

Stop Trafficking!

Awareness Advocacy Action

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FOCUS: This issue highlights how orphanages, adoption, surrogacy and even volunteering may be linked to human trafficking.

Orphanage trafficking refers to children who are deliberately recruited into orphanages and exploited for profit.

Some are sexually abused, forced into labor or begging, or used for their organs, while others may be sold for illegal adoption. Running an orphanage can be a lucrative trade. Vulnerable 'orphans' attract funding, donations, and international volunteers.

It is estimated that up to 80 percent of the more than eight million children in orphanages have at least one living parent. Most of these children are in an orphanage because they have been displaced, are disabled, or have lived in a family that cannot care for them due to poverty. In some cases, "child finders" are sent by orphanage owners to local villages or those impacted by war, natural disaster, or societal discrimination. If they go and live in an orphanage, the "finder" promises a better life for the children, education, food security, safety, and healthcare.

Instead of fulfilling those promises, many orphanages use the children to raise funds by forcing them to perform shows or interact and play with potential donors to encourage more donations. Orphanages have also kept children in poor health to elicit more sympathy and money from donors. In addition, documents are created to make it look like the child has no family.

Children in institutional care, including government-run facilities, can be easy targets for traffickers. Moreover, orphanages facilitate child trafficking rings by using false promises to recruit children and exploit them to profit from donations. This practice has been well-documented in several countries, including Nepal, Cambodia, and Haiti. The ongoing institutionalization of children in orphanages is contrary to the child's best interests and their right to a family under the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The physical and psychological effects of staying in residential institutions, combined with societal isolation and often inadequate regulatory oversight by governments, place these children in situations of heightened vulnerability to human trafficking. Even at their best, residential institutions cannot meet a child's need for emotional support that family members or consistent caretakers provide. Children are especially vulnerable when traffickers recognize and take advantage of this need for emotional bonding stemming from the absence of stable parental figures.

According to the 2018 Trafficking in Persons report, some orphanages, including in Oceania, Central America, and Eastern Europe, doubled as brothels. In one instance, children of an orphanage reported clear cases of staff forcing some girls, especially those from rural or indigenous communities, out at night to engage in commercial sex. Forced labor has also been reported in residential institutions, with one instance involving staff of an orphanage for children with disabilities forcing children to assist in construction projects and other dangerous tasks, such as sterilizing soiled mattresses, under the guise of "work therapy." These children perform domestic work in houses in the surrounding village or labor on a farm in several countries.

Even when a child leaves or ages out of a residential institution, the vulnerability to human trafficking continues, in part, due to the physical and psychological damage many of these children have suffered. In addition, the social isolation of



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residential institutions often prevents children from building stable, long-term familial or social relationships. By depriving children of opportunities to develop a social support network, receive adequate schooling, experience ordinary life or social situations, and practice using cognitive reasoning and problem-solving skills, residential institutions leave those departing from institutional care more vulnerable to traffickers' schemes. Some traffickers, recognizing the heightened vulnerability of these children, wait for and target those who leave or age out of institutions.

In 2018, Australia became the first country to reference the exploitation of children in institutions in its modern slavery legislation. Click [here](#) to learn more.

“Voluntourism”

T.W. is a survivor of orphanage trafficking. Her experience of being taken from her home in rural Kenya to an orphanage for the sole purpose of interacting with western volunteers and to keep donations to the orphanage flowing is disturbingly common.

It was made clear to her from the start that the orphanage's primary concern was to ensure volunteers visiting the orphanage were kept happy so that they would return, set up fundraisers, and make significant donations to the orphanage. Click [here](#) to learn more.

Voluntourism is the practice of combining voluntary work with tourism. Voluntourism has become a popular trend, creating a boom in vacation packages involving volunteer work. Every year, thousands of well-meaning individuals decide to travel to developing countries on short-term visits, setting their sights on helping vulnerable children. Unfortunately, the destination for many of these travelers is an orphanage. Sometimes it's a preplanned trip with a whole week at the institution, arranged by an organization, church or travel agency. Other times, a vacationer might just set aside a couple of hours to visit an orphanage and play with the kids. These trips can bring a lot of money into orphanages in the form of fees and on-site donations. In addition, visitors often convince family and friends back home to make significant donations as well. Little do they know that many orphanages are established for the sole purpose of satisfying the western desire to volunteer.

