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Sex slave owner wins conviction appeal

Peter Gregory
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The first person in Australia to be found guilty of possessing sex slaves has won an appeal against her convictions.

Further legal argument is to be heard in the Court of Appeal on Friday about whether Wei Tang, 45, should be acquitted or face another trial.

In June last year, Tang, formerly of North Balwyn, was sentenced in the County Court to 10 years' jail, with a six-year minimum for keeping five Thai women as sex slaves.

Each of the women was said to have been required to work off debts between \$40,000 and \$45,000 by having sex with men.

All had previously worked in the sex industry.

Under agreements negotiated through a broker, the women were to have their travel expenses paid and were to be provided with accommodation, food and incidentals while in Australia.

According to the prosecution case, described in a judgement delivered today by Justice Geoffrey Eames in the Appeal Court, the women arrived in Australia at different times between August 2002 and May 2003. They were known as "contract girls" and worked at a Fitzroy brothel known as Club 417, which Tang owned.

The brothel charged clients \$110 for sex. From that amount, \$43 went to the women and the rest to owners of their contract. The debt was reduced by \$50 for each client, and the women were permitted to work for themselves on their single day off per week.

Charges were laid after the brothel was raided on May 31, 2003.

Justice Eames said the prosecution argued that the women were controlled about where they lived and when and where they worked. He said two of the women paid off their debts, and were given back their passports, which were being held at the brothel.

In her first trial, the jurors were unable to agree on verdicts for the charges faced by Tang. She was re-tried last year and found guilty of five counts of possessing a slave, and five of using a slave.

Justice Eames said he would uphold a ground of Tang's appeal complaining about trial judge Michael McInerney's direction about the definition of slavery.

He said Judge McInerney had the misfortune to be the first judge in Australia to devise directions about the offences, and the great majority of his rulings were not challenged.

Justice Eames said Judge McInerney acted with care in performing a difficult task, and considered a wide range of submissions in two trials.

But he said the slavery definition needed to make it clear that Tang must be proved to have acted with the knowledge that she was dealing with victims as though they were (her) property. She could not be acting in the belief that, for example, she was their employer.

The Court of Appeal president, Justice Chris Maxwell, and Justice Peter Buchanan, also upheld the appeal.

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