

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

December 16, 2022

Dear Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into the rights of women and children

The US Parliamentary Task Force on Human Trafficking welcomes the opportunity to make the following submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

Orphanage Trafficking

Human trafficking is a global problem, and children are especially vulnerable. They make up almost one third of all trafficking victims worldwide, and this is evidenced also in the prevalence of trafficking in orphanages around the world¹.

According to Catholic Relief Services (CRS), 80-90% of the 8 million children living in orphanages around the world have at least one living parent.² The unfortunate reality is that children are often in orphanages due to poverty, abuse, neglect, or family breakdown, rather than the death of both parents or all living kin. While this is concerning itself, the issue is further complicated by the demand for access to orphans from tourists to and volunteers with orphanages worldwide - also known as voluntourism. Orphanages throughout the world encourage tourists and volunteers from wealthier countries to visit them in hopes of raising funds. Additionally, there are reports of children who have been deliberately malnourished and their living conditions deliberately deprived in an effort to increase donations from visitors.³ To meet the demand, there is evidence that large numbers of children are recruited from their families and sold into orphanages for a profit. This form of child trafficking is sometimes referred to as orphanage trafficking, and these children are often called “paper orphans” due to

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/stories/children-make-almost-one-third-all-human-trafficking-victims-worldwide>

² <https://www.crs.org/media-center/news-release/80-90-percent-children-orphanages-are-not-orphans#:~:text=BALTIMORE%2C%20MD%2C%20May%2031%2C,at%20least%20one%20living%20parent.>

³ <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Better%20Volunteering%20Better%20Care%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>

falsification of documents to show parental death or abandonment.⁴ It is a particularly heinous crime that targets the most vulnerable of our society.

Australia's Role

Human trafficking in orphanages, or “orphanage trafficking,” has strong links to voluntourism and foreign aid that comes largely from donor countries such as Australia and other Western nations.⁵ False orphan narratives are continually used to elicit sympathy and international funding. The UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 16.2 calls for an end to the abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.⁶ The stripping of basic human rights from these children is an injustice that can be combatted in part by stopping the demand for international voluntourism. Australia and other Western nations have an important role to play in curbing the demand, especially in Southeast Asia which is reported to be the largest funder of children in residential care.⁷

In the *Hidden in Plain Sight Report 2017*, one of the recommendations was for human trafficking in orphanages to be acknowledged as a form of modern slavery.⁸ While much progress has been made in response to some recommendations of the report, Australia now has an opportunity to continue this forward-thinking approach by becoming a leader in this space for international reform.

Consultative Working Group on the Development of International Standards of Care for Shelters for Children and Trafficking Survivors:

One such way is through the development of a consultative working group for 18 months to research and develop international standards of care for shelters for both children and trafficking survivors. Such a consultative working group could be comprised of relevant Members of Parliament, a representative from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the National Children's Commissioner, stakeholder civil society organizations, survivors of human trafficking and adults who have lived in out-of-home care as children. Standards of care for shelters are essential to preventing abuse and harm to children and trafficking survivors, and they provide accountability for leadership. They also provide a framework for decision making by Australians and citizens of other nations when exploring adoption from or support for those providing housing and care.

⁴ van Doore, K. E. (2016). *Paper Orphans: Exploring Child Trafficking for the Purpose of Orphanages*, *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, 24(2), 378-407. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718182-02402006>

⁵ <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/07/13/orphanage-trafficking-and-the-modern-slavery-act-in-australia/>

⁶ <https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/sustainable-development-goals.html>

⁷ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2349300319894498>

⁸ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Moder nSlavery/Final_report

It is paramount that this issue of human trafficking in all forms, especially of children, be at the forefront of international human rights policymaking. The creation of a consultative working group to research and explore accountability and oversight measures that prevent the trafficking of children through orphanages is a recommended initial step.

Sincerely,

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