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The impact of orphanage tourism on Bali

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with the phenomenon of orphanage tourism in Bali, Indonesia. Context is given based on a recent published report by the Dutch government on the impact of orphanage tourism. Findings are derived from larger-scale qualitative research based on child welfare institutions in Bali, Indonesia (50 children, 16 familial caregivers) between 2015 and 2020. Two axial codes (forced attendance and suspicion) of this research are used in this article. Deductions are based on recent literature, prior research and findings. The conclusion of this article is that children in Bali should not be institutionalised for the sake of poverty or education and that a continuous flow of tourists visiting and donating to child welfare institutions means that children have become commodities for such institutions, causing a plethora of problems for children living in these institutions.

KEYWORDS: Bali, impact, orphanage tourism, right to education, underprivileged children

Introduction

Recently, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a report entitled "Investigation of the extent of volunteer travel from the Netherlands to residential care facilities for children in low- and middle-income countries: roles, responsibilities and scope for government action". The aim of the study was to define the extent of orphanage tourism from the Netherlands, to describe the actors involved and to decide what government actions can be taken (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). That orphanage tourism is damaging for children being institutionalised has been addressed by the author's PhD research on the change of perception of submitting children to child welfare institutions in Denpasar, Bali (Westerlaken, 2020). In this research, several children living in child welfare institutions indicated the impact of visitors to the institutions they were living in and parental caregivers neglecting to act, which showed ignorance of the dangers. The fact that children need to entertain guests with the objective of securing the economic situation of the child welfare institutions can be defined as orphanage trafficking as described in the Australian Modern Slavery Act (Government of Australia, 2018). The Act defines it as "the active recruitment of children into orphanages or residential care institutions in developing nations for the purpose of ongoing exploitation, particularly through orphanage tourism" (point 8.4). The introduction of a modern slavery act based on the Australian model is mentioned as one of the possible interventions the Dutch cabinet can take based on the report mentioned above. With this, the Dutch government would consider child trafficking and child exploitation as a form of modern slavery (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). This case study focuses on the impact of orphanage tourism in Bali, Indonesia.

Literature review

Since 2007, Indonesia has been making a shift in policy from a focus on economic, cultural and religious support to institutions for orphaned, neglected or abandoned children to a policy that focuses on strengthening the capacities of the impoverished families to retain their children in the family situation rather than surrender them to residential child welfare institutions (Martin & Sudrajat, 2007; Babington, 2015).

Babington (2015) notes that the increase in the number of child welfare institutions before 2007 mainly resulted from individuals and organisations seeking to take financial advantage of easily obtained government subsidies. Socio-economic hardship among parents or familial caregivers are considered to be the main reason, or a push factor, for placing children in child welfare institutions, even if they come from middle-class families (Irwanto & Kusumaningrum, 2014).

For Bali specifically, the fact that tourism is such an important source of income, running a child welfare institution to gain funding from tourists as an attractive business opportunity for commercial purposes has become a possible scenario (Sudrajat [Save the Children Indonesia], 2017, personal communication).¹ Butler (2011) describes in his podcast that the generosity of holidaymakers intensifies the misery of vulnerable children and that funds are misused to let the child welfare institution's owners' own children study at international universities and buy cars.

According to the Decree of the Minister of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia NO30/HUK/2011, children are to be admitted to a child welfare institution as a last resort (Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2011). The decree is in line with the United Nations Convention of the Rights of

the Child (signed with reservations by Indonesia in 1990) which declares that

the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding (United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, 1990, p. 1).

The Decree of the Minister of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia NO30/HUK/2011 stipulates when children need alternative care, such as placement in a child welfare institution or a substitute family, as follows:

1. The family does not provide appropriate care even with adequate support, neglects, or overlooks their responsibility towards the child.
2. Children who have no family or the whereabouts of their family or relatives is not known.
3. Children who are victims of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation in order to ensure their safety and well-being, where familial care is evidently against their best interest.
4. Children separated from their families due to disaster, either social or natural (Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2011, p. 20).

