

Beyond sex trafficking

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What do Ashburton, North Fitzroy and Kew have in common, apart from being relatively affluent Melbourne suburbs? They are suburbs where foreign women have been found locked up while paying debt bondage contracts by providing unpaid sexual acts in Melbourne brothels. Such women are victims of people trafficking, a crime involving the recruitment, movement and exploitation of human contraband.

In December 2004, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) arrested men in relation to women locked up in Ashburton and laid charges against the aptly named Mr Hoo and Mr Ho (Who are they? Big fish? Organised criminals? Hapless middlemen?). These arrests are another feather in the cap of the AFP's Transnational Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking Team. The AFP alleges that Hoo and Ho, along with Mr Yeung (who has skipped the country) recruited women from Thailand, Korea and Hong Kong to Australia for sexual exploitation in brothels.

Hoo allegedly kept three Thai women locked in a suburban Ashburton house and Ho allegedly tried to sell a twenty-one year old women for \$21 000. Hoo has been charged with three counts of possessing a slave while Ho is the first person ever charged with entering into a commercial transaction involving a slave under laws introduced in 1999. The pair were arrested in South Yarra and were refused bail on 3 December in the Melbourne Magistrates' Court.

The Hoo and Ho arrests followed hot on the heels of the 2004 committal hearings of three others charged with sexual servitude offences related to a brothel at 417 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, which was also an AFP bust.

Such arrests would have been most unlikely before a change of government approach to sex trafficking which began two years ago. Before then, foreign women in brothels who had every appearance of being victims of sex trafficking were routinely taken directly to immigration detention centres, given no assistance, and deported, with little, if any, investigation into their circumstances.

For example, take the Gary Glazner Clifton Hotel prostitution racket in Kew Junction in the late 1990s. In that instance, Asian women were kept upstairs at the Clifton Hotel and ferried to brothels. Most of the women were deported by the Immigration Department, much to the frustration of those trying to investigate and prosecute the case based on testimonies the women may have given if they could have stayed in the country. More recently, Ms Puongtong Simaplee, who was picked up in an immigration department raid on a Sydney brothel, died after inadequate medical treatment for heroin withdrawal in the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre in September 2001 within days of telling immigration officials she had been sold into prostitution aged twelve and brought to Australia aged fifteen.

Fortunately, mandatory detention and deportation of women victims of sex trafficking by the Australian government is largely a thing of the past. Now, the women can

sometimes obtain a visa to stay in Australia (but this is in the main limited to those women who are useful as witnesses for an investigation or prosecution). Some other positive indications of Australia's progress against sex trafficking include the introduction of a \$20 million Federal Government funding package to fight sex trafficking. The money is split between various government agencies such as the AFP, the Attorney General's Department and trafficking victim support program which, though very limited in its eligibility criteria, is a step in the right direction. Meanwhile, the Attorney General's Department has funding to develop a community awareness campaign about sex trafficking.

These counter-trafficking measures indicate that despite the Federal Government's hard-line approach to border control (witness the recent Bakhtiyari family deportation) the Government can be softer towards sex trafficking victims. The softening has come in response to a sustained and successful campaign by Project Respect, a Melbourne non-government organisation that works with women in the sex industry (an organisation which the author has assisted in the past). That Project Respect's campaign was focused on sex trafficking may explain why the Government's anti-trafficking measures have been limited to trafficking for sexual exploitation rather than including broader types of labour exploitation.

A new, broader campaign and reform program is needed. As 2005 begins, the new frontier for anti-people trafficking work in Australia is outside the sex industry. World wide, the clamour for economic opportunity pulls people from the developing to the developed world. In recent years, developed countries have tightened their borders, squeezing would-be migrants into illegal migration channels. Cheap migrant labour will continue to be exploited in Western countries. In the USA, trafficking is known to occur into child care and domestic roles, restaurants, agricultural jobs such as fruit picking and construction sites. In this global reality, traffickers transport countless numbers of people across borders in all kinds of exploitative circumstances.

Despite a tendency by Australian governments to ignore people trafficking into areas other than the sex industry, some cases of non-sexual trafficking have come to public attention, including cases of Indian stonemasons, South African chefs, a South African construction worker and an Eastern European artist (see documentation of these trafficking cases by *Project Respect*, 2004 - www.projectrespect.org.au).

We ignore forms of trafficking outside the sex industry at our peril. We must move our attention beyond sex trafficking to other industries. We should do this for three main reasons. First, to preserve our labour standards. Second, to prevent profit flowing to traffickers, who may be involved in other forms of serious crime. Thirdly, and in my view most importantly, to protect immigrants from exploitation. People trafficking is modern day slavery. Sexual slavery is particularly shocking but in 2005, any kind of slavery is unacceptable.