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The Lucrative Business of Children:
A Study of Child Trafficking in Nepalese Orphanages



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Abstract:

The purpose of this research paper is to shed light on and explore the detrimental effects orphanage volunteer tourism has on communities in Nepal, especially the orphans themselves and their families who become subject to different degrees of manipulation, deceit and abuse due to the industry. This study will also delve into the Nepal Civil War's effect on orphan trafficking in Nepal, the effects of institutionalization, media and campaigns launched against voluntourism, and other related topics. The paper particularly focuses on orphanage voluntourism in the tourist heavy and capital of Nepal, Kathmandu.

The information in this report was attained through interviews conducted with several non-governmental organizations and other individuals related to tourism, orphanages, and child trafficking. This paper also relied heavily upon already existing reports, media articles, laws and policies, and other online research. The paper serves to make the issue of voluntourism within orphanages more accessible and better understood, without oversimplifying this extremely complex issue. This report should inspire debate and discourse between people, further publicizing an issue that, until recently, has been shrouded in secrecy.

One Young Woman's Story:

“ When I was 22 my friends and I volunteered at an orphanage called Light for New Nepal in Balaju Northside. I had been happily volunteering for about two or three months. However, after a couple months some children informed us that the people who worked there were treating them badly. The kids looked so malnourished. We found out that everything we donated to the children such as clothes and food, were being sold for money. We were outraged and talked to the people who ran the orphanage. They said they needed the money to run the facilities, but we knew this was wrong. We knew the kids were being abused. At that point we were too far in and at that point we couldn't turn back.

We decided to rescue the children overnight. We drove to the orphanage late during the night and took the kids out in a microbus to our friend's house. I suddenly realized that I was responsible for 14 children's lives, and was terrified. Mrs. Pema Zimba, a lady who worked in a Bhaktipur school, gave me advice. She told me to go to all of my friends and family and ask for food and clothing for the children. She told me to collect stuff, not money. This is what I did for 6 months. For over a year constant orphanage threats tormented me. They said they knew where I lived and they were coming for me and the children, but I tried to pay no mind.

During this six month period is when I founded the Children and Youth First. I conducted research with the children and found out all I could about their background and families. Most of the kids' families were still alive, but did not care that I had their child. Parents pay about 30,000 rupees to enroll their children into orphanages. They sign a paper saying that their kid is officially an orphan.

CYF's first volunteer was an exciting and confusing moment. I didn't know if I should charge him money to stay or if he should volunteer completely free of charge, or if he should bring supplies for the kids. We decided to ask him to bring food and clothing. Later on volunteer agencies began to say they could send us volunteers, that if we charged \$200 we would get \$100. We decided we wanted to mainly have local leaders working with the children, and encourage Nepali people to volunteer in their own

country. First and foremost volunteers need to be responsible and smart. This is so important.”



A young girl driven away after having been rescued from an abusive “Happy Home” orphanage in Kathmandu, Nepal¹

¹ Patisson, Pete. “Nepal’s Bogus Orphan Trade Fuelled by Rise in ‘voluntourism’ The Guardian. May 26, 2014. Accessed May 3, 2015.

Introduction:

The criminal network for trafficking is massive and is the third biggest trade in the world and the fastest growing industry. The history of orphan trafficking in Nepal dates far back and is inextricably tied to the Nepal Civil War, which lasted from 1996 to 2006.² During the war mountain villages in Western Nepal became the grounds over which the Maoists and the government clashed. Homes, schools and shops were suddenly transformed into chaotic battlegrounds and the Maoists forcibly conscripted children from their villages into military groups. The already impoverished and insecure area became even more vulnerable as the war raged on, creating the perfect environment for child traffickers to prey on frightened families in disarray.^{3 4}

Cunning child traffickers approached these scared and desperate families, deceptively promising their children safe, sustainable, and healthy futures in the bright and relatively prosperous capital of Kathmandu, far from the flying bullets and the Maoist army recruitment.⁵ The traffickers, often under the guise of boarding school representatives or related figures, manipulated countless parents into giving up all of their wealth and savings in exchange for their child's "safe and successful" future as a lawyer, businessman, or doctor in a city. Parents believed their child would one day come home to the village, educated, healthy, and happy, when in actuality most of the children were discarded into seedy, under-resourced children's homes in tourist-heavy areas such as Pokhara, Chitwan, and especially Kathmandu.⁶

In 2010, inter-country adoption was officially disbanded by the majority of Western countries due to the exposure of many children's fake documents. Orphanages and children's homes in tourist-heavy cities such as Pokhara and Kathmandu, no longer making income from international adoptions, quickly switched their focus to the plethora

² "Next Generation Nepal - The Challenge." Next Generation Nepal - The Challenge. Accessed April 27th, 2015

³ Grennan, Conor. *Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*. New York: William Morrow &, 2010.

