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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Where have all the children gone?

The earthquake in Nepal caused thousands of children to lose their homes. Many may now end up in illegal orphanages — but not all of them are orphans. Nicola Smith reports on a child-trafficking scandal in which many British companies are implicated

Nicola Smith Published: 23 August 2015



A five-year-old who has been rescued from an illegal orphanage is reunited with her mother in Kathmandu. Photographs by Tom Van Cakenberghe/Getty Images for the Sunday Times Magazine

There is an uncomfortable poignancy about the way we are greeted when we arrive at the run-down orphanage in the foothills of the Himalayas. The iron gate swings open, and five young children sprint out of a muddy courtyard, immediately grabbing our legs and shouting “Hello sister,” “Hello brother.” They take hold of our hands and hug us; yet we are strangers to each other. We are led to believe that they are orphans, but who really knows?

Kathmandu has a lot of orphans and a lot of orphanages. There are close to 600 registered by the

Nepalese government and many more operating without a government permit. In a country blighted by chronic debt, extreme poverty and massive unemployment, it's perhaps not surprising that so many children lose their homes and families. And with the earthquake last spring causing chaos across the country, even more children have been displaced. It's been estimated that more than 16,000 Nepalese children are living in some sort of institution — yet aid agencies, and even the government itself, have acknowledged that as many as two-thirds of those are not orphans. Their parents have simply released them into the orphanages' care, or sold them.

While some institutions provide genuine care for children in need, many others exist mainly to manipulate money from charitable foreigners, who are moved by poverty and want to help. Many are cynically treated as commodities to make a fast buck for the orphanage owners. In the worst cases, the practice constitutes child trafficking: Unicef says that since April, at least 245 children have been rescued.

Part of the problem lies with naive western travellers who regard volunteering for an orphanage as an important element of a backpackers' holiday; "gap-yahs" with a social conscience. And the demand for these trips has opened a new market that many companies based in Britain are eager to fill.

The orphanage we visit, the Innovative Social Center, is a private institution run by the Pariyar family at the end of a potholed lane on the outskirts of Kathmandu, the Nepalese capital. A slick presentation by Sujan Pariyar, the owner's 21-year-old son, who acts as the orphanage caretaker, raises several serious questions. He initially claims that all 11 children in his care are "orphans", only backtracking when challenged about credible reports that at least one was not.

"We have orphan, single-parent and poverty kids," he later says, claiming they were placed by the government's Village Development Committees. Pariyar also remains vague about the orphanage's funding. One existing source of income is through volunteers, who pay £5 a day to stay in two second-floor bedrooms with six beds, which is against rules laid down by the Nepalese government.

On the floor below, seven young boys cram into a room of three beds, next to another small bedroom for four girls.

Pariyar later says he will try to involve embassies in future vetting, but skirts around the fact that

government rules forbid overnight stays at orphanages.



When
the 21-
year-old

A 13-year-old recovers in Budhanilkantha, Kathmandu, from his ordeal at a fake orphanage

Dumfries student Amy Spence went to work in a Kathmandu orphanage, she had heard reports of foreigners being duped by dubious institutions and wanted to avoid the pitfalls. She erred on the side of caution and paid more than £800 for a placement set up by Bunac; based in Kensington, it is one of the world's oldest volunteering agencies.

“They were more expensive, but I chose them because I didn't know anything about Nepal and I needed to go through someone more ethical,” she says. “I talked to them about the legitimacy of the orphanage I was working in and making sure it really was all right. And they said, ‘Yes, we've been there ourselves,’ and I was made to feel quite safe.” Three years later, Spence, who is now back in Britain, is embroiled in a legal battle to try to push the Nepalese authorities to investigate allegations that children at the orphanage are badly mistreated. She was sent to a family-run orphanage that cared for 10 children on the outskirts of Kathmandu. It cannot be named for legal reasons, as a government investigation into it is underway.

Her suspicions were raised when the children were deprived of using donated toys and blankets, and appeared afraid of the woman in charge. “It was run-down and the hygiene was awful,” says Spence. “The children's clothes were infrequently washed and many of them suffered with worms and skin conditions.”

Spence's concerns were shared by a Swedish-Australian couple, Peggy Aberg and Michael Druitt, who first volunteered, then financially supported, the same home for years. Initially they were “mesmerised” by the family, who claimed to be running the orphanage in memory of their dead daughter. They now admit they were “naive” when they rallied financial support from family and friends. “From the very beginning it was never really clear what we were sponsoring,” says Aberg.

Requests for receipts and documentation went unanswered, but they carried on for the sake of the children. “They started to hug us. You could tell that they had never really received affection,” she



says.
“We
were
buying
into this
whole
saviour

A mother waits to sign legal guardianship papers to transfer her daughter back into her custody

complex. Looking back, there was at no point any real focus on the children and their welfare,” adds Druitt.