Preying on the good intentions of well-intentioned individuals who want to help, orphanages claim to provide care for “orphans,” but these organizations are often sources of profit for sometimes unscrupulous operators. Many volunteers and donors who give their time and money don't know that most children living in institutions have families.

Orphanage trafficking has begun to be formally recognized by national and international agencies as a form of human trafficking, perpetuated by the

opportunity presented to traffickers in the form of orphanage volunteering. Travelers and volunteers are willing to pay large amounts for orphanage experiences which traffickers use to their advantage. In addition, the rising popularity to “give back” has resulted in the unnecessary separation of children from their families.

Traffickers, attracted by the funding orphanages receive from donations and organizations offering ‘voluntourism’ placements, effectively turn children into commodities by ensuring a constant supply of children available to attract funding. As a result, the number of orphanages continues to rise, matching the popularity of voluntourism.

Volunteering in these facilities for short periods without appropriate training can cause emotional stress and even a sense of abandonment for already vulnerable children.

Moreover, background checks are usually not performed on these volunteers, increasing the risk of children being exposed to individuals with criminal intent. This is the perfect opportunity for a child sex offender to be close to children and commit their crimes with a sense of impunity and anonymity. Perceived as influential in their “helping” role, offenders can easily manipulate and bribe victims, families, and communities into silence.

Voluntourism also reinforces a negative stereotype that communities and families in developing countries need ‘saving.’

Cambodia

Every morning at 6:30, the boys and girls of the Little Angels orphanage in Cambodia get to work, sitting at wooden tables set up in front of the entrance to ensure that passing tourists can't miss them. For hours at a time, they use hammers and small chisels to punch holes in pieces of leather traced with delicate patterns. No one says a word as they work — one of the boys has earbuds in his ears. The leather creations are traditionally used in Cambodia for shadow puppet shows, but here they serve as souvenirs for tourists. The larger works sell for as much as \$700.

At around 11:00 a.m., a small tour bus stops on the dusty road in front of the orphanage. Little Angels is located not far from Angkor Wat, the World Heritage Site in Siem Reap Province, which attracted more than 2.5 million visitors last year. Colorfully dressed Chinese tourists pour out of the bus, drop some money into a transparent donation box, buy small heart-shaped leather pendants and give the children bags of candy. To show their gratitude, the youngsters line up and begin to sing songs, ending with the English-language classic: "You Raise Me Up." The tourists take pictures with their smartphones.

The show is performed by the children whenever groups of visitors stop by. But apart from the moving lyrics, the 80 children in the orphanage speak little English. Instead, they spend their mornings working before sitting through five hours of lessons at a public school in the afternoon.

Nearly all of their earnings go to their parents. Their parents, after all, are not dead — and they don't even live that far away.

Thousands of children live in orphanages in Cambodia. However, many boys and girls still have parents. This reality has prompted the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to refer to these homes as "residential care institutions" rather than orphanages. The last official survey, conducted in 2015, found 406 of these homes in the country, housing more than 16,000 children. According to UNICEF, only about one in five "orphans" is without relatives.

Most of the families that send their children to these facilities live in poverty. Public schools cost money in Cambodia, and the facility usually covers the expense.

Some even offer additional English lessons. These institutions serve as a kind of free boarding school where the children may even earn money for the parents.

The extent to which the children suffer from being separated from their parents varies. Many of the



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children hope the experience will increase their future chances of landing a well-paid job. Most will, unfortunately, be disappointed, though. According to UNICEF, these institutionalized children later have great difficulties integrating themselves into society, forging relationships, and, having never experienced a regular family life themselves, being responsible parents.

