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The Role of Clientelism in Facilitating Orphanage Trafficking

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ABSTRACT

Orphanage trafficking involves the recruitment and/or transfer of a child into a residential care facility for a purpose of exploitation, including labor, sexual exploitation and servitude, or child institutionalization for profit. Orphanage trafficking has been recognized as a form of child trafficking under international law and has been increasingly reported in a range of countries, including Cambodia and Myanmar. Despite the growing academic focus on this subject, the specifics of how children are targeted, recruited, and transferred into these unregulated orphanages for exploitation remain largely unclear, as do the precise social mechanisms employed. Drawing on qualitative research, this article delves into the significant role that patron-client relationships play in the recruitment, transfer, exploitation, and concealment of child exploitation within unregulated residential care facilities established for exploitative or profit motives in Cambodia and Myanmar. It reveals how orphanage directors exploit clientelism to circumvent regulations, manipulate and undermine bureaucratic systems meant to protect vulnerable groups, and legitimize illegal activities through a process of formalization. The article explores the implications of the use of clientelism in orphanage trafficking for prevention efforts, child protection governance reforms, and rehabilitation of children whose perception of exploitation and victimization has been shaped by their socialization to clientelism norms.

Introduction

Orphanage trafficking is a variant of child trafficking, defined as the recruitment and/or the transfer of a child into a residential care facility (RCF) for the purpose of exploitation and/or profit (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023; K. E. van Doore, 2016). It involves the constituent elements of acts and purpose, that meet the definition of child trafficking under the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000). As with all forms of child trafficking, only the act and purpose elements are required to establish orphanage trafficking. The element of means is not required (UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, 2000, art. 3). Types of exploitation associated with orphanage trafficking include labor exploitation, sexual exploitation, and servitude (Lyneham & Facchini, 2019; K. E. van Doore, 2016). In cases where the objective is financial profit, children are institutionalized without reference to their best interests as a means of generating revenue through activities such as orphanage tourism, which encompasses visits and volunteering activities in orphanages as a part of a touristic experience, child sponsorship schemes and foreign donations (Bales et al., 2018; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015; Mulheir & Gyllensten, 2017; K. van Doore & Nhep, 2019; K. E. van Doore & Nhep, 2021). Orphanage trafficking contravenes articles 32, 35 and 36 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which establish the right of the child to protection from

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trafficking and all forms exploitation (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child art, 1989; K. E. van Doore, 2022).

Orphanage trafficking frequently involves the practice of paper orphaning, wherein a child's orphan status is falsified through fraudulently issued documentation (birth certificates, abandonment certificates, parental death certificates) or fabricated narratives, designed to fulfill the criteria for admission into residential care, or to attract funds from donors specifically interested in sponsoring orphaned children (K. E. van Doore, 2022). Other forms of child trafficking that intersect with orphanages but fall outside the definition of orphanage trafficking provided, and are not considered in this study, include child trafficking for illicit adoption (Smolin, 2006) and the trafficking of children from institutions into other forms of exploitation (Lumos, 2021).

Orphanage trafficking has been documented in unregulated RCFs in Cambodia and Myanmar (Hanel, 2017; Lumos, 2021; United States Department of State, 2019). Recruiters are known to specifically target children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families in rural areas, enticing them with promises of education, opportunities, and ongoing support for their families in exchange for the child's long-term institutionalization (Nhep, 2021; Nhep et al., 2024). Children are often transported vast distances to be placed in unregulated RCFs that act as end sites for their exploitation (Nhep, 2021; Nhep et al., 2024; K. E. van Doore, 2022).

Existing literature into orphanage trafficking has not explicated exactly *how* targeting, recruitment, and the transfer of children into often distant unregulated RCFs for exploitation works, nor the exact social mechanisms employed. However, several recent studies have identified links between clientelism and the operations of unregulated RCFs, where orphanage trafficking typically occurs (Nhep, 2024), and to orphanage tourism, one of its primary drivers (Miller & Beazley, 2022; Tomazos & Murdy, 2023).

Clientelism refers to enduring, dyadic, asymmetrical relationships established between patrons and clients to facilitate mutually beneficial exchanges (Hilgers, 2011). In Cambodia and Myanmar, patron-client relationships were identified between RCF directors, recruiters, children, families, local authorities, and political figures (Nhep, 2024). Clientelism is generally incompatible with child rights norms (Nhep, 2024d). The obligation to prioritize the interests of the patron over the best interests of children often supersede gatekeeping procedures governing children's removal from families and admission into alternative care, resulting in unnecessary separation, institutionalization, and violations of children's rights to family life and preservation of identity and family ties (Nhep, 2024d). While clientelism has been linked to certain elements of orphanage trafficking and its operating environment, the exact role of clientelism in facilitating orphanage trafficking has yet to be fully examined and confirmed.

Expanding on previous qualitative research focused on clientelism in RCFs, this article investigates the ways in which patron-client relationships are leveraged to facilitate the trafficking and exploitation of children in unregulated RCFs in Cambodia and Myanmar. It explores some of the salient implications for prevention and post-trafficking rehabilitation work with children whose experience of orphanage trafficking was shaped by patron-client relationships.

Orphanage Trafficking Under Cambodian Law

Cambodia's dedicated legislation addressing human trafficking and sexual exploitation is the Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation 2008 (RGC). Of the seven child trafficking offenses contained in the law, Article 10 Unlawful Removal with Purpose, Article 17 Transportation with Purpose, and Article 19 Receipt of a Person with Purpose (Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking 2008 [RGC], s.2) are relevant to orphanage trafficking. Purposes of child trafficking covered under the law include sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, servitude, slavery-like practices, organ removal, adoption, or profit (Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation 2008 [RCG], s.2).

