



## Disability and Human Trafficking: Challenges and Solutions

Human trafficking is the unlawful act of transporting or coercing people into activities such as sexual exploitation, forced labor, and begging in order to benefit from their service. Worldwide, **almost 20% of human trafficking victims are children, and those with intellectual, developmental, and mental health disabilities are at heightened risk** as traffickers can exploit their socio-economic, social, or medical needs. Perpetrators tend to commit harmful acts when a child has mobility problems or speech inhibition, while those with mental challenges are often not believed, and children with cognitive disabilities or developmental delays may have difficulty understanding dangerous intentions.

### Absence of Social/Familial Support

Social isolation and lack of relationships for children with disabilities place them in a **unique state of vulnerability**. Reliance on others for care and economic assistance can create an **unequal power dynamic**, increasing the likelihood that a child be submissive to an abusive caregiver.

### Lack of Education

Children with disabilities face an even greater barrier in societies where they are not expected to attend school:

- Community members are less likely to raise concerns when they see a child with a disability participating in trafficking acts such as begging.
- Education gaps reduce a sense of empowerment, preventing children from speaking out and seeking help.
- Those with intellectual disabilities may have a poor understanding of relationships, making them susceptible to manipulation and **unable to comprehend dangerous situations**.

In low-income countries such as Kenya, lack of education within communities has led pastors and healers to sexually exploit mothers as a way of “healing” their child, while some community members believe that sleeping with children with disabilities can heal sexually transmitted diseases.

### Poverty

Disability is both a cause and consequence of poverty. 80% of people with disabilities live in poverty due to higher medical costs and limited employment opportunities, making children and families more vulnerable to exploitation.

- Traffickers may promise medical equipment and medication to families that cannot afford it.
- Limited opportunity for employment due to stigma, discrimination, and lack of education gives **traffickers an avenue for exploitation** by promising children ways to earn a living.
- Pastors participate in a Kupenda Disability Advocacy Workshop in November 2019. In exchange for money, poor parents may send their child with a person they trust and be promised that their child will be educated, fed, and treated well.



*Pastors participate in a Kupenda Disability Advocacy Workshop in November 2019*

### Disability as a Result of Trafficking

Not only is disability a risk factor for trafficking, but hazardous forced labor jobs involving dangerous machinery, toxic chemicals, or extreme heat can lead to injury and permanent disability. While these long-term consequences may be physical, such as lost limbs, sex trafficking can lead to or exacerbate disability through psychological harm.

# Kupenda's Educational, Medical, Advocacy, and Emergency Reporting Services

Kupenda's reach area is a meeting point of high tourism and poverty, making it prone to human trafficking. As Kupenda works to maximize educational opportunities, minimize stigma, and ensure the safety and well-being of children with disabilities in low-income countries like Kenya, we are simultaneously mitigating harmful acts such as human trafficking and exploitation.

## Educational Opportunities

Kupenda connects children with high-quality education that is tailored to their unique physical and intellectual needs. Our efforts include:

- Mobilizing local governments to support inclusive education,
- Training teachers on the education of children with disabilities,
- Constructing accessible school buildings, and
- Helping families access funding for tuition and school supplies.

Our efforts increase access to learning while keeping children in a safe, inclusive environment. Inside the classroom, communication lessons give children the ability to self-advocate, academic study empowers those who were previously thought unable to learn, and newfound relationships with peers and teachers offer students a strong social support system.

## Medical Services

Kupenda refers children with disabilities to medical professionals while helping them gain independence and protect themselves from exploitation. Our experienced physical therapists help rehabilitate children with physical disabilities, while improved access to medical equipment and supplies helps mitigate symptoms and improve mobility. Finally, continuous care and treatment ensures that children with disabilities can reach maximum health, allowing them to reduce vulnerability and focus on building a successful future.

## Advocacy

One of Kupenda's founding principles is to inform communities about the rights of people with disabilities. Through family counseling, community leader workshops, and Disability Awareness Days, Kupenda minimizes harmful beliefs that contribute to the trafficking of children with disabilities. Our training defines disability, identifies causes and interventions, and supports community action planning that promotes loving inclusion.

## Emergency Reporting

Thanks to the emergency care feature of Kupenda's Child Case Monitoring Mobile App, our staff are able to report and provide immediate support to children who show signs of malnutrition, illness, life-threatening medical needs, and abuse. Emergency triggers help stop maltreatment in its tracks, ensuring that all children are kept safe from trafficking and other forms of abuse.

### Partnership:

In 2018, Kupenda visited Trace Kenya, a Mombasa-based NGO working to prevent human trafficking, protect victims, and prosecute offenders. Following Kupenda's visit, Trace made a commitment to increasing their awareness on the issue of trafficking and sexual exploitation of children with disabilities, and further promised to work with and inform Kupenda on future cases.

## Doreen



Doreen is a 5th grader from Kilifi County with hearing impairment. Growing up, Doreen never had a stable home. Relative after relative refused to care for her, and drought and insect infestation of the family's farm led to financial instability and a lack of opportunities.

Most of Doreen's holidays were spent at Gede Special School, where a Kupenda scholarship not only enabled her to access an education but also provided her with a safe home and counseling.

When children could not attend school during the pandemic, Kupenda provided Doreen and her family with food and hygiene supplies, while contacting them often to make sure Doreen was safe and healthy.

By continuing to check on Doreen's home and school life, Kupenda has taken Doreen out of harm's way and allowed her to excel in school, sports, and in her social life. If left abandoned, she could have become another victim of human trafficking.

**For more information:**

Visit: [www.Kupenda.org](http://www.Kupenda.org)

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