Estimates vary on how much of the tourists' money benefits the children. In the case of the Little Angels, the facility says that 20 percent of revenues go directly to the children while 80 percent is used to help cover operational costs. It is clear that such orphanages can be a lucrative business for those who run them and that the system needs tourists to survive. Unfortunately, the government does not provide any funding. From 2005 to 2010, the number of orphanages in Cambodia increased by 75%, primarily located in tourist areas.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

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Nepal

About 80 percent of the children living in orphanages in Nepal have at least one parent. Most of the orphanages in Nepal are in the Kathmandu valley or the other popular tourist destinations of Pokhara and Chitwan and depend on international charities and non-governmental organizations for funding. Many children are taken from their homes with the promise of a better life; in reality, they are often mistreated, abused, and subject to ever-changing visitors on tours or volunteering stints. Large donations to orphanages also give traffickers the opportunity to enslave children for labor or begging and to falsify documents for profit from international adoption. (2021 Trafficking in Persons Report)

Forget Me Not (FMN) is an organization that works to reunite children in orphanages with their families and give them a new beginning. In addition, the organization works to end child trafficking into orphanages and stop the demand for 'orphans' through grassroots education and empowerment programs.

FMN has rescued and reunified 108 children in Nepal since 2013, where the movement of children into orphanages for exploitation is regarded as child trafficking domestically. In addition, FMN has successfully prosecuted three orphanage directors for trafficking children into orphanages for profit.

Orphanage directors will often not release children even where they have been requested to do so by parents. There have been cases where parents have located their children in an orphanage, and the directors have required the costs of having the child within the orphanage to be reimbursed. In one case, an orphanage director created a system of bonded labor for a mother who believed her two children were in school but searched and located them at his orphanage. Instead of releasing the children to her, the orphanage director insisted the mother pay him 144,000 rupees (\$1440) for two years of 'care' at the orphanage for two years at the cost of 6,000 rupees per month.

Another mother said she was asked to pay 30,000 rupees to release her child in the same orphanage. It was reported that the orphanage director asked the parents not to reveal that they were being charged to release their children but rather that they were making a donation to the organization. The orphanage director was subsequently successfully prosecuted for child trafficking.

FMN supports orphanage "living" survivors with job training, work experience, and employment opportunities in Kathmandu's tourism sector.

Forget Me Not's Ethical Tourism Collective is designed to support these youth while educating tourists who might otherwise visit or volunteer in an orphanage in Nepal. Click [here](#) to learn more.



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Baby Harvesting

Nigerian police freed 19 pregnant women from properties in Lagos. Most of the women in these properties had been abducted "for the purpose of getting them pregnant and selling the babies." The rescued women, who were between 15 and 28 years of age, had been enticed by promises of employment but when they arrived, were held against their will and sexually assaulted to get them pregnant. Police said that male babies would be sold for \$1,400 and the female babies for \$830. The raid was one of several that have been conducted, including one last year when one hundred sixty children were rescued.

Baby harvesting and child harvesting refers to the sale of babies and children. Child harvesting programs take place at baby factories or baby farms. This illegal breeding of babies for marketing purposes is known as "infant commodification." Babies are usually sold for adoption, but some have been used for organ harvesting, and some have been tortured or sacrificed in witchcraft rituals. Children are sold and then usually trafficked, usually for forced labor.

Children are typically forced to work in mines, factories, farms, or as domestic workers. In addition, some are forced into prostitution.

The women involved in baby harvesting schemes usually live in poverty, and some are coerced to give up their newborns. In addition, some women are impregnated to produce infants for sale.

In many African countries, baby factories are on the rise partly due to an increase in adoption. However, there is a stigma associated with acquiring a child through adoption in many African countries, and childlessness is demonized. As a result, the commodification of infants is increasing steadily as a significant aspect of trafficking across Africa, including Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Serra Leone, South Africa, and Uganda.

A July 2021 report indicated an increase in baby factories in Nigeria. The report noted that social stigma plays a significant part. Desperate teenagers with unwanted pregnancies are sometimes convinced to give up their babies for financial gain. Moreover, the stigmatization of infertility in the country leads to a high demand for



babies by infertile couples who are unwilling to associate publicly with adoption or surrogacy due to the additional stigma attached to it. In Nigeria, male children are valued more than female children and are sold at a higher price. Women are kidnapped and forcibly impregnated to keep up with the demand. These babies are then taken away from them and sold for adoption.

