

Return to mother Africa

How a woman who left the UK for Nigeria is helping to transform the lives of her homeland's 8 million orphans

By Tony Snow

CHARITY UNICEF estimates that there are 8.2 million orphaned and abandoned children in Nigeria – and it is the youngest that are most at risk, like Makeba.

She was discovered in a severely malnourished state; her skeletal frame suggested that she had little chance of survival. She was just six months old when she arrived at Juvenile Welfare Centre in Lagos.

Princess was in an even more perilous state. She was born with severe abnormalities as the result of a botched abortion attempt. Her nostrils had not formed, which made feeding and breathing a huge struggle.

In both instances, doctors felt there was little they could do. But Laja Adedoyin took a different view. Her background was in the arts, and having lived much of her adult life in the UK, with her own children grown, she returned home to Nigeria and through the lives of Princess and Makeba found her calling – the Hearts of Gold Children's Hospice.

Thanks to Laja, Makeba is now a healthy five-year-old. But Princess' story was not to have such a happy ending. Her struggle for life was always going to be far greater, but Laja did everything she could, buying special feeding apparatus and taking her for specialist treatment in South Africa. However, at one year and 22 days old, Princess died.

"Princess brought me to realise that it was my calling to work with disabled children. She had a very short life – but it was fantastic," said Laja.

The hospice began life in modest fashion, but many more children were to follow Makeba and Princess into Laja's care, and the premises were soon bursting at the seams.

Within three years, Lagos State Governor Babatunde Fashola was paying attention, and a year later he had installed Hearts of Gold in purpose-built new premises.

While funding still remains a struggle, Hearts of Gold now has more than 35 children in its care, benefiting from a standard of paediatric care that few other establishments in the country can match.

"The negative impact on the



GOLD STAR: Laja's orphanage has been praised

society of orphanhood of so many children is evident through the growing number of children living in the streets, exposed to the worst forms of child labour and child trafficking," said former UNICEF country representative for Nigeria, Ayalew Abai.

Over the past five years, in order to stamp out corruption and the threat of child exploitation, Nigerian authorities have sought to introduce regulation to ensure basic levels of service for orphaned children, such as education, health and nutrition, protection and social care.

British charity the GAAP Orphanage Foundation recently undertook a fact-finding mission to seven orphanages and children's homes across Nigeria, including Hearts of Gold.

WELFARE

GAAP was set up to improve the welfare of abandoned and orphaned children in Nigeria and across West Africa.

Founder Abbey Orebanwo said: "Hearts of Gold was the first children's home we saw, and it was clearly a benchmark for others to aspire to. The challenge faced by most orphanages is not to try and emulate the work of Mrs Adedoyin, but to reach even the most basic of standards. This is where GAAP can play an important role."

Orphanages and children's homes now need to be registered to operate legally, but few are able to meet the tough criteria. In a country of over 160 million, the Department for Child Services puts the formally registered at under 200 countrywide. There are many more, but most that exist are under the radar of official scrutiny.

GAAP has agreed to collaborate with Hearts of Gold to tap into their expertise in

helping other orphanages.

Another of the orphanages visited by GAAP lies at the edge of a village in outlying Lagos state. It is one of the many that remain unregistered, and at risk of closure if discovered by the authorities.

The founder is the wife of a local pastor who started it after awaking one morning to the sound of a crying child at her doorstep. She took the child in and word soon spread of her benevolence. More children followed. Her orphanage is now home to 33.

But the conditions contrast starkly with those at Hearts of Gold. There are three cramped rooms and all the children sleep head to toe on floor mats. It is often a struggle to make ends meet and necessary to sell on donations of food and clothing to pay for essentials.

The children survive on a staple diet of dry noodles, and those that are ill are often unable to get the required standard of medical care.

TOUGH

"This was tough to see. What we found here was a well-meaning, good intentioned woman who simply couldn't cope. She did not have the expertise, knowledge or resources required to supervise an orphanage," said Abbey.

GAAP identified a range of steps to be undertaken to build the foundations to improve the child welfare system in the country. The first being to develop an infrastructure and support network to empower orphanages.

It proposes to undertake audits to make sure that orphanages and children's homes are fit-for-purpose and being run for legitimate reasons.

The charity also found that many homes need assistance with the registration process



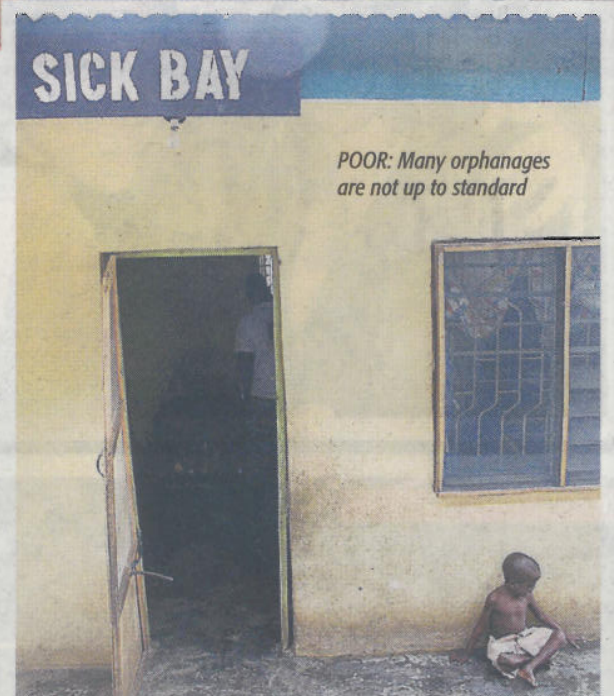
CALLING: Laja Adedoyin

dures and measures to bring them into line with government standards.

"We are proposing to draw together a collective of local healthcare and educational bodies so that a network of professionals such as Mrs Adedoyin are on hand to take care of the welfare of the children," Abbey said.

"It is very apparent that a lot needs to be done to help abandoned and orphaned children, but we found a great willingness among many to make a difference.

"Once we are at this point, the wider impact of child abandonment can be addressed and we can start tackling the causes as well as the remedies."



POOR: Many orphanages are not up to standard



SUFFERING: Funmi

Children in need

THE GAAP Orphanage Foundation is currently undertaking two specific projects in Nigeria and is seeking donations.

* The Help Funmi Appeal - Funmi is a 13-year orphan suffering with severe malnutrition and other health complications. Funds raised will pay for medical bills and after care to improve the quality of her life.

* The Bore Hole appeal - A registered orphanage, the charity needs safe running water to ensure that young children in its care are not put at risk from disease or other health problems.

To find out more about the GAAP Orphanage Foundation visit www.gaaporphanage.org.uk
To make a donation visit www.justgiving.com/gaap-appeal