All three offenses relevant to orphanage trafficking are predicated on the act of unlawful removal of a child, which is defined in Article 8 as the removal of a child from parental powers or legal guardianship by persons without legal authority or legal justifications (Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking 2008 [RGC], s.2). The gatekeeping mechanisms for the placement of a child into alternative care provide the legal framework for the removal of a child from their family, the termination, suspension, or transfer of custody, and admission into residential care (Sub Decree 119 2015; Prakas 2280 2011; Sub Decree 34 2017). Violations of gatekeeping, such as the recruitment or transfer of a child into an orphanage by non-mandated child protection authorities (e.g., orphanage directors and recruiters), transferring a child into a residential care facility without justified cause, or placing a child in an unregistered orphanage, all can constitute unlawful removal (Sub Decree 119 2015. art. 16). Parental consent does not absolve the act of unlawful removal, as parents are technically prohibited from relinquishing their children except under special circumstances stipulated by law and through court decisions (Criminal Code 2009 [RGC]. art. 321; Civil Code 2007 [RGC]. art. 1050; Child Protection Act, 2023 [RGC] s.1).

Based on the construction of Cambodia's child trafficking offenses, instances of orphanage trafficking involving the removal and admission of a child into a residential care facility in violation of gatekeeping mechanisms (regarded as unlawful removal) for the purpose of exploitation or profiting from the child's institutionalization, would be deemed child trafficking under Cambodian law. All the acts that constitute orphanage trafficking, including the recruitment, transportation, and reception of a child into a residential care facility for exploitative purposes, are criminalized under the various child trafficking offenses (Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation 2008 [RCG], s.2).

Orphanage Trafficking under Myanmar Law

The Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons Law 2022 (MMR) is Myanmar's specialist legislation combating human trafficking. Within this legislation, offenses related to child trafficking criminalize the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, and receipt of a child for exploitative purposes (Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons Law 2022 [MMR], s.3B). The law expressly covers various forms of exploitation associated with orphanage trafficking, such as forced labor and sexual exploitation (Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons Law 2022 [MMR] s.3B). Furthermore, the legislation's definition of exploitation includes a non-exhaustive clause, capturing the pursuit of profit as a form of exploitation. This clause stipulates that:

> . . . in addition to the aforementioned acts, any receipt or agreement for the receipt of money, property, or other benefits, directly or indirectly linked to such acts, falls within the purview of the law. (Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Persons Law 2022 [MMR], s.3)

Based on Myanmar's child trafficking statutes, orphanage trafficking, comprising the recruitment, transfer, or receipt of a child into a residential care facility for a purpose of exploitation, falls within the provisions for child trafficking and could be prosecuted under Myanmar law. In contrast to Cambodian law, Myanmar's legal provisions do not hinge on proving the unlawful removal of the child from their family for placement in the facility. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that orphanage trafficking cases typically involve violations of gatekeeping mechanisms. Establishing breaches or manipulations of gatekeeping processes becomes crucial in distinguishing between legitimate child protection interventions and illicit activities such as recruitment, transfer, harboring, and receipt of a child for exploitation in the residential care facility (K. E. van Doore, 2022).

Myanmar's gatekeeping mechanisms, encompassing legal powers, justifications, and processes for removing a child from their family and admitting them into residential care, are outlined in *The Child Rights Law 2019* (MMR). Admitting a child into residential care without the involvement of social welfare authorities and placement in non-authorized residential care facilities are violations of

gatekeeping mechanisms. Operating a residential care facility for children without proper authorization constitutes an offense under the *Child Rights Law 2019* (MMR), attracting penalties of fines and imprisonment.

Methods

This qualitative, deductive research (Bingham & Wilkovsky, 2023) aimed to investigate the role of clientelism in facilitating the trafficking and exploitation of children in residential care settings in Cambodia and Myanmar. This research is part of a wider study that explored the presence and utility of clientelism in Cambodian and Myanmar RCFs using the *Conceptual Model for Identifying Clientelism in New Sites* (Nhep, 2024b). Data on patron-client relationships in RCFs were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee (GU 2022/559).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 24 qualified social workers; 14 from Cambodia and 10 from Myanmar who were senior in present or past key roles that supported the transition or closure of multiple RCFs and the reintegration of children. These roles provided participants with an in-depth understanding of the operations of RCFs, the nature of relationships between different stakeholders in the residential care facility, and children's experiences in care. Executive Directors of registered child protection organizations in Cambodia and Myanmar involved in the transition or closure of RCFs were approached with written requests to interview senior social workers. These organizations were identified through the researcher's professional networks. Executive Directors who supported their organization's involvement in the research provided the names and contact details of senior social workers who agreed to receive information about the study. Twenty-six social workers were subsequently contacted, one declined, and another did not respond. Demographic data is not reported due to the small pool of potential participants, and need to protect identities in the political environment, for fear of repercussions.