In late 2020, officials ended a "baby harvesting" sting operation in Ghana with the arrest of 11 individuals, including two doctors, four nurses, two mothers, two social welfare officers, and a traditional birth attendant. Two babies were "sold" to undercover investigators for about \$5,000 each. Authorities believe some mothers may have been told their babies had died after delivery while others who were unable to care for their newborns were encouraged to sell them.

Baby harvesting will only be abolished when legislation barring it is enacted, and the penalties significantly outweigh the profit motive. In addition, awareness and acceptability of adoption and reducing the legalities for infertile couples will also curtail the need for baby factories.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Surrogacy and Human Trafficking

Surrogacy dates back to biblical times. Today it is considered one of many assisted reproductive technologies and is often regulated by law. In an altruistic surrogacy, a woman agrees to carry a pregnancy to term for another, in most cases a relative or close friend, for no monetary compensation aside from medical expenses. On the other hand, commercial surrogacy is an arrangement in which the woman is compensated for her services beyond her medical expenses.

Often, the woman does not know the intended parents for the child.

There is much controversy over whether commercial surrogacy fits within the protocol of what defines human trafficking. Although the woman or girl may agree to carry a child to birth, some argue that according to the Palermo Protocol, consent is irrelevant where any means of the act of trafficking have been used. So, if a woman has given her consent, but has been recruited, coerced, deceived, given money or gifts, and exploited, that nullifies any consent she has given. Moreover, Article 21 of the Additional Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being defines that the

human body and its parts cannot be a source for acquiring financial gain. Wherever contracts or money are involved in settling the transaction of human life, the potential for coercion, commodification, and control often follows.

Some practices used by surrogacy organizations can resemble those utilized by traffickers. The women or young girls sought to be surrogates are often vulnerable and living in poverty. Advertisements offering large sums of money to rent their wombs are a direct means of recruitment. Surrogate mothers are coerced by the offer of large sums of cash and deceived about the risks and harms of pregnancy. The contracts these women sign are often full of threats of breach of contract language for any non-compliance. In addition, in commercial surrogacy, the child may be considered a commercial commodity and lead to exploitation and abuse. Fortunately, to date, there are no proven cases of surrogacy for child exploitation.

Some countries ban both altruistic and commercial surrogacy, including Italy, Spain, France, Portugal, Bulgaria, and Germany. Severe sanctions are applied for medical doctors who arrange surrogacy for their patients. Other countries, such as the UK, Denmark, Ireland, and

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Belgium, only allow altruistic surrogacy. Commercial surrogacy is legal in Russia and Ukraine.

Laws regarding surrogacy in the United States vary among states. For example, New York ended the ban on commercial surrogacy in February 2021, and as of today, only three states, Michigan, Louisiana, and Nebraska, ban commercial surrogacy.

Nationally and globally, there is an incentive to legalize altruistic surrogacy so to discourage commercial surrogacy. The unequal legality of surrogacy across international lines and, in the case of the United States, state lines have led to a global black market for surrogates. Women living in poverty where commercial surrogacy is legal are used as surrogates by wealthy individuals and couples from countries where commercial surrogacy is illegal.

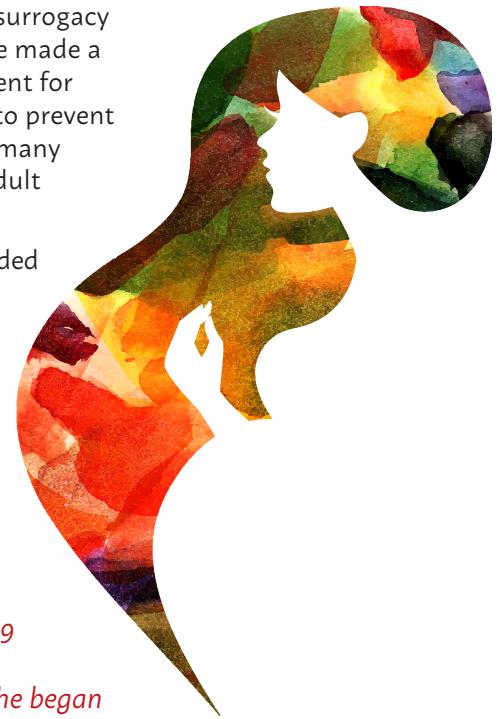
Sadly, in the United States, a disproportionate number of surrogates are military spouses.