The couple alleges that children told them that some donations were being spent on the family rather than on basic needs, such as plumbing and hygiene. On frequent visits they realised their money had yielded no improvements and “the home was in disrepair”. After two years they stopped their funding and now warn untrained volunteers not to come to Nepal. “If you’ve not got the experience, the background or the ability to actually contribute to solving the problem, then stay away,” says Druitt.

Bunac says it is unaware of the specific allegations and stopped sending volunteers to orphanages in 2014. It no longer works with the Nepalese partner agency that had arranged Spence’s placement.

A Bunac staff member sent to check the orphanage in 2012 did not spot any problems, reporting that “the orphanage survives on funding and donations, is under-resourced and in need of support”. According to a spokesperson: “During this site visit, we did not feel that the safety of our volunteers was at risk.”

Meanwhile, Spence and the Swedish-Australian couple have filed a case with the Central Child Welfare Board, a government body in charge of regulating orphanages. They are being helped by Forget Me Not, an Australian charity that has worked in Nepal since 2006, which specialises in rehabilitating children who have been trapped in fake institutions before reuniting them with their families.

“This is a situation that perpetuates children as a commodity,” said Forget Me Not’s CEO, Andrea Nave. “And it’s more than just the children who are victims in this ugly business model.”

In June her charity helped reunite 10 children, whom she believes were about to be presented as earthquake orphans, with their families. Among those reunited were Purnima Karma, a 30-year-old single mother, who had feared she would never see her daughter Sushmita, 13, and son Suresh,

14, again.

Widowed at 28, after her tailor husband consumed poison, and earning 3,000 Nepalese rupees (£18) a month as a cleaner, Karma reluctantly gave them up to a family friend who owned a children's institution and offered to educate them.



Karma had no inkling that, over the next two years, her children would be trained to tell foreign tourists who

A mother (centre) is reunited with her two children in Mulpani, Kathmandu

volunteered at their new home, the Oppressed Welfare Center in Kathmandu, that they were orphans. Nor could she have predicted that, when the stream of foreign volunteers dried up, Sushmita and Suresh would be moved — allegedly without consent — to the remote district of Lamjung, where they would live with eight other children in a cramped hut and forced to work after school in the fields.

Alarmed, Karma asked for her children back. She had paid the orphanage owner 23,000 Nepalese rupees (£140) for their upkeep; now he wanted more.

“He said, ‘If you want your children then you have to compensate all the expenditure on them to date.’ He wanted 3,000 rupees [£18] per month per child for the last two years. I told him, ‘I don’t have the money.’”

Karma could have lost them if a 7.8-magnitude earthquake had not struck Nepal in April. The quake prompted the owner to seek aid, and the authorities discovered that his operation was illegal. The home was raided and he was arrested and charged with trafficking. All 10 children were given shelter in Forget Me Not’s transit home.

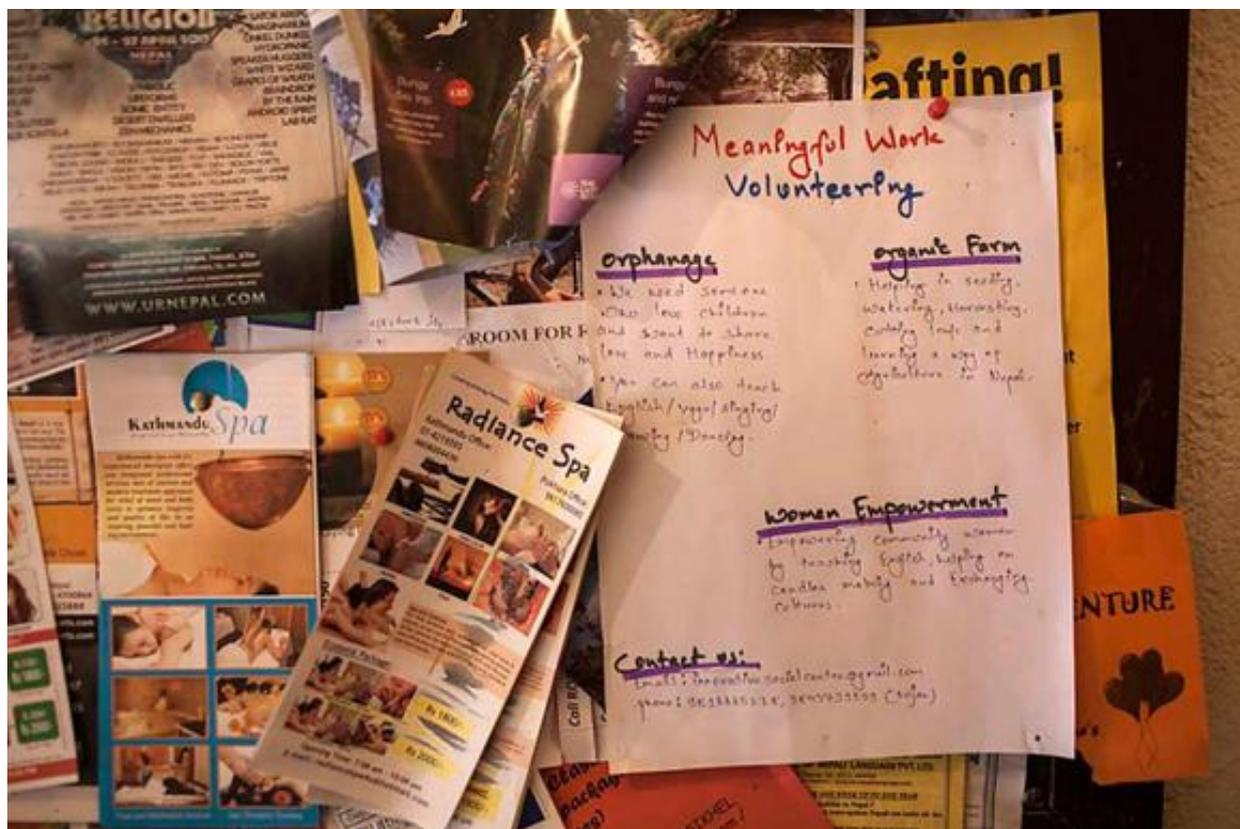
But even now, Karma still lives in fear. The owner, who was angered that Karma had reported him to the police, was quickly bailed, and threats have allegedly begun to filter back to her through one of his female associates. “She called and scolded me, saying, ‘Why did you give fake information to the police?’” she says. “I’m afraid he might come again and ask for my children. He might take them to India.”