Participants who had observed instances of clientelism in RCFs were questioned about their experiences with cases involving the unlawful removal and exploitation of children in residential care. Those with relevant experiences were further probed regarding the influence of clientelist relationships on child trafficking and exploitation in these facilities. All participants were from registered child protection organizations with rigorous child safeguarding and child protection incident reporting mechanisms in place. Social workers had previously used those reporting mechanisms to report and respond to all child protection incidents discussed during interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author in Khmer or English, in a location chosen by participants. A Myanmar interpreter was present during all interviews with participants from Myanmar with interpretation provided as needed. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, translated into English as required, and de-identified. Interviews averaged 1.5 hours in duration.

Qualitative, deductive thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data (Bingham & Wilkovsky, 2023; Braun & Clark, 2006). The data were organized into categories based on elements of child trafficking, which established the priori framework. These categories were then assessed in relation to the research objectives (Bingham & Wilkovsky, 2023). To prevent confirmation bias and enhance the study's reliability, a critically reflective and open approach was maintained, and alternative explanations were explored (Nickerson, 1998). Detailed notes were recorded to capture the thought process during analysis and to avoid forming premature conclusions. The results were checked to ensure that each theme was supported by the data and originated from participant responses, with relevant quotes included for validation (Daniel, 2018). This article presents previously undisclosed themes related to the role of clientelism in facilitating orphanage trafficking and exploitation.

Findings

Participants with experience working in unregulated RCFs where clientelism was prevalent depicted clientelism as a pervasive social norm that significantly contributes to the facilitation of orphanage trafficking and exploitation. Clientelism was utilized in the acts of recruitment and transfer of children into institutions and facilitated the various purposes of orphanage trafficking, including sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, servitude, and child institutionalization for profit.

It was emphasized by participants that the presence of clientelism in RCFs does not necessarily imply malicious intent or indicate that trafficking and exploitation are manifest. However, participants underscored that clientelism heightens the overall risk and vulnerability of children to orphanage trafficking and exploitation and is often deliberately manipulated by directors of unregulated RCFs for exploitative purposes.

The role of clientelism in facilitating orphanage trafficking and exploitation was described as complex, with five interconnected themes identified through the analysis. These themes are the role of clientelism in fostering conditions in the RCF conducive to orphanage trafficking, the use of clientelism in recruitment, the role of clientelism in grooming, the manipulation of clientelist norms to facilitate exploitation, and the role of clientelism in masking and concealing exploitation.

The Role of Clientelism in Fostering Conditions in the RCF Conducive to Trafficking

Unregulated RCFs that employed clientelism in their operations were characterized as high-risk closed environments prone to violence, abuse, and exploitation. Two distinct categories of risks associated with clientelist relationships were identified. The first category pertained to external patron-client relationships between directors and mandated authorities or high-level political figures, while the second category of risks stemmed from internal patron-client relationships between directors and staff.

RCF directors routinely exploited patron-client relationships with mandated authorities or political figures, allowing them to sidestep regulatory measures and evade effective monitoring. Consequently, these RCFs operated in contravention of both legal mandates and established policies, falling below the minimum standards and lacking proper oversight. Reports indicated that child safeguarding frameworks in these facilities were either weak or absent. This deficiency was attributed to the ideological conflict between child rights and clientelist norms, further facilitated by RCF directors leveraging clientelist relationships to manipulate the inspectorate system. The outcome was a notable absence of organizational structure, preventative child protection mechanisms, accountability, and viable reporting channels. Participant C4 explained, "RCFs that operate based on clientelism and not according to the standards and policies typically have very weak child protection frameworks. Guaranteed, this will increase the risks of abuse or exploitation occurring."

Consequently, children residing in these RCFs were left vulnerable, subject to the discretion and underlying motivations of directors. Participants recounted instances where RCFs were intentionally established to engage in exploitation or capitalize on the institutionalization of children. In certain cases, participants observed an evolution in directors' motivations leading to RCFs initially intended to support vulnerable children transforming into sites of exploitation over time. Participant C11 stated, "In these orphanages, children are subject to the will of the director. If the director is using the orphanage as a business, then the children's rights are going to be violated."

Clientelist relationships between directors and prominent political figures enabled RCFs to operate clandestinely and without fear of consequence. Political figures were often donors to the RCF who leveraged public acts of charity to garner political support. Mandated child protection authorities were perceived to be reluctant to diligently carry out their regulatory responsibilities over RCF with prominent political patrons, driven by concerns of potential reprisals and personal repercussions. As noted by participant C04,

> Mandated authorities are paralyzed and unable to make decisions to act, or intervene, even if it's warranted under the policies, because they're worried it will be wrong, impact someone, or will result in them being demoted, or overlooked for promotion because it offended someone with power.

These facilities were characterized as insular, tightly controlled, secretive, impermeable, and particularly susceptible to exploitation. Directors were seen as practically immune to accountability. Participants observed that intervention typically occurred only when exploitation reached egregious levels and became widely known to the public. M01 conveyed,

> These orphanages are closed spaces. No one can enter without permission. The only people they permit to enter are donors. They are open for donations only, but not for monitoring. There is no transparency in these places and no ability to protect children.

Clientelist relationships between directors and staff further contributed to the closed and secretive atmosphere within RCFs that enabled child exploitation. Directors seeking to exploit children were perceived as deliberately fostering patron-client relationships with staff to secure their cooperation and passivity. Characteristics inherent to clientelism, such as power imbalances, reliance on support provided by the director, and the expectation of loyalty, hindered staff from acting to protect children. Instead, examples were given where staff overlooked or downplayed exploitation, stifled children's disclosures, or resigned from their positions due to protracted exploitation, however without informing authorities. One participant, C03, detailed the following,

> The children told the police they reported the sexual abuse to the staff, but the Khmer staff of the orphanage refused to help them. They kept silent, because the perpetrator was the director of the orphanage, the person who sourced the funding and made all the decisions, so they weren't game. They thought if they report then it's going to impact staff employment and salaries.