Commercial agencies target these women because of their difficulty finding work and their need to make an additional income to support their families.

Finally, some argue that a child's right not to be bought and sold as an object is ignored. In a 2018 address on surrogacy and the sale of children given to the United Nations Human Rights Council by Special Rapporteur Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, the Special Rapporteur explained that, "although commercial surrogacy includes the sale of services, it also usually includes the sale of the child," and that payments made in altruistic surrogacy arrangements "may blur the line between commercial and altruistic surrogacy." She made a point that it is impossible to distinguish payment for reproductive labor and payment for children. She stressed that from a human rights perspective, the priority must be to prevent the commodification of children, specifically the rejection of a "right to a child." In many surrogacy arrangements, the rights of children are an afterthought in the face of adult desires.

The COVID pandemic brought this point home when hundreds of babies were stranded worldwide over the spring and summer of 2020. Born to surrogates living in one country and commissioned by individuals or couples living in another, these babies were cared for by paid caretakers until the intended parents could travel to claim them. Many of these babies lived in makeshift orphanages raised by strangers.

Click [here](#) to learn more.



Surrogacy in India

Macwan, 24, earned \$94 a month as a supervisor in a garment factory, but when a tough national lockdown was imposed in March 2020 as the first wave of COVID-19 hit India, Macwan, and most of her co-workers were fired. She had no savings and struggled to put food on the table. Worried about caring for her 3-year-old child, she began to look into surrogacy. "If things continue in this vein, then my son's future is also going to be like mine," says Macwan, her soft voice shaking.

In October, Macwan arrived at the Akanksha Hospital, one of the biggest surrogacy facilities in the country. Her mother—who had been a surrogate herself ten years earlier—had tried to dissuade her. But Macwan argued that the money was much more than she would ordinarily be able to make. Surrogates at Akanksha are paid in installments during the process for a total of about \$6,230 for a successful surrogacy for a single baby; in the event of a miscarriage, a woman receives what she has been paid up to that point as well as an additional \$135. Click [here](#) to learn more.

In India, there is a high demand for surrogates even though commercial surrogacy is illegal. Couples from abroad and non-resident Indians formed the bulk of the clients, and women, usually those living in poverty, are trafficked to meet the demand. Many of these women are not given a copy of their contract and are trapped in surrogate homes against their wishes. The women are subjected to sex-selective abortions, and restrictions imposed on women in surrogate homes are inhumane. Women are selected into surrogacy based on their class, age, skin color, religion, caste, and the payment varies according to these categories.

Since commercial surrogacy is illegal, the hospital and the intended parents are not liable for complications or death of the surrogate mother or miscarriage of the baby.

Moreover, if there are complications during delivery, the doctor's priority is to save the unborn baby and, after that, the mother's life. Therefore, the money paid for the delivery is for the unborn baby and not the mother.

Most women come from households that live in poverty, and many slip back into poverty after their surrogacy experience. Almost all surrogate mothers (93%) think the surrogacy process is a form of slavery.

As with Cambodia and other countries, banning commercial surrogacy drove the practice underground, where there is no oversight to ensure legal, ethical, and medical care standards are met.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Infants Born to Chicago-area Surrogates Stranded in the United States

In July 2020, Nara Schoenberg, a features reporter at the Chicago Tribune, published an article on babies born of surrogate mothers stranded in the United States due to the pandemic. An estimated 200 to 400 international babies born to American surrogates were stranded in the United States, unable to go home to their biological parents in France, Britain, Israel, and China.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

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Historically, adoption took place to preserve and transmit family lines or inheritance, gain political power, or forge alliances.

Adopted persons were usually adolescents or adults who could guarantee the continuation of the family line. Today, adoption is considered a way to provide a home for children who do not have parental care or to allow couples or individuals the opportunity to care for and raise a child.

