her, even in weakness, Katooko felt a connection and knew she would take her home. For nearly three months, she and her husband moved between hospitals, working with nutritionists and specialists to stabilise her.



Kooli (left) and Katooko with some of the children at Ebenezer Children's Ministry home in Namawondo, Kibuku district

Today, Ann is a healthy eight-year-old. She runs, laughs and recites poems with confidence.

Another child under their care is 11-year-old Samuel. Police records from Butebo Central Police Station show that Samuel's father assaulted him after a stepmother falsely accused him of stealing sh500. In anger, the father tied the boy's hands behind his back, dragged him to a banana plantation, covered his back with dry leaves and set them ablaze. By the time the neighbours intervened, Samuel's back and arms had been severely burned. Although discharged from Mbale Regional Referral Hospital, his left arm remains deformed and his scars frequently reopen. Doctors say he will need several skin grafting procedures.

Ann and Samuel are only two of the many children who have passed through Ebenezer Children's Ministry. The home has 101 children who are vulnerable, neglected, abused, orphaned or rejected.

"Ebenezer is a fortress for severely vulnerable children," Kooli says.

"Many have suffered cruelty from parents or



Katooko (left) and Kooli exhibiting the scars on the back of Samuel, who was assaulted by his father

## TRAUMA MANAGEMENT

Long before their marriage, both Sylvia Katooko and George Kooli obtained therapy training and worked as social workers in trauma settings. This background prepared them for the emotional and psychological needs of vulnerable children in their care.

"Trauma manifests differently in each child. Some recover quickly, while others take years," Katooko says.

She cites the example of Janet, who was sexually abused by her uncle at the age of six. For a long time, she feared playing with boys her age.

"Slowly, through counselling, she is learning that the boys here are like her brothers. She is no longer as fearful."

guardians. Some were sexually abused by people entrusted with their care. Others are orphans living

with HIV and were rejected by relatives."

The home admits children aged zero to 13 from the

Bukedi North sub-region, including Kibuku, Budaka, Butebo and Pallisa districts. According to the 2024 Uganda Police Annual Crime Report, Bukedi North recorded 202 child-related cases, up from 187 the previous year. Katooko believes the true figure is much higher.

"Many people do not understand what constitutes child abuse. Even when they do, family ties often prevent them from reporting," she says.

Among the earliest admissions were 12 children living with HIV. Two later died after relatives insisted on taking them temporarily, despite warnings to maintain strict medication routines. The children missed their drugs and their health deteriorated. Since then, children living with HIV are not allowed to leave the home for holidays.

Caring for children living with HIV came with challenges that the couple had not anticipated. Frequent illness, repeated hospital visits and stigma took a heavy toll. When the children reached school-going age, stigma followed them into classrooms.

A turning point came in 2015 through a collaboration with Ebenezer Children's Ministry in the US. With financial and technical support, the couple acquired five acres of land and built a children's home and primary school in Kibuku district. Today, Ebenezer Children's Ministry Primary School has 800 pupils from both the home and the community, helping to reduce stigma and offer a supportive learning environment.

## GENESIS

The idea of starting a children's home began during Katooko's final year at university in 2009. While collecting data for her research at Budaka Health Centre IV, she witnessed the death of a critically ill child whose grandmother had delayed seeking treatment due to lack of money. The moment never left her.

Around the same time, she had just married Kooli. When she shared her desire to start a children's home, he was initially unsure.

"I feared she did not want biological children," Kooli says.

"Later, I understood this was a calling."

Today, they have two biological children and hundreds they call family.

## RUNNING THE HOME

The home has a team of 12 that include caregivers, cooks, a guard, a nurse and a home manager. To sustain the home, the couple engages in growing crops and fish farming. Support from partners in the US boosted their efforts, though resources have tightened recently. The home is registered under the gender ministry, and all admissions involve police and probation officers.

## COMMUNITY VOICE

George Mumi, the chairperson of Namawondo LC1, calls the ministry a blessing in a community often grappling with social evils. "This ministry has given these children a fresh start," he says.