The Use of Clientelism in the Act of Recruitment

Clientelism was employed in the act of recruitment to populate exploitative RCFs operating outside of the formal gatekeeping system. In most cases, these RCFs were unregistered and therefore unauthorized to receive referrals through legitimate child protection referral channels. Clientelist relationships were employed to facilitate the child's unlawful removal from their family and placement in the RCF. Participant C08 said,

> Understanding clientelism in orphanages helps us understand how child trafficking in orphanages works, because clientelism is the mechanism used for unlawful removal and admission for a purpose that has nothing to do with the child's best interests, but profit or other forms of exploitation.

Participants described how directors used their clientelist networks to target specific cohorts of children from lower-middle-class families, without experiences of adversity, who did not meet the criteria for lawful removal under child protection law. These children were perceived as well-behaved, more easily controlled, and compliant, and therefore deemed more suitable for RCFs established for exploitation and profit, rather than those focused on providing genuine care. As explained by C04:

> Directors whose motive is to profit from running an orphanage use clientelist relationships to recruit children from stable middle-class families as part of the strategy as they don't have challenging behaviours like children who've experienced trauma. It's easier for the directors to fulfill their goals with these children and maintain the false pretence of an orphanage that helps disadvantaged children.

In some cases, the child's recruitment and transfer was an act of reciprocal exchange under a preexisting patron-client relationship between the director or recruiter and the family. M10 reported, "If the clientelist relationship is between the director and the parents, the child is the thing being exchanged and the child is the one under the director's control and exposed to harm and risk." In other cases, the clientelist relationship was formed during recruitment through the

negotiation of support and opportunity for the child and family in exchange for the child's institutionalization. Instances were recounted where recruiters or directors offered enduring assistance, monetary incentives, or in-kind payments to families in exchange for admitting their child to the RCF. In some scenarios, participants observed that families placed greater emphasis on the support provided to the broader family than the well-being of the individual child in care. Conversely, in other situations, families were portrayed as either coerced or deceived into placing their children into care based on false promises of better education and opportunities. Participant C06 noted,

> In this picture, the children are objects being exchanged under the relationship between the parents and the director. It's more indicative of child trafficking and the sale or exchange of a child than it is a child protection intervention to fulfill the needs of the child... It's the adults who are making all the decisions based on the benefits they are seeking.

The Use of Clientelism to Groom Children and Families for Orphanage Trafficking

Clientelism played an instrumental role in the grooming of children and their parents to facilitate orphanage trafficking. Grooming was described in broad terms (i.e., not limited to sexual exploitation) and extended to preparing children for all purposes linked to orphanage trafficking. Several essential characteristics of clientelism were identified as conducive to priming children for exploitation, by undermining protective family relationships, and discouraging protective behaviors.

The inherent asymmetry in patron-client relationships relegated children to an inferior and subservient position, firmly under the control of directors. Woven into the fabric of norms of loyalty, reciprocity, and gratitude, all characteristic of clientelism, is an implicit expectation for children to display submissiveness, abstain from questioning, and maintain silence, which constrains children's agency. This conditioning compels children to align with the interests of their patron and comply with inappropriate demands, adhering to the norms of reciprocity. These expectations override children's protective instincts and hinder their capacity to exercise protective behaviors. As explained by participant C13,

> Children feel a sense of loyalty and obligation to the orphanage and director which prevents them from reporting. Sometimes when the children are being exploited for labor they think, well it's just a case of them asking me to do work that I can do, so that's not so bad. They don't realise it constitutes labor exploitation ... It's difficult for children to separate out loyalties and other issues to realize they've been violated.

Clientelist relationships established between directors of RCFs and the families of children in care fundamentally reshaped the parent-child dynamic, depriving children of the protective benefits that strong parent-child relationships typically provide. The asymmetry inherent in clientelist relationships, coupled with the expectation for clients to yield to their patrons, disempowered parents, resulting in the surrender of parental responsibility and authority. This dynamic persisted even when children were informally and unlawfully admitted without any actual legal impact on guardianship. Parents, obligated to display loyalty and gratitude to the directors, found themselves constrained in advocating for their children once placed in care. This constraint was amplified in cases where parents received ongoing support from directors, fostering dependency and discouraging them from raising concerns or intervening in the face of inappropriate conduct or maltreatment. C14 elaborated as follows:

> The underlying obligations of clientelism and the impact it has on the concept of parental responsibility and power over the child essentially means that directors amass all the power over the child's life under this banner of patronage and end up with full control. At that point, the child is at high risk of rights violations, including sexual abuse, exploitation, emotional and physical abuse, and trafficking.

The Manipulation of Clientelist Obligations to Facilitate Child Exploitation

Participants gave examples of various forms of exploitation connected to orphanage trafficking in Cambodia and Myanmar, including sexual exploitation, labor exploitation, servitude, and child institutionalization for profit. Participants described how clientelist norms were relied on and manipulated to facilitate all forms of exploitation.