When adoption is done illegally, it is a form of human trafficking. Children who become victims of illegal adoption often come from developing countries, whereas the adoptive parents usually live in wealthier parts of the world. At times parents who live in poverty may be offered money for a baby. In addition, parents may be deceived, misled, or threatened to get them to put their child up for adoption or do so to settle a debt, and at times, the baby offered for adoption will have been abducted from a hospital or the mother. Abduction is especially prominent in Kenya.

In May 2021, India put out an alert on fake child adoption scams, and authorities urged people to report any adoptions proceedings to ensure that they took place

according to established norms. One such message asking people to adopt a two-year-old girl and a toddler, whose parents died of Covid-19, circulated via social media.

Illegal adoptions resulting from crimes such as abduction and sale of and trafficking in children, fraud in the declaration of adoptability, falsification of official documents or coercion, and any illicit activity or practice such as lack of proper consent by biological parents, improper financial gain by intermediaries and related corruption, constitute illegal adoptions and must be prohibited, criminalized and sanctioned as such.

In March 2017, the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography reported on the sale and sexual exploitation of children from illegal adoptions during the 34th session of the Human Rights Council.

The Special Rapporteur's statement included the recommendations that all member states adopt legislation

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that prohibits and criminalizes illegal adoption as a separate offense and the sale of and trafficking in children that result in unlawful adoptions, with sanctions that reflect the gravity of the crimes. It is also recommended that all nations ensure legislation that does not contribute to the creation or maintenance of an enabling environment for illegal adoptions and to strengthen and invest more in national child protection systems by increasing support to vulnerable families and providing alternative childcare measures in which adoptions respect the principle of subsidiarity and ensure the best interests of the child.

The statement also noted that countries should establish and implement a single process for adoption.

This process should include a holistic assessment of the child's full range of rights. Private and independent adoptions should be prohibited. In addition, the process should consist of procedures concerning domestic and intercountry adoptions, including the determination of adoptability, and establish effective mechanisms for overseeing adoption processes, especially verifying the background of any child who is declared an orphan. Countries should also ensure the right to truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence of victims of large-scale illegal adoptions by reforming institutions that were either involved in or incapable of preventing abuses. In addition, processes that guarantee victims' effective and meaningful participation in the design and implementation of measures to obtain comprehensive redress should be in place. Efforts should also be in place to protect children victims of armed conflict and natural disasters from becoming victims of illegal adoption.



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Regarding intercountry adoptions, the Special Rapporteur states that authorities should ensure the effective monitoring of adoption activities by accredited bodies to guarantee their transparency and accountability. Annual quotas for adoptions by countries and agencies should be eliminated. The "reversal in the flow of files" approach should be adopted by refusing to accept any application that has not been initiated concerning a child identified as requiring adoption abroad. The statement recommends that governments increase awareness of the need to bring the number of approvals of prospective adoptive parents into line with the projected number of adoptees, adopt stricter criteria for support, and provide complete information, including on mechanisms available to report illicit practices. The provision of development or humanitarian aid must not be linked to an authorization to carry out adoptions, and payments by agencies or prospective adopters to residential care facilities must be prohibited.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

Orphanages are big businesses in Liberia, attracting millions of dollars in international assistance every year.

Yet, according to Liberian government officials and child rights activists, most of the so-called orphans living there are not parentless at all.

Furthermore, many orphanages are "sub-standard." In 11 out of Liberia's 15 counties, orphanages constitute "major human rights problems," according to a report issued by the Human Rights and Protection Section of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). "Children living in Liberia's orphanages are denied basic rights – ranging from the right to development and health to the right to identity, family, education, leisure, and participation in cultural activities."

The number of orphanages in Liberia has increased tremendously, from just ten in 1989 to more than 120 today. Orphanage owners block efforts to reintegrate

children into their families and even snatch children. The owners have established relationships with philanthropic organizations abroad, often in the United States, seeking money for the "orphans." However, none of the owners nor the deputy health minister would name their financial supporters except to say that most donors are faith-based organizations headquartered in the United States. Some owners also admit that they use the children for financial gain.