The 2019 Resolution on the Rights of the Child about the promotion and protection of the rights of children was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 2019 and has been ratified by the Republic of Indonesia. The main focus of the resolution is on children without parental care. The importance of growing up in a family environment, the right to have a family and the unnecessary separation of children from their families shows that children should not be separated from their family due to poverty or lack of resources (Better Care Network, 2019a). The main message is that the resolution urges the strengthening of child welfare and child protection systems and improving current efforts. The resolution further stresses that trafficking and exploitation of children in care facilities has to be prevented. The resolution specifically mentions volunteer programmes in child welfare institutions, specifically in the context of tourism and faith-based missions. The new resolution concludes that children should be supported to stay with or be returned to their families, or where this is not possible, governments should commit to put in place systems that guarantee quality alternative care is provided to all children through family and community-based care (Better Care Network, 2019a). As Better Care Network concludes, "[t]his Resolution's call for institutions to be progressively eliminated gives an unprecedented political, human rights-based imperative for States to transform the way children are cared for and families are supported" (Better Care Network, 2019b).

The organisation Save the Children describes that there is little awareness by governmental social workers in Indonesia of the potential negative effects when children live in a child welfare institution. The governmental social workers view institutionalisation as the best solution for families considered to be *tidak mampu*, in other words, families considered too poor and uneducated to provide proper care, guidance and discipline (Martin, 2013).

Research by Save the Children UK, DEPSOS (*Departemen Sosial* — Indonesian Department of Social Welfare) and UNICEF showed that in a number of institutions, children's chores extended to work that had to be carried out by the children with the objective of contributing to the economic benefit of the

institution (Martin & Sudrajat, 2007). Save the Children, UNICEF and DEPSOS conclude that this work is seen as exploitative and harmful in law (Martin & Sudrajat, 2007).

Richter and Norman (2010) describe orphanage tourism as a form of volunteer tourism characterised by short-term travel to residential care facilities to engage in everyday caregiving or for a short leisure visit, where an emotional connection with needy young children is sold. Child welfare institutions using this practice exploit local poor families and well-meaning foreigners. Poor families are enticed to surrender their children to the child welfare institution and well-meaning foreigners as they think they can make a change in those children's lives, while the actual main objective is to gain money (Mowforth, 2016). Save the Children is worried about the untrained and unskilled number of volunteers in child welfare institutions and calls it a harmful practice and way of building and funding these institutions (Smith, 2016).

Research shows that many children cared for in child welfare institutions are neither parentless nor abandoned by their families. For example, only 8% of the children researched in Denpasar, Bali had no parents alive or known (Westerlaken, 2020). The main reason for placement in a child welfare institution is the economic situation of the parents or the desire for securing an education (Martin & Sudrajat, 2007; Butler, 2011; Martin, 2013). Child welfare institutions actively recruit children to fill quotas, which can often be set by sponsors. For this type of recruitment, child welfare institutions mainly look at educational needs instead of care needs (Martin & Sudrajat, 2007; Martin, 2013; O'Kane, 2016). The key criteria of most of the institutions researched by Save the Children, UNICEF and DEPSOS exposed that the child must be of school age, from a poor family, able to take care of themselves including washing, cooking and carrying out daily chores and willing to abide by the rules of the institutions.

The report by Save the Children, UNICEF and DEPSOS even questions whether institutions are run *by* children or *for* children as care for children is not prioritised and the ratio of staff per child is low. Generally, there is a lack of understanding of the importance of responsible adults providing individual care and attention to children. Life skills that are taught in the institution are in essence crucial to the actual running of the institution, such as cleaning, cooking and washing (Martin & Sudrajat, 2007).

The Decree of the Minister of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia NO30/HUK/2011 is clear on the fact that economic reasons and poverty should not be the main reason for the separation of a child from their family, hence a submission to a child welfare institution should not be permitted based on those grounds (Martin & Sudrajat, 2007; Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2011; Martin, 2013). In contrast, access to education was named as a primary aim for many child welfare institutions in the research done by Save the Children, UNICEF and DEPSOS (Martin & Sudrajat, 2007) and is confirmed by Westerlaken (2020), who discovered that 72% of children living in child welfare institutions in Denpasar, Bali are institutionalised solely for the reason of poverty and education. As their key conclusion, Save the Children, UNICEF and DEPSOS note that children should not have to choose between education and family (Martin & Sudrajat, 2007).

A special provision in the Decree of the Minister of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia NO30/HUK/2011 is made relating to education. If the principal matter faced by the family

is access to education, the child welfare institutions are obliged to facilitate access to education by paying for tuition costs, school supplies and transportation costs. The child welfare institutions are supposed to prevent the placement of children in their institutions based on the purpose of accessing education (Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2011).