Sexual Exploitation

Numerous instances were cited in which clientelism was manipulated to facilitate sexual exploitation of children in RCFs. In every case that involved sexual exploitation, directors were identified as perpetrators engaged in either sexual offenses or the procurement of children for child sexual exploitation. Clientelist relationships were employed by directors to target and groom children and their families, at times serving as a precursor to the establishment of RCFs expressly set up to facilitate sexual exploitation. The provision of money, goods, and services to children and families enabled perpetrators to establish themselves as patrons, fostering trust, gaining access to children, and creating obligations among children and their families to demonstrate gratitude and loyalty in exchange. These dynamics were strategically utilized to mask and downplay instances of sexual exploitation. Participant C04 reported,

> These relationships are cultivated. In one case, the director gave money to the families. He bought motorbikes for the older children who were his victims. He gave goods to the families of the victims, which made the families and the children happy.

Becoming a director of an RCF provided perpetrators with a plausible justification to isolate children from their families by admitting them into the RCF. Unregulated RCFs operating without oversight provided an ideal setting for committing and concealing sexual exploitation. The convergence of clientelism in RCFs was perceived as particularly troubling, as it allowed perpetrators to desensitize children by masking sexual grooming behaviors as acts of "care." Illustrative examples were provided where directors personally undertook activities such as bathing, dressing, and applying lotions to children's bodies, all under the pretext of providing care. For instance, C03 conveyed the following:

> The perpetrator set up an English program, bought food and clothing for children in the community and acted as their patron. He gathered children to come and live with him. He was bathing and undressing the children and eventually sexually abused them.

Participants detailed how perpetrators skillfully manipulated the dynamics of patron-client relationships to condition children for long-term sexual exploitation following their admission. The power imbalance inherent in clientelism was exploited to disempower and subordinate children to the director, thereby facilitating coercive control. Utilizing clientelist norms of reciprocity, perpetrators coerced favors from children, such as massages, to prime them for sexual exploitation. The dependency of children on directors for essential support, including food, shelter, and education, combined with the fear of losing future assistance and opportunities, increased their vulnerability to exploitation. M03 reported,

> Sexual abuse is common in these orphanages where there is clientelism. The children are totally reliant on the directors. They think they owe the directors a debt of gratitude for the support they've received. They think they must repay those debts by being loyal. They feel like they have no power to take action or report the exploitation.

Labor Exploitation and Servitude

Labor exploitation and servitude were documented in Cambodia and Myanmar, with a more pervasive presence observed in unregulated RCFs in Myanmar. Labor exploitation often coincided with other forms of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation and institutionalization for profit motives. Participants utilized definitions of child labor and forced labor as stipulated in domestic child rights

and labor laws to ascertain which activities constituted labor exploitation. Instances of labor exploitation encompassed construction work, manual labor on farms belonging to the directors, employment in businesses owned by directors (such as tea shops), and the provision of domestic services within the homes of directors and their extended families. Clientelism played a pivotal role in subjugating the children, creating an atmosphere of coercive control within the RCF, securing children's acquiescence through fear or a sense of obligation to the director, and disguising exploitation as reciprocity. As noted by M10,

> Because the patron-client relationship is not equal, and not based on child rights, children are at risk. The directors have a lot of power and can be controlling. Children can be threatened. Children in these environments are at high risk of experiencing oppression and coercion. The directors sometimes exploit the children for labor and they expect the patron-client relationship to protect them from disclosure or being reported.

Participants witnessed varying degrees of labor exploitation within unregulated RCFs. In certain RCFs, children were observed to receive some measure of support and care but were concurrently expected to contribute free labor. Conversely, in more explicit and severe cases, children were deprived of educational opportunities, and subjected to hazardous child labor resulting in serious injuries. In certain instances, the conditions met the criteria for classification as servitude, wherein the movement and liberty of the children were severely restricted. M06 explained, "Even though the child has the right to go to school, the orphanage doesn't send them to school, and they stay at the orphanage and work." One participant recounted how patron-client relationships with families were utilized to circumvent reintegration efforts, to retain children aged 12 and older in the RCF, given the perceived value of older children as a source of forced labor. M01 conveyed the following:

> When children reach the age of 12 or 13, they can work a lot. They become very useful in cleaning, gardening, and working on farms owned by the director. They become a human resource that the directors don't want to lose. They become a source of labor.

The detrimental effects of labor exploitation on children's mental health were also highlighted, with one social worker recounting a case in which a child, enduring prolonged and severe labor exploitation in an RCF, tragically took their own life. In this case, the patron-client relationship between the director and the family played a decisive role in the family's decision not to report or pursue justice.

Profit

Profiting from children's institutionalization was perceived to be the most pervasive form of exploitation associated with orphanage trafficking in Cambodia and Myanmar. The most common types of profit-generating activities observed included orphanage tourism, including orphanage tours, performances by children, and sending children to major tourist sites to engage with tourists and solicit donations; child sponsorship schemes; and appeals made to foreign donors. Clientelism was described as instrumental to the process of harboring children in RCFs for profit and was specifically linked to the misrepresentation of children as orphaned or abandoned (paper orphaning) for this purpose.

Directors and recruiters established patron-client relationships with local authorities, offering payments and other incentives in exchange for fraudulent birth certificates or abandonment certificates for infants or very young children who had been bought or unlawfully removed from their parents and transferred into the RCF. In some instances, recruiters utilized fraudulent birth certificates to gain control over the children, deceptively establishing a parental relationship with them. In other cases, these certificates were employed to fabricate the child's identity, sever ties with their family to impede family tracing, and to fraudulently fulfil bureaucratic prerequisites, ensuring that children appeared eligible for institutionalization. C05 provided the following example,

> We had a case where clientelism was involved in the operation of the orphanage, and as part of all of that, they had connections with authorities who were involved in their recruiting and admission that was unlawful. They would thumb print and sign blank documents and give them to the orphanage director to admit any children they wanted to. In that orphanage we had one case where a child was given back to a recruiter who posed as their parent on fraudulent identity documents.