A Children Protection Taskforce comprising UN agencies, international aid groups, and government ministries has started a nationwide documentation process to identify children in orphanages whose parents are still alive to reunify them.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

In early 2021, Paul Petersen, an Arizona elected official, began serving the first of three sentences for running an illegal adoption scheme. Pregnant women from the Marshall Islands were paid to come to the United States to have their babies and then give away their babies. Peterson was indicted in October 2019 for running a human trafficking operation in three states: Arkansas, Arizona, and Utah. He pleaded guilty to charges in all three states.

The women were crammed into houses to wait for the birth, sometimes with little to no prenatal care. According to court documents, women in one place slept on mattresses laid on bare floors in what one shocked adoptive family described as a “baby mill,” according to court documents. The charges span about three years and involve some 75 adoptions. Investigators also found eight pregnant women from the Marshall Islands in raids of his properties outside Phoenix and several more waiting to give birth in Utah.

The adoptive parents are considered victims along with the birth mothers, and no completed adoptions will be undone, authorities said.

“The commoditization of children is simply evil,” said Utah Attorney General Sean D. Reyes. Reyes said that the accused served a two-year mission in the Marshall Islands for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. “Many of these mothers described their ordeal as being treated like property. Make no mistake: this case is the purest form of human trafficking.”

According to court documents, Petersen charged families \$25,000-\$40,000 per adoption and brought about \$2.7 million into a bank account for adoption fees in less than two years.

The probe began after investigators got a call to a human-trafficking tip line in October 2017. Staff at several hospitals in the Salt Lake City area would eventually report an “influx” of women from the Marshall Islands giving birth and putting their babies up for adoption, often accompanied by the same woman. Click [here](#) to learn more.

Action

Voluntourism: What can be done

In 2018, Australia became the first country to criminalize recruiting children into orphanages as a form of slavery.

In 2019, the British government updated a travel advisory to discourage tourists from volunteering or visiting orphanages. The same year the Dutch parliament held a debate on the practice of volunteering at orphanages and its connection to human trafficking. At the same time, author J.K. Rowling warned against the practice at a conference for global leaders, stating that “visiting and volunteering in orphanages drives an industry that separates children from their families and puts them at risk of neglect and abuse.”

Voluntary Service Oversees committed in 2016 to no longer send volunteers to orphanages and in 2019 published a “Global Standard for Volunteering in Development.”

Organizations can use these guidelines to design responsible volunteering opportunities, ones that are led by local communities, promote cultural exchange and bring in individuals with skills that aren’t available locally. As more organizations commit to the “Global Standard,” orphanage tourism could be eradicated.

Organizations and tourism companies offering orphanage volunteering can have a role in reducing the incentive for traffickers to ensure there’s a constant flow of children available to keep attracting foreign volunteers and donations. In addition, when tour operators hear complaints from the public, they make changes to root out exploitation.

Please click [here](#) to urge tour operators to take action against orphanage trafficking.

Action

Sheela Saravanam

A Transnational Feminist View of Surrogacy Biomarkets in India

Springer

A Transnational Feminist View of Surrogacy Biomarkets in India

by Sheela Saravanam

Drawing on her ethnographic work with surrogate mothers, intended parents, and medical practitioners in India, the author shows the dark connections between poverty, gender, human rights violations, and indignity in the surrogacy market. In a developing country like India, biotechnologies therefore create reproductive objects of certain female bodies while promoting an image of reproductive liberation for others.

Alternatives to Orphanages

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that every child has the right to grow up in a family environment, and its Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children states that institutional care should be a temporary «last resort» for the «shortest possible duration.» Moreover, decades of studies conclude that children who grow up in institutions have poorer outcomes with increased rates of mental illness, physical and intellectual underdevelopment, and a higher risk of being trafficked.

A shift away from institutional care to a family caregiving setting has its challenges. As a result, there is a need for resources and expertise to develop solutions to children's health and safety.

Community care options, such as small group homes and community care where appropriate, can serve as alternatives while working toward a permanent placement in a family setting. Aftercare plans that include ongoing support from community resources can help children thrive after leaving institutional care. Click [here](#) to learn more.