Research approach

The research in this article consisted of a qualitative method approach with a general focus on reasons for submission, experiences, feelings and effects of living in a child welfare institution. Based on preliminary field research, a sample group of 50 children and sixteen parents/familial caregivers were interviewed.

Study findings

This report deals with one identified subtopic of the PhD research of the author (violence and force, axial code "forced attendance and suspicion"). Other identified subtopics in this research were "way of submission", "feelings of parents", "reactions of family", "reactions of child", "reason", "religion", "violence and force" and "best choice or not".² Children as well as familial caregivers were asked about their experiences with violence and force (physical, verbal and sexual) in the child welfare institutions, as also described by Irwanto and Kusumaningrum (2014). Several cases of abuse, by staff and tourists, concerning Balinese child welfare institutions in Denpasar, Bali have been discussed in local media in the past five years. In the "violence and force" subtopic, sixteen references were coded in the children's interviews, relating to 1.06% coverage of the interviews, and fifteen references were coded in the familial caregivers' interviews, relating to 3.48% coverage of the interviews.

Identified axial codes are:

1. being beaten;
2. forced attendance;
3. permission to go home;
4. anxiousness; and
5. suspicion.

Two axial codes (forced attendance and suspicion) are used in this article.

Axial code "forced attendance" relates to three conversations. Several children acknowledged disturbance from guests visiting the child welfare institution they lived in. The child welfare institution considers welcoming guests to secure the economic situation of the institution more important than children's welfare.

Komang,³ a fourteen-year-old girl, was asked by her parents to live in a child welfare institution because her parents could no longer afford to send her to school. She narrates:

Komang: *I said yes at that time. I thought it was going to be easy for me to go home whenever I want it [holding back her tears].*

Researcher: *Is it different from your expectations?*

Komang: *Yes, they don't allow me to go home that often. Only for special holidays.*

—

Researcher: *Do you feel that you do not have freedom here? Or do you feel there are too many regulations here?*

Komang: *Yes [crying]. It just too much, especially when guests are coming, I cannot have a good rest. For example, I just came back from school, and guests are coming late, and I don't have time to finish my school assignments.*

Ketut, a sixteen-year-old girl living in the same institute as Komang, also talks about the rules in the institute during the most important holidays in Bali, Galungan and Kuningan.⁴

Researcher: *Are you going home during Galungan/Kuningan?*

Ketut: *Yes, but either Galungan or Kuningan. It depends on the orphanage; they divided us into two groups, based on grade; senior and junior high school. One group is going home during Galungan, the others on Kuningan.*

Researcher: *Is it because they don't want to leave the orphanage empty?*

Ketut: *Yes.*

Researcher: *Why?*

Ketut: *Because we have some guests visiting the orphanage.*

Putu, a seven-year-old boy, does not live in a child welfare institution, though he obtains an education there.

Researcher: *But why are you here?*

Putu: *I am here only for school.*

Researcher: *Is it just for school?*

Putu: *Hmm, if a guest is coming during the weekend, I usually stay here until afternoon.*

—

Researcher: *It is Sunday, but why are you here today?*

Putu: *Because there are some guests here.*

The possibility for people to visit child welfare institutions brings the opportunity for abuse to a higher level. Several (ongoing and unpublished) cases of abuse by staff and visitors at child welfare institutions in the research area are known. In this research, parents were asked about their feelings towards possible violence or force in the child welfare institutions.

Axial code "suspicion" relates to three conversations. The parents of Kadek, a twelve-year-old girl recount:

Researcher: *Do you ever feel anxious by the fact that your child is living in an orphanage?*

Father: *No, because Miss —, who works there, guaranteed that nothing will happen to my child. If I want to bring my child back home for odalan,⁵ I have to submit a letter and the next day she has to come back to the orphanage, so I feel safe, because there is a procedure.*

Mother: *Like my husband said, I feel safe because of that.*

The brother-in-law of Nengah, a thirteen-year-old boy, says:

Researcher: *Did you ever feel suspicious or have you been afraid that Nengah may experience physical violence?*

Brother-in-law: *You know, the purpose is to educate children, of course he is evenly [sic] considered my child as their child. So, if the purpose is for good, then there must be violence, but in case the child is too naughty. But I think it's actually more effective.*

The mother of Wayan, a fourteen-year girl, says:

Researcher: *Were you ever cautious or afraid to surrender your daughter to the orphanage? Maybe because of cases like physical violence?*

