

NFP Calls For Action On Growing 'Orphanage Tourism' Industry

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Well-intentioned Australian tourists, including many students, are inadvertently contributing to the growth of the orphanage 'industry' and subsequent exploitation of children in developing countries, according to Save the Children's submission to an inquiry into modern slavery.

Save the Children – which is part of the cross sector network [Re-Think Orphanages](#) – called on the Australian government to help put an end to a growing trend of 'orphanage tourism', at a public inquiry into establishing a modern slavery act in Australia in Melbourne on Wednesday.

The charity said in its [submission](#) that more than eight million children lived in institutions globally, but over 80 per cent of them had parents or other family.

Save the Children's child protection advocate Karen Flanagan AM told Pro Bono News that "among other factors, Australians participating in 'voluntourism' experiences in countries like Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam are inadvertently supporting a boom in orphanages".

"Children who grow up in institutions often experience a range of damaging, and sometimes lifelong, effects such as attachment disorders, developmental delays, and difficulty forming relationships in adulthood," Flanagan said.

She said despite a strong body of evidence supporting the policy of 'deinstitutionalisation' in Australia, it's become apparent that the travel, private, philanthropic and education sectors are now driving a "dangerous trend towards institutionalisation in developing countries".

"It's a simple matter of supply and demand. As long as there are people who support these institutions financially through donations, or by visiting them as tourists, unscrupulous individuals will take advantage of the situation and exploit and traffic vulnerable children for financial gain," Flanagan said.

"The problem with this whole area is the lack of reliable data because it is a growing trend and it's basically becoming more popular to do it .

"We know that wherever there are tourists to countries like Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Thailand, and other places there has been a 500 to 600 percent increase in orphanages and children in orphanages, which means that the drivers are the people who are demanding the orphanage experience.

"The more Australians who travel to these places to see or visit orphanages, the more 'orphans' will be obtained."

"Australians are unwittingly contributing to the demand so that unscrupulous operators set up orphanages through offering these tourism experiences. So we are working with many industries including the tourism industry and education sector to raise awareness on this issue.

"Alarming, it also leaves children at increased risk of sexual and physical abuse. There seems little doubt that aspects of voluntourism, combined with the orphanage industry, enable a form of modern slavery.

"We are trying to track how Australian money contributes to this issue and use that to educate people and to put their money into other ways of helping children and families. When people find out that their money is actually contributing to children being taken away from their families usually they want to stop that."

Flanagan said one of the things that Save the Children was advocating to the modern slavery inquiry was that if there was legislation which acknowledged that orphanage tourism was a form of modern slavery, the Australian based and registered entities would have to comply with the regulatory standards.

“That would need to be monitored so that supply chains and flows of people, money and resources are not unwittingly contributing to the unnecessary separation [of children] from their families,” she said.

“In other words people need to understand that these children do have families and even if these families are poor it is still not a reason to take them away to an institution to feed them and educate them.

“The work that Save the Children does is to strengthen families to ensure that they can earn a decent living and to ensure that children are protected in a family environment. And if they can't be with their own family then they would be in family based care.”

Save the Children said it had been actively engaged in Cambodia and Thailand where they have acknowledged there is a problem.

“We are working with them to tighten up on their legislative requirements and their compliance and registration. For example a few weeks ago Cambodia announced that very shortly they will have no children under three in orphanages or institutions,” Flanagan said.

“They have acknowledged that this is a problem and the proliferation of orphanages they obviously can't sustain and they know that it is not good for children.”

Save the Children said the ongoing institutional care of children was a breach of a child's right (under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) to be able to live with their parents unless it was unsafe or not in their best interests to do so (Article 9) and to grow up in a family environment (Article 20).

She said Save the Children Australia operated child protection programs in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, and did not fund or support any form of institutional care of children.

In February 2017 Parliament's [Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade](#) began an inquiry into whether Australia should adopt national legislation to combat modern slavery, comparable to the United Kingdom's Modern Slavery Act 2015.

Foreign Affairs and Aid sub-committee chair, MP Chris Crewther said: “The appalling practice of modern slavery is a scourge that regrettably continues to affect millions of people around the world, including in Australia.”

According to the 2016 Global Slavery Index, an estimated 45.8 million people around the world were in some form of modern slavery, which described a range of exploitative practices including human trafficking, forced labour, wage exploitation, forced marriage and debt bondage.

“The inquiry seeks to build on this work to explore what further changes could be made to strengthen Australia's efforts to combat modern slavery. This is particularly timely in light of the UK's recent introduction of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 and allows the opportunity for the committee to assess whether similar changes could be applied here in Australia.”

The inquiry received 98 submissions.



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Lina Caneva has been a journalist for more than 35 years, and Editor of Pro Bono Australia News since it was founded in 2000.