The British trekking guide Jonny Rowett, 40, wanted to help local children when he moved to Nepal in 2009. He began to support the Happy Home Nepal orphanage in Kathmandu, reassured by its large number of foreign volunteers. Testimonials from beaming Brits, Australians and Americans still adorn its website. Over four years, he says, he and his partner raised thousands of pounds in donations for the orphanage.

But Rowett began to feel uneasy. The children started to trust him, and he says they confided that they were being physically abused. "It took them many years to dare to tell me," he said. Doubts were also raised about how the children had ended up in the orphanage. In 2013, Rowett and several former volunteers joined Freedom Matters, a British anti-trafficking charity, in trying to press criminal charges against the Happy Home owner, Bishwa Pratap Acharya.

Rowett says he was then harassed by the police, who allegedly had links to the home, and that he was accused of being a "mafia boss". "I lost so much weight through all of this because you realise that the system is so bad," he says.

Acharya was finally arrested in February 2014 and remained in jail for a year while the police investigated charges of fraud and kidnapping. But he was released a year later after a court ruled that the charges could not be proven. He and his wife were convicted, however, of inflicting "severe torture" on two girls, and ordered to pay them £300 each.



Acharya denies all

Job adverts at a tourist centre in Thamel for tourist volunteers to work in orphanages, both legal and illegal

accusations and is appealing the conviction. He is now running the home again.

Meanwhile in Britain, a number of gap-year travel companies are selling placements in Nepalese orphanages. These "conscience breaks" are advertised widely online, but are rather more circumspect when it comes to detail about whether the orphanages they work with are legitimate.

"It's not in our interests," says a spokesperson from Plan My Gap Year (PMGY), an "award-winning" company based in Tunbridge Wells. The company did not answer a written request about visas, orphanage vetting, and the legality of volunteer accommodation.

On its website, PMGY states that “volunteers will stay either with a host family or at the orphanage”. However, other British companies say they operate in Nepal with extreme caution because of the known problems. James Chapman, from Outreach International in Somerset, says it only works with one boarding school in the tourist town of Pokhara, which it had strictly vetted and verified that children still saw their families.

Some orphanages do a good job, and many volunteers grapple with the face that Nepal’s institutionalised children do at least receive a better education. But Martin Punaks, the British director of the US charity Next Generation Nepal (NGN), which rescues children from fake orphanages, argues that research shows they are still psychologically better off in a loving family.

“For the volunteers it is wonderful, they have an inspiring experience,” he says. “However, for the children, who have already suffered the trauma of being taken away from their parents and being forced to live in an institution, they spend their entire childhoods being visited by ‘nice foreigners’ who bond with them, then leave, causing incredible grief. We have sadly witnessed many ‘cute children’ in orphanages growing up into angry, bitter and unhappy adults.”

Over the past few years, NGN has successfully reunited 140 institutionalised children with their families, and offered them further help. Forget Me Not is now rehabilitating another 21. They have offered Purnima Karma a job with accommodation so that she can support her children.

Her case proves that there is an alternative way to deal with extreme poverty. Last month, she beamed as she hugged her son and daughter. “I’m so happy to have my children back,” she said.

0 comments



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