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Child exploitation fears drive push to outlaw 'orphanage tourism'

BY POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT LOUISE YAXLEY

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PHOTO A parliamentary committee has heard many children in Cambodian orphanages are being exploited.

FLICKR: TONI VERD

It could become a crime to organise trips for Australians to visit orphanages in countries like Cambodia.

A parliamentary committee has heard many of the children are not orphans, and are being exploited to satisfy a demand from well-meaning Australians and others to volunteer.

West Australian Liberal senator Linda Reynolds has warned Australian church groups, schools and service clubs that many of their tours are to sham orphanages that exploit

children.

She wants it to be a criminal offence for someone to facilitate a trip to an overseas orphanage which is profiting from the children housed there.



PHOTO Sinet Chan was herself exploited in a Cambodian orphanage.

SUPPLIED: PATRICE NEWELL

Senator Reynolds also argues orphanage tourism should be a category of modern slavery because around three-quarters of the children are not orphans — they have at least one living parent.

"Some of these orphanages are well intentioned but most of them are for profit and some of them are run by organised crime because ultimately children in these facilities are a commodity," she said.

Sinet Chan, who grew up in a Cambodian orphanage, has pleaded with Australians not to donate to or volunteer at orphanages.

"The support of orphanages has created a thriving industry in which children are separated from their families and subjected to terrible abuse and neglect, as I was — being used as a commodity to generate funding," she said in a submission to a federal parliamentary committee investigating if Australia should have a law against modern slavery.

"The love and affection we received from visitors initially felt nice, but it was always very traumatic

when it came time for them to leave. We would be very upset and cry a lot."

Ms Chan said it triggered memories of the loss and separation that the children had already suffered after being separated from their families.

"Having these adults coming in and out of our lives felt like we were continuously being abandoned," she said

Deliberately malnourished to attract money and sympathy

An Australian child protection organisation, Forget Me Not, told the inquiry children in orphanages are often trained to perform traditional dancing and forced to perform for visitors.

"Some children are sent out to beg for funds in bars at night or hand out flyers advertising their orphanage," the Forget Me Not submission said.

"Some orphanage operators have deliberately kept children malnourished to attract more sympathy and thus more money.

"Even where orphanages are well run, over sixty years of research tells us that the very process of institutionalisation is harmful to a child's development. "

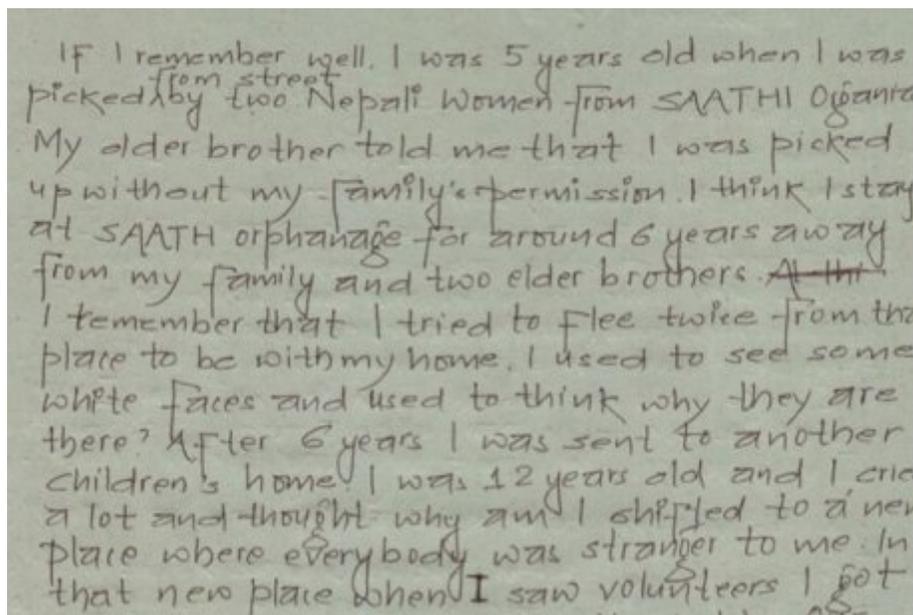


PHOTO This was part of the submission to Forget Me Now.