Mother: *My daughter is not like that.*

Researcher: *Ok, so it's safe there?*

Mother: *Yes, also there are three caregivers, so it's okay.*

Researcher: *So, you are not afraid?*

Mother: *No.*

The parents of Made, a twenty-year-old woman still living in a child welfare institution while finishing university, recount:

Researcher: *Have you ever had any suspicion or fear that your child may be experiencing violence in the orphanage?*

Mother: *She is in the orphanage, so I don't have any feelings like that.*

Father: *We try to think positive. If our child is kind, then the people around her must be kind too.*

Mother: *Moreover, if she is in the orphanage, even if we as parents are far away from her, at least in the orphanage they have their responsibilities regarding her, right? I am fine with it. She is there, then she is safe.*

Discussion

The results do not point primarily towards hard conclusions on the impact of orphanage tourism, though one should keep in mind that the informants are children, and the interviews were mainly supervised by institution staff. Interpretations can be made based on research outcomes and literature.

The outcomes are divided in two sections: forced attendance, and suspicion. The research discovered several cases of forced attendance. The clearest case is of Komang, a fourteen-year-old girl who chose to be institutionalised in order to be able to continue education, where she feels that the forced attendance when guests are visiting the child welfare institution is disrupting her tasks for school as well as her rest. This qualifies as "ongoing exploitation, particularly through orphanage tourism" as meant in the Australian Modern Slavery Act (2018). The difficulty is that forced attendance is a common practice in most child welfare institutions in Bali and it is difficult to change these practices, especially when there is economic gain. A danger that comes with these practices is the relatively easy possibility for tourists with an ulterior motive to engage with child welfare institutions and groom children for their wants. As mentioned above, several cases of abuse by staff and "tourists" concerning Balinese child welfare institutions in Denpasar, Bali have been discussed in local media in the past five years. Nonetheless, cases are ongoing or solved without involvement of authorities and remain unknown to the general public. The "ostrich syndrome" of parental caregivers as shown in the "suspicion" part of the results is extremely concerning. Though parental caregivers must be aware of the danger of institutionalising their children, based on the interviews, familial caregivers make the choice to not acknowledge cases of physical, verbal and sexual abuse in institutions.

The Decree of the Minister of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia NO30/HUK/2011 stipulates that children are to be submitted to a child welfare institution as a last resort (Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2011). In the field, the opposite can be seen. Many children are still being committed to child welfare institutions for the sake of their education.

Conclusion

The Decree of the Minister of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia NO30/HUK/2011 clearly stipulates that if the issue faced by the family is financial instability, a child welfare institution should provide support through financial assistance and economic empowerment. If the primary issue is access to education, child welfare institutions should facilitate access to education by providing support for tuition costs, school supplies and transportation. Child welfare institutions should prevent children being placed in institutions for the purpose of education (Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2011). The fact that many child welfare institutions are not complying with these rules is perhaps because having a child welfare institution is a lucrative business. For this business, children are needed.

By visiting and donating to child welfare institutions, tourists are (knowingly or unknowingly) keeping a practice alive of children being separated from their families and with that creating possibilities for abuse through institutionalisation, and for psychological problems, separation anxiety and reduced possibilities for success in life. The Dutch report on orphanage tourism concludes the issue well: "Children in residential settings have become commodities for the benefit of parties who earn from caring for children or otherwise have an interest in the maintenance of residential settings" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020, p. vii).

Recommendations

Awareness about the impact of orphanage tourism needs to be raised to a higher level. Parents and familial caretakers in Indonesia need to be educated about the possibilities the Decree of the Minister of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia NO.30/HUK/2011 is giving to ensure children remain in the familial environment, but also to be aware of what their rights and obligations as parent or familial caregiver are. A socialisation programme is needed.

Visitors, volunteers, interns, but also government and (faith-based) NGOs need to understand what a child welfare institution is and how their programmes are executed. Help offered by the abovementioned organisations and individuals often is counterproductive in solving core issues. An awareness campaign is needed. Through financial assistance or economic empowerment, or support towards families in accessing existing social aid programmes, children should not be institutionalized.

Notes

1. Tata Sudrajat, Deputy Director of Program Development Quality and Advocacy at Save the Children Indonesia.
2. Publications on other subtopics are being prepared.
3. All names are fictive. Real names are known by the author.
4. Bali's most important holidays
5. A Balinese temple celebration

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