Patron-client relationships with families were further manipulated to restrict contact between children in RCFs and their families, reinforcing the false premise of orphanhood on which the orphanage business model relied. Some directors provided families with regular payments or support in exchange for the long-term institutionalization of their children. Directors were also able to use the control clientelism afforded them over parents to sabotage reintegration efforts and retain children in the RCF. This was exemplified in a comment by C03,

> For some directors, the more children they have in care the more they benefit financially, and therefore they will be resistant to reintegration. In these cases, they may use their status and influence over the parents to try to prevent reintegration. At that point, they are acting to protect their program and the personal benefits they derive from their program.

Additionally, patron-client relationships were utilized to secure children's cooperation in their portrayal as orphans for the benefit of donors, voluntourists, and visitors, perpetuating the false narratives of orphanhood presented in donor communications. M10 explained, "To keep this charade going, the children might be required to lie. False stories are shared to raise more money and the children are often required to participate in sharing these stories."

The Role of Clientelism in Masking and Concealing Exploitation

Directors involved in orphanage trafficking were perceived as intentionally manipulating clientelist norms to mask exploitation. This facilitated prolonged exploitation, which in some cases, extended to periods of up to 10 years. Several participants emphasized children often lack awareness or certainty regarding their status as victims of exploitation. Children may interpret behaviors that legally constitute labor exploitation, servitude, grooming, and commodification, as acts of reciprocity, erroneously believing that these actions can be legitimately demanded of them by directors in exchange for their care and education. M03 reported, "The child will think that they are giving back to the director, even when they've been exploited. So clientelism even distorts how the children perceive exploitation when it happens in an orphanage under this relationship."

Several participants described how the conflation of clientelist obligations with exploitation complicated reintegration and rehabilitation efforts. Examples were given where children, confused about whether they had been exploited, were hesitant to provide information to social workers, actively blocked reintegration or fluctuated between accepting and rejecting professional support. This confusion made it difficult for social workers to provide effective assistance and for the child to navigate their path toward recovery. As explained by C07,

> Because the director used clientelism, the children were unsure about their victimization. The older children wouldn't cooperate with social workers. They staged a protest to have the former directors who abused them reinstated. They wouldn't provide information for reintegration, even threatened to cut us with razors and blades.

Clientelist relationships were intentionally manipulated in the concealment of trafficking and exploitation in RCFs. Participants highlighted instances where directors exploited their elevated status and day-to-day control over the lives of the children, leveraging families' dependence on continuous support to coerce victims into maintaining silence. The concepts of loyalty, coupled with the perceived obligation of parents, children, and staff to express gratitude and submission to patron-directors, acted as deterrents to disclosure and hindered reporting. As indicated by M03,

> In their mind, they think that they owe a debt of gratitude to the director as their benefactor, and they have to pay that debt back somehow, through loyalty. I know of a case where sexual abuse happened in the orphanage, and everyone knew about it. But because the director had authority and power, no one felt they could report it. They all felt they had to be loyal.

Participants noted a convergence between clientelism and nepotism in exploitative RCFs, highlighting the tendency for directors to employ family members in caregiving and other staff positions to intensify the concealment of exploitation. C04 described,

> In clientelist orphanages, it's common for family members to be staff. If the wife is the director and the husband is a caregiver and the husband abuses a child, it's very unlikely it would be disclosed or reported . . . It's all going to fall under the conditions of clientelism, so there is secrecy.

Clientelist notions of unequal power and status and reciprocal exchange were manipulated by directors involved in the exploitation of children in RCFs to interfere with inspections, remedial action, and criminal justice proceedings and to secure impunity. Participants' observations revealed that families involved in patron-client relationships with directors were more likely to opt for out-of-court settlements rather than reporting incidents of child exploitation to mandated authorities or law enforcement. These settlements constituted a form of reciprocal exchange firmly entrenched within clientelist norms, where families received financial compensation in return for maintaining silence and loyalty in the face of formal investigations against the director. C01 explained as follows,

> If the parents have sent their children to the orphanage, and they've signed an agreement with the orphanage, that includes benefits, for sure, they're not going to rock the boat. They're not going to report. They're more likely to help keep the issue secret and they might negotiate in secret for some kind of settlement or arrangement with the offenders.

Instances were cited where both children and their families actively defended directors accused of exploitation, aiming to avoid arrests or prosecutions. Additionally, directors wielded their influence to pressure and coerce children and their families, compelling them to withdraw legal complaints or retract testimonies previously provided to law enforcement or investigative judges. Participants noted that, in some cases, a deep sense of obligation to the director was enough to prompt compliance, while in other instances, it was believed that payments were offered in exchange for retractions of statements. C03 illustrated,

> The children in the orphanage were armed with knives and batons and tried to stop the police from arresting the director. These were older children in the orphanage who had been subject to the very abuse he was being arrested for. They confronted the police and said no you can't arrest him. He's like my father and I owe him gratitude.