⁴ Feit, Katie, and Martin Punaks. "The Paradox of Orphanage Volunteering". 2014

⁵ Danekhu, Ramesh. "Stop the Orphanage Business." Accessed May 6, 2015.

⁶ Feit, Katie, and Martin Punaks. "The Paradox of Orphanage Volunteering". 2014

of tourists, charities, and travel agencies that made their way to Nepal.⁷ “With money to be made from running orphanages in tourist areas...all the traffickers have to do is ensure an ongoing supply of destitute children to attract the sympathetic tourist dollar.”⁸

Voluntourism



Sign found on the back door of a café bathroom in Thamel.

Next Generation Nepal defines orphanage voluntourism as “a spectrum of activities related to the support of orphanages and children’s homes by individuals who are primarily, or were initially, tourists on vacation.”⁹ Voluntourists visit for all different reasons. Perhaps they want to give something back to Nepal after a beautiful experience in the mountains. Perhaps they were recruited by flyers, volunteer agencies, or heard about volunteering in Nepal’s orphanages from friends or co-workers. People will spend ridiculous sums of money in order to feel benevolent and selfless, paying up to \$200 a week! Volunteers are often asked to sponsor a child or become so attached to the children they feel compelled to fundraise money for the orphanage back in their home country.¹⁰ A Nepali blogger writing about the dangers of voluntourism in Nepal explained how the

⁷ Lovera, Julien, and Martin Punaks. *Reintegration Guidelines for Trafficked and Displaced Children Living in Institutions*. Eugene, Oregon: Next Generation Nepal, 2015.

⁸ Feit, Katie, and Martin Punaks. “The Paradox of Orphanage Volunteering”. 2014

⁹ Feit, Katie, and Martin Punaks. “The Paradox of Orphanage Volunteering”. 2014

¹⁰ “UNICEF - Orphanage Voluntourism in Nepal: What You Should Know.” Accessed May 11, 2015.

majority of that money given by tourists to the children is often pocketed by corrupt orphanage owners and very little spent on the children's health, education, and living situation. "The business of children is just like a supply and demand model; at the moment child trafficking into orphanages is more popular than ever because there is a huge demand for it coming from tourists pouring into Nepal."

The Issues

"Child trafficking is illegal in the eyes of international law, however Nepal is lawless and corrupt. The government does not care and does not crack down hard enough, if at all because they get money from the traffickers indirectly."

- Jacob Wey, NGO affiliate

According to an interview with Jacob Wey who works for an NGO fighting orphan trafficking, out of the 760-800 registered orphanages and homes in Nepal, only 10% meet the minimum standards, and 90% of these orphanages are in Kathmandu, Pokhara, and Chitwan. The children taken to homes and orphanages are used as a fundraising tool to raise money from tourists and other duped, naïve well-to-do people. Many children are forced to live in squalor and are sometimes deliberately starved, mutilated, and hurt in order to gain more sympathy from tourists and ultimately more money for corrupt orphanages.

Mr. Wey discusses how there is no system in place and no regulations in Nepal about volunteering. Technically one is not legally allowed to volunteer on a tourist visa, but the government turns a blind eye because voluntourism is so popular and a significant source of income for Nepal. The government could easily set up a registration scheme to regulate and control volunteers, but it is not interested. There are naturally many different issues that rise from voluntourism without regulation.

Maria Row from another NGO battling orphanage voluntourism explains how foreigners may not be qualified and have the right background and skill set to work with children. This could lead to discomfort on both the child and volunteer's parts, anxiety,

and the in the worst cases pedophilia. For the children at these homes, volunteer tourism is a steady flow of predominantly white people quickly coming in and out of their lives. This results in sadness, attachment disorders, and psychological abandonment issues. Kids also may feel the need to entertain volunteers and be ever present and energetic.