SUPPLIED: FORGET ME NOT

Senator Reynolds was moved to campaign against orphanage tourism after a visit to Cambodia.

"I was utterly appalled that there were 500-plus of these institutions and the consistent message was 'stop Australians coming and supporting them'," she said.

"Some children are stolen, some are recruited — the facilities pay recruiters to go out to poor communities and convince parents that their children will be better off in these institutions."



PHOTO WA Senator Linda Reynolds has warned Australian groups that many "orphanage" tours exploit children.

SUPPLIED

She warned that despite promises that the parents would be able to stay in touch with their children, many lose contact because the children are given new identities, making them 'paper orphans'.

"So sometimes parents will spend a lifetime trying to find these children," she said.

Selfies with orphans

Griffith University law school's Kate van Doore's submission to the parliamentary inquiry found more than half of all Australian universities advertise orphanage placements as part of their international volunteering opportunities.

Ms van Doore found 15 per cent of high schools in Victoria and the ACT have school trips to overseas orphanages or fundraise for them.

Senator Reynolds urges those groups to examine their motivations.

"Really be honest about your reasons for doing this," she said.

"Do you need to post 5,000 selfies with young children or of yourself doing good?"

"If you are doing it and it negatively impacts on somebody else — it is very paternalistic it is very naive and it can be very destructive."

Tasmanian Labor senator Lisa Singh is also a member of the parliamentary inquiry investigating modern slavery.

Senator Singh said she is really concerned about young people being trafficked into orphanages for profit.

"This is a form of slavery that most people would not be aware of," Senator Singh said.

She said she hoped the parliamentary inquiry would shine a light on the trade in children that was otherwise hidden.

Is it a scam?

The Attorney-General's department has agreed to consider the implications of making it a criminal offence for someone to facilitate a trip to an overseas orphanage that is exploiting children.

And the Federal Government's national roundtable on human trafficking and slavery will consider so-called sham orphanages at its next meeting which is due at the end of the year.

Senator Reynolds said there would be significant implications if the link between orphanages and trafficking is recognised and then legislated in Australia, as it would open the door to potential prosecutions of businesses whose activities or supply chains directly or indirectly cause children to be trafficked, such as travel companies that arrange the travel.

The Senator added it could flow through to other nations including the United Kingdom "which we hope would will dramatically impact the orphanage business".

She said making it illegal to facilitate the tours would help, but public awareness in Australia was also essential because reducing the demand would reduce the incentive to set up the sham orphanages.

Senator Reynolds said the people who want to help children overseas are often naive about the consequences.

"It is a bit like any scam. People who are scammed very rarely want to admit it to themselves or to others that they have been subject to this scam," she said.

"I have talked to a lot of people and they say 'oh I am sure my charity is fine'."

But she said when pressed they slowly conceded that they can't be sure.

White saviours

Senator Reynolds has urged the Foreign Affairs department to prominently display warnings about so-called voluntourism on its website alongside the general information for travellers.



PHOTO The highlighted countries have seen a rise in institutionalised children.

SUPPLIED: CAMBODIAN CHILDREN'S TRUST

"If you want to volunteer, do it responsibly. Really think through 'do you want to support the institutionalisation of children which we know is really bad for any kids?', " she said.

"Know the impacts, understand the community, better understand what they need, and work with the community. Don't just be some white saviour plonking yourself into a community that you know nothing about thinking you are doing good but actually making things worse."

Another charity, Save the Children, called on the Government to fund an awareness campaign about volunteering in orphanages increasing demand for children to be trafficked.

It calls on State and Territory Governments to consider ways to make sure school students don't unwittingly visit or volunteer at such institutions overseas and instead should be encouraged to support programs to strengthen families.

Its submission to the parliamentary inquiry described the ongoing institutional care of children as a breach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Senator Reynolds said even if legal action is successful in stemming the growth of sham orphanages or closing some down, there would be a huge problem to reunite the children with their families.

"Some of them will remember who they are, where they have come from, but then if you do return them home, what support do you provide the family to help them? So it is not easy," she said.

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