Finally, clientelism played a significant role in shaping the approach of authorities, including law enforcement, to addressing instances of exploitation or abuse within RCFs. Some patron-directors established clientelist ties with mandated authorities, strategically undermining the effectiveness of inspections by transforming them into tools for concealing exploitation rather than uncovering it. Apprehensions about the potential repercussions of investigations into exploitation in RCFs on influential patrons at higher echelons hindered proactive policing efforts and undermined the efficient execution of protocols aimed at safeguarding children and ensuring access to justice. C03 was adamant, explaining:

> Clientelism absolutely has an impact on the implementation of mandatory closure procedures for non-compliant RCFs and those where abuse is uncovered. If the director has a high-level patron, and knows powerful people, intentionally or otherwise this influences the implementation of procedures, including inspections, interventions, and investigations in cases of abuse. At every stage, authorities responsible for implementing those procedures need to think about who might be behind the perpetrator. Do they have a patron or not? This is something that causes hesitancy.

Discussion

Clientelism serves as a social mechanism routinely employed by directors of unregulated RCFs to facilitate the acts and purposes associated with orphanage trafficking. While patron-client relationships are not inherently or always exploitative, the fundamental characteristics of clientelism can be readily manipulated to achieve exploitative ends.

Clientelism is utilized in the perpetration of orphanage trafficking and exploitation in five distinct yet interrelated ways. First, patron-client relationships among directors, mandated authorities, and high-level political figures are strategically leveraged to establish RCFs that lack

oversight and accountability. This, in turn, creates closed and secretive conditions conducive to the perpetration and concealment of unlawful removal, recruitment, transfer, and exploitation of children in care. Second, directors utilize patron-client networks and relationships to target, recruit, and harbor children in RCFs long-term. Third, directors rely upon the socialization of children and families to clientelist norms to groom children and their parents, and weaken parent-child bonds, in preparation for exploitation post admission into the RCF. Fourth, directors manipulate the exchange relationship inherent to clientelism, using it as a means to perpetrate exploitation. By blurring the boundaries between exploitative actions and normative expectations of reciprocity, loyalty, and submission, directors can mask exploitative conduct and secure children's compliance. Last, directors capitalize on children's and families' dependence and instincts as clients to discharge their debts of gratitude, to suppress disclosures, reports, and conceal instances of exploitation.

While this study is the first to identify and explore connections between clientelism and orphanage trafficking, it is noteworthy that links between clientelism and other forms of human trafficking have been previously made. For instance, in Israel, pervasive political clientelism was identified as a condition facilitating the transformation of legal labor migration schemes into mechanisms for labor trafficking (Kemp & Raijman, 2014). In Laos, patron-client relationships were recognized as social networks that aid in the non-consensual recruitment of victims for transnational sex trafficking (Molland, 2012). Moreover, in Ecuador, existing clientelist relationships embedded within bureaucratic tribunals were utilized in the trafficking of children for illicit adoption purposes (Leifsen, 2008).

Several of these examples share a commonality with orphanage trafficking, namely the utilization of clientelist networks to infiltrate and manipulate formal bureaucratic systems for exploitative purposes. By manipulating formal systems, traffickers adeptly transform irregular and illicit recruitment practices into ostensibly acceptable forms, a phenomenon described by Leifsen (2008, p. 214) as " . . . the production of legal formality." Leifsen emphasizes that the formalization of illicit acts of human trafficking relies on clientelist or semi-clientelist exchanges between co-opted bureaucrats within the system and external parties complicit in trafficking acts (Leifsen, 2008). In the context of labor trafficking in Israel, traffickers utilized clientelism to infiltrate the labor hire system, gaining access to visas and work permits and thereby "formalizing" fraudulent and deceptive recruitment practices (Kemp & Raijman, 2014). In the case of child trafficking in Ecuador, clientelist networks involving lawyers, public servants in the central adoption authority, and external actors profiting from illicit adoption were employed to fraudulently meet eligibility criteria for intercountry adoption (Leifsen, 2008). In instances of orphanage trafficking, particularly in Cambodia, clientelist relationships were leveraged to formalize two illegitimate activities: the operation of unregulated RCFs, through manipulation of the inspectorate system, and the recruitment, irregular admission, and receipt of a child into an RCF in contravention of gatekeeping mechanisms, through paper orphaning. While formalization has been previously discussed in connection with child laundering (Smolin, 2006) and orphanage trafficking (K. E. van Doore, 2022), this study offers additional insights, confirming clientelism as a mechanism employed to facilitate formalization in this context.

These examples demonstrate the pivotal role clientelism plays in the concealment of human trafficking in plain sight. By actively contributing to the camouflage of deceptive recruitment through formalization, clientelism becomes a key facilitator in subverting systems initially designed to safeguard vulnerable populations, who as a result, are ultimately trafficked and exploited through these systems' channels. In the context of orphanage trafficking, clientelism specifically subverts the alternative care system, establishing a deceptive pathway for child trafficking to masquerade as child protection and altruism (Cheney & Ucembe, 2019; K. E. van Doore & Nhep, 2021). The prevailing assumption that children in RCFs are "safe" and are children who have already been "rescued" from situations of risk, rather than being potentially in situations of exploitation, further complicates the already challenging task of detecting orphanage trafficking and identifying victims (Nhep et al., 2024).

Implications for Prevention and Intervention

As argued by scholars such as Molland (2012) and Lindquist (2013), the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts hinge on the extent to which they are grounded within the socio-cultural context where trafficking takes place, and responsive to the contextual and cultural nuances that shape its various elements. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how an understanding of clientelism's role in enabling orphanage trafficking influences initiatives aimed at combating this type of child trafficking. Two specific implications are elucidated: the impact on prevention strategies for orphanage trafficking and the efforts toward post-trafficking rehabilitation.