The issue of institutionalized care is crucial in examining children's homes and orphanages in Kathmandu. Jacob Wey reveals that there are serious negative effects on children who are separated from their families at young ages and then institutionalized. With parent-child relationships, children accomplish developmental tasks related to psychological maturation. The primary problem is that these institutions do not adequately provide the same level of child-centered attention and support consistent long-term caregivers would. This love and care is critical for emotional, physical, mental and social development. In many of the orphanages and homes the staff turnover is frequent, sometimes damaging children's capacity to form healthy relationships and attachments with adults later in life. Many kids leave the institutions confused about their identity and place in society.¹¹ Maria Row agrees that all efforts should be made to help children grow up in family-based care settings or be reunified with their families so they can experience and develop genuine loving relationships with those who whole heartedly love them back.¹²

Solutions?

Non-governmental organizations such as the Umbrella Foundation and Next Generation Nepal work to stop orphan trafficking at the source. They believe that, ideally, there should be no children's homes and orphanages existing, and fight to prevent trafficking by strengthening families. Many NGO's, such as the ones that Row and Wey

¹¹ "Effects of Institutionalization: Goal of Permanency." September 11, 2009. Accessed April 30, 2015.

¹² Lovera, Julien, and Martin Punaks. *Reintegration Guidelines for Trafficked and Displaced Children Living in Institutions*. Eugene, Oregon: Next Generation Nepal, 2015.

work for, believe that the root cause of orphan trafficking in Nepal is *education*.¹³¹⁴ Wey describes how many people living in the rural mountain villages such as Humla, Nuwakot, and Rasuwa , are targeted by child traffickers and lack quality education systems and resources, and associate Kathmandu with wealth, status, safety, and success. One solution is to go straight to the villages and strengthen these rural communities by educating people on the truths about appearing “school board representatives”, renovating and building schools, health posts, working on developing libraries, acquiring computers, and overall improving educational standards. Maria Row expressed, “we should allow volunteering but introduce register schemes, regulations, monitoring plans, and control to Nepal. Build the villages and families, *not* the orphanages. Focus on local empowerment and focus on taking the emphasis off foreigners.”

Media and Campaigns

¹³ “Next Generation Nepal - How We Work.” 2015. Accessed April 15, 2015.

Should orphanages in Nepal be more controlled by the government?



1 . Yes

62.92%

Poll immediately popped up on computer screen after connecting to Wifi of internet café.

Over the past year or so there has been an increase in the media's attention on child trafficking into orphanages from news sources such as Vice, the Guardian, and the Nepali Times, to pop-up polls on the internet. International campaigns such as Think Before Donating, whose message is "Don't create more orphans. Think families not

orphanages!” educate the public on the truth behind orphanage volunteering.¹⁵



Because orphanage voluntourism and child trafficking has been extremely popular in the local and international news, this has boosted the public’s knowledge of the once more closeted issue.

Conclusion:

Voluntourism within orphanages seems to have quickly become the new trending activity to do abroad, especially for young adults from Western countries. Well-intentioned and adventurous youth travel to Nepal searching for out of the ordinary experiences, such as volunteering in Nepal’s orphanages. This experience is something different *and* also makes them feel good about themselves. The psychology of voluntourism is something to consider. What is the motivation behind a person wanting to volunteer at an orphanage in a foreign, different, exotic place such as Kathmandu? Is it really ethical and self-sustaining? Why not volunteer locally in orphanages around one’s own home?

¹⁵ “Don’t Create More Orphans.” Accessed April 20th, 2015.

Pippa Biddle is a 22 year old American who once travelled to Tanzania to volunteer building infrastructure for an “underdeveloped” area. Looking back on her time spent there. She reflects, “Basically, we failed at the sole purpose of our being there. It would have been more cost effective, stimulative of the local economy, and efficient for the orphanage to take our money and hire locals to do the work, but there we were trying to build straight walls without a level.”¹⁶

Although the work NGO’s have been doing is wonderful and extremely valuable, NGO’s must be careful about creating identities for people as “under developed” and “struggling communities”. NGO’s and other organizations working to stop orphan trafficking should focus on strengthening communities in sustainable and considerate ways without turning them into “developed” and more modernized cities that emulate Kathmandu.

¹⁶ Biddle, Pippa. “The Problem with Little White Girls, Boys and Voluntourism.” The Huffington Post. Accessed May 14, 2015.

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