The Baby Stealers

Babies are being stolen in Kenya to feed a thriving black market. In a year-long investigation, BBC Africa Eye infiltrated the trafficking rings selling children.

They witnessed children being snatched from homeless mothers to be sold for as little as \$390 (United States). In addition, the team uncovered illegal child trafficking in street clinics and the theft of babies at a major government-run hospital. The main incentive behind this thriving unlawful market for babies, aside from money, is the stigma associated with childlessness. The “baby stealers” usually target mothers with infants and children under the age of three. Thus, vulnerable women are being preyed upon in Nairobi to supply a secretive but thriving illegal Kenyan market for babies and young children.

Agencies responsible for finding missing children and tracking black market activity are under-resourced and under-staffed. As a result, one of the few recourses for mothers whose children are taken is Missing Child Kenya. This community-led initiative leverages technology and crowdsourcing in the search for and the tracing and reunification of missing and displaced children. In its four years in operation, the organization has worked on about 600 cases.

Child trafficking is rampant in Kenya and remains under-reported. Most of the children are stolen from vulnerable women who do not have the resources to force action from the authorities or to attract media attention.

According to BBC Africa Eye's research, child-trafficking rings operate within the walls of some of Nairobi's biggest government-run hospitals and in illegal street clinics in the city's slums. The clinics have delivery rooms for expectant mothers and have been identified as a location for the black-market trade in babies.

While mothers may turn to the local police station, they often do not get any help. Missing Child Kenya points out that “Many street mothers are children themselves, and they are taken advantage of in their vulnerability.” Too often, they are not seen as victims of crime who deserve sympathy, “but nobody should assume that people on the street do not have feelings, that they do not deserve justice.”

The full BBC documentary can be found [here](#). It is well worth the time.



Women's Rights Organizations Call for a Ban on Surrogacy in Ukraine

In June 2020, two hundred women's organizations called for a ban on all forms of trade in children and women in Ukraine. The call for a ban was in response to news of newborn babies that were not picked up by foreign customers when the country closed borders during the COVID pandemic. The news brought to light the exploitation of women living in poverty and the need for more robust protection of women's rights.

The situation has shed light on the inhumane system of trade in reproductive rights that characterizes the surrogacy industry. The ban calls for the end of all forms of reproductive trade and for Ukraine to sustain international conventions on the rights of children and women. The ban states: "The United Nations Special Rapporteur has recognized surrogacy as the sale of children as defined in the Additional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, the European Parliament has condemned the practice of surrogacy, which undermines the human dignity of the woman since her body and its reproductive functions are used as a commodity." Furthermore, the European Parliament considers "that the practice of gestational surrogacy which involves reproductive exploitation and use of the human body for financial or other gains, in particular in the case of vulnerable women in developing countries, shall be prohibited and treated as a matter of urgency in human rights instruments." Click [here](#) to learn more.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

would grant children on United States soil protection against separation from parents, abuse, and kidnapping. It would make the United States accountable for harm to children -- in all forms. The U.S is far behind the rest of the world when it comes to protecting children and their rights and this needs to change.

196 countries have signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The United States has NOT.

Take Action to Stop Volunteer Placements in Orphanages



Volunteer tour operators are restarting operations as vacations and international travel is back on the agenda. But some are still offering placements in orphanages, widely acknowledged to be a driver of trafficking. The travel industry, rocked by COVID-19, has had a long time to rebuild as an industry committed to ending orphanage trafficking. So why are volunteer tour operators stuck in the same place they were prior to the pandemic, advertising harmful volunteer programs in orphanages and institutions?

With over 100,000 global supporters calling for change, a United Nations General Assembly resolution against orphanage volunteering, official government travel advice, and decades of research and expertise calling for an end to orphanage volunteering, it's clear that volunteer tour operators need to act now.

[Ask Plan My Gap Year](#) to stop offering volunteer placements in orphanages and take a stand against trafficking.

Global Vision International and African Impact have already stopped offering placements in orphanages as a direct result of wanting to offer an ethical volunteering experience resilient to the risk of trafficking. By keeping up the pressure to see similar commitments from other volunteer tour operators, we can turn the tide against orphanage volunteering and trafficking for good.



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