Prevention

At its core, orphanage trafficking emerges as a consequence of inadequate regulation of residential care services. This encompasses weak enforcement of laws and policies governing the establishment, registration, monitoring, and funding of such services, as well as the procedures for admitting children. Offenders exploit these regulatory deficiencies to commit orphanage trafficking, all the while concealing their operation as a charitable child protection service.

While this characterization is true, it is an oversimplification, and insights from this study reveal a more nuanced perspective. The importance of child protection regulation notwithstanding, the study demonstrates the propensity for clientelism to be leveraged by directors of RCFs to bypass regulatory enforcement, or infiltrate and subvert bureaucratic systems, even in an increasingly regulated environment (Nhep, 2024). As such orphanage trafficking occurs not only where there is a *lack* of governance, but from persistent clientelist practices *in* governance that belie superimposed rational legal-administration systems and subvert the rule of law (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2004). This suggests that prevention initiatives must consider how child protection governance can be democratized as a part of reform efforts (Nhep, 2024d).

Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2004, p. 168) warn of the complexity of reforming clientelist governance and suggest it should commence with a thorough examination of the socio-cultural manifestations of clientelism, including an understanding of "clientelist governance practices in action." Such an analysis enables policymakers to discern the cost-benefit dynamics, identify winners and losers, anticipate potential sources of resistance, and gather crucial information for designing governance reform strategies that are more likely to be effective, yield greater net benefits, and minimize unintended consequences (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 2004).

Domingo et al. (2023, p. 13) similarly emphasize the importance of investing in understanding political clientelism and governance within the framework of anti-trafficking endeavors, due to "the weight of patronage politics" in ASEAN countries. Nevertheless, they caution that this is a long-term approach that should be balanced with pragmatism and investment in programs that, while not directly tackling structural root causes, contribute to raising awareness and mitigating risks among populations vulnerable to trafficking in the immediate and near term (Domingo et al., 2023). This holds true for orphanage trafficking, where effective prevention is likely to necessitate a blend of immediate strategies, such as raising awareness among families and expanding access to social protection mechanisms to minimize their reliance on clientelist exchanges, while long-term strategies that address the governance agenda take effect. Additionally, child protection social workers and practitioners, should be educated on the risks of clientelism in residential care facilities, and importance of stringent adherence to regulation, as a component of child safeguarding training.

Intervention

The utilization of patron-client relationships to facilitate orphanage trafficking can profoundly impact children's self-perception as "victims." The blurring of roles between patrons and perpetrators, clients, and victims, can lead to conflicts between legal definitions of victimhood and the child's own understanding of their circumstances. In a study on child labor trafficking victims in the United States, Goździak (2008) observed a similar dissonance among children who

collaborated with traffickers for various reasons, including familial ties or derived benefits. The post-trafficking adjustment of these children proved complicated and traumatic for two primary reasons: a lack of clear identification of perpetrators and a disconnect with the goals, objectives, and conceptual frameworks of aftercare service providers who regarded them as traumatized victims (Goździak, 2008). This suggests that flexible, culturally sensitive and situated approaches to working with children, whose perceptions of their exploitation have been shaped by clientelism, may need to be explored (Martinho et al., 2020). To avoid inflicting additional trauma, pathways may need to be individually tailored to each child's culturally informed and evolving understanding of their own experiences (Goździak, 2008). Additionally, greater consideration may need to be given to the contexts in which the use of dichotomous terms such as "victim" and "perpetrator" are beneficial, or counter-productive, making a clear distinction between legal and therapeutic realms (Goździak, 2008).

Limitations

The results of this study should be considered with respect to several limitations. The study relied on participants' ability to detect orphanage trafficking and exploitation in the course of their practice and retrospectively recall observations. Varying degrees of knowledge amongst participants regarding orphanage trafficking may have affected their observations. Interviews with children, care-experienced young people and their families could provide additional insights and should be considered for further research.

Conclusion

This article examined the role of clientelism in facilitating orphanage trafficking in Cambodia and Myanmar. Clientelist relationships were strategically leveraged by directors for several purposes: to operate unregulated RCFs as sites of exploitation and to target, recruit and admit children in contravention of gatekeeping mechanisms. In addition, directors intentionally manipulated clientelist norms to exploit children and relied upon children and their family's socialization to these norms to groom and secure their cooperation, including to suppress disclosure and reporting.

Clientelist networks were also leveraged to conceal orphanage trafficking. Patron-client relationships between directors and recruiters and co-opted bureaucrats with official roles within the system enabled them to "formalize" unlawful acts, including recruitment, irregular admissions, paper orphaning and the operation of unregulated RCFs. This process of "formalization" lent legitimacy to illicit acts; disguising them as child protection interventions thus allowing traffickers to operate openly and with impunity.

The use of clientelism in RCFs to perpetrate exploitation enabled boundaries between notions of exchange, loyalty, gratitude, and exploitation to be blurred. While legal definitions offer clear pathways for demarcation and classification of such conduct as exploitation, for children it was less clear. Children did not always perceive their experiences to be exploitation, nor identify as victims. This has potential ramifications for post-trafficking rehabilitation efforts.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

Ethics Approval

The study was approved by Griffith University's Human Research Ethics Committee GU 2022/559.

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