

**HOT TIP****The feel**

**Mother's experience.** Sophia's mother Marije Slijkerman who was in Kampala visiting her daughter at the time of her disappearance, has dedicated the last decade trying to piece together just what happened to Sophia.



# Ten years without Sophia: What it feels like

**Dutch NGO offers €10,000 (approx Shs40m) reward for decisive tip on the whereabouts of Sophia Koetsier, the Dutch medical student who disappeared in Murchison Falls National Park 10 years ago.**

BY MARIJE SLIJKERMAN

“Last Tuesday, October 28, marked another year without our beloved, and so very much missed Sophia Koetsier. That day she vanished, after last being seen at the Student Centre in Paraa, Murchison Falls National Park. An unimaginable nightmare started for us, her parents, her brothers and her many friends.

Ten years of being thrown back and forth between intense sorrow, despair, insecurity, feeling powerless, frustrated. But hope remains. If nothing is certain, everything is possible. Miracles do happen.

It still feels like just a few months ago that we took Sophia to Schiphol Airport. She was excited about the adventure awaiting her, carrying her newly bought backpack and wearing her new walking shoes. We bought them together. Never, ever, could I have imagined to see one of those shoes lying along the bank of the River Nile, some two months later, but without any trace of Sophia herself.

## Off to Uganda

On September 1, 2015, Sophia, 21-year old medical student, arrived in Uganda to work as an intern in Lubaga Hospital in Kampala for eight weeks. Every week, she sent us, her family, an extensive report, writing about everything she saw, heard, did and learned. She enjoyed her work at the hospital, liked her colleagues and they liked her.

After finishing the internship, she went on a two-week trip around the country with two Dutch fellow students and a local guide. On Day Six of the journey, she disappeared.

The circumstances are, and remain, unclear. Authorities quickly, conveniently and without evidence, assumed: ‘fatal accident’.

We have been navigating a jungle filled with question marks ever since and are of the opinion that a thorough and serious investigation into Sophia's disappearance has never taken place. The impression that the initial inves-

tigation was genuinely flawed has been acknowledged by several authorities. ‘It's clear to me this case has not been taken seriously and it has been kept at a local level far too long,’ according to Gen Jeje Odongo, then Minister of Internal Affairs.

More than four years later, a new investigation was launched. Unfortunately, this was derailed by the Covid-19 pandemic that took over the world early 2020.

Another investigation was started in the spring of 2022. Despite having shared a trove of useful information, gathered myself in the course of my many trips to Uganda, the CID declined to involve me. Instead we were promised a report after three months. Those three months became 18 months. All the while we were kept in the dark. The report turned out to be quite underwhelming.

## At crime scene

The morning after Sophia's disappearance, one item belonging to her was found. Very near that same location, but more than 24 hours later, a whole trail of items was found, on Friday October 30.

That day, I arrived at the so-called scene-of-crime. I clearly recall being mystified when seeing these puzzling items, including one of the shoes I mentioned earlier.

Also, other items included a number of torn pieces of fabric, making up just one leg of the trousers Sophia was likely wearing when she disappeared. Some of those pieces of textile were tied to dead wood, others were put underneath leaves or grass on the ground. Her knickers hanging in a tree, four to five metres high up and pulled over a branch, hanging above the river. Her RayBan sunglasses lying there. All the items were spread out along the bank of the Nile river over a distance of some 40 metres.

I did not see Sophia's hand there and a strong feeling of something being very wrong immediately took over. That feeling has never left. Like the feel-



**Promising:** Sophia Koetsier arrived in Uganda in September 2015 for internship at Lubaga Hospital.

Sophia; a social butterfly takes a fun photo with children in Karamoja. PHOTOS/ COURTESY OF MARIJE SLIJKERMAN

ing that there are people who know more. That is why, for a long time, I have pleaded for one or two really sharp and motivated investigators who would be able to quietly gather information without attracting unwanted attention. Late last year, it seemed like my plea had finally been heard and I hoped we might, at last, get some answers to our many questions. Unfortunately, that hope fell apart within months.

Regrettably it was not the first time this happened. Time and time again, I have met people who seemed genuinely concerned, were in a position to help and showed a willingness to do so. But, more often than not, the communication halted soon after it started, without any explanation. Very frustrating, very painful.

## Sophia at a glance

Sophia is a bright, gifted and am-

bitious young woman. We know she wasn't well when she disappeared. Being diagnosed as bipolar, getting enough rest is crucial for her. At home she has her own room in a quiet neighbourhood. Living in a crowded student house in Kampala did not give her that rest. Uganda is also a very noisy country, which I can attest to, after 28 trips.

The lack of rest, and sleep, eventually took a toll on Sophia and it is clear that she was entering a so-called manic episode. This may have played a role in whatever it is that happened to her but it certainly played a role in the investigations, resulting in tunnel vision, ruling out anything other than ‘crazy girl got into fatal accident’.

## The feeling today

Time does not heal all wounds. On the contrary, the wound becomes bigger and more painful, dominating the

mind during the day and keeping us awake at night. No child is as present as a missing child. The not knowing is devastating, as every parent of a missing child knows. Doing nothing is no option and I will continue to walk every road that unfolds itself in front of me, to find out where it leads. Thus far there have been many dead end roads with lots of obstacles.

A Dutch NGO, active in solving unsolved cases, is asking attention for Sophia's disappearance on social media. They offer a €10,000 (Shs40m) award for the decisive tip that will lead us to Sophia, wherever she is. We shall increase that amount as much as we can.”

**For more information:**  
<https://www.peterrdevries.nl/cases/sophia-koetsier/>  
 Or go to: [www.findsophia.org](http://www.findsophia.org)  
 Email: [contact@findSophia.org](mailto:contact@findSophia.org)