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OF QUEENSLAND  
AUSTRALIA

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## NEWS REPORT

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Every year, four million people are trafficked around the world most being women sold into prostitution. In a rare public appearance, one of the nation's experts on human trafficking, Kathleen Maltzahn, is in Perth to give her take on the growing epidemic that extends to our own back yard.

It was like an action scene straight out of Hollywood. Only, the actors were real and the stakes higher. Sitting in a blacked out minivan in searing heat on the outskirts of Manila, Kathleen Maltzahn, a human rights activist from Melbourne watched anxiously as armed police descended on a group of dilapidated buildings. Could they free those trapped inside? Up to 500 women and girls trafficked for sex.

Sadly, loose talk had led to a tip off and the escape of the traffickers and their captives. Maltzahn turned to comfort the dark haired teenager sitting beside her. At 17, 'Emma' had witnessed first hand all the horrors of the brothel prison. Sold by a trusted school friend for just 500 pesos, she was repeatedly prostituted and raped, sometimes by up to 19 men a day, in tiny rooms littered with rubbish and human waste. When she finally escaped, she took with her a lone possession: handwritten notes from other girls, begging their parents to come and save them. And with Maltzahn's help, she had contacted National Bureau of Investigation officers in Manila.

'I was bitterly disappointed. Emma's determination in wanting to help the other girls get out of this hellhole had amounted to nothing,' sighs Maltzahn of the failed operation in 1993.

Fortunately, though, the experience was not wasted. Returning home to Australia in 1995, having spent five years witnessing the sex trafficking nightmare of the Philippines, the young outreach worker decided to go where no one had gone before gathering evidence of sex trafficking in Australia while setting up the nation's first support agency for victims, Project Respect, in Melbourne.

'The best way of getting over feeling upset about something is to try to stop it or change it,' says Maltzahn resolutely. But her timing couldn't have been worse. "This was when people didn't believe trafficking existed here. They would say "You're not going to get anywhere, because women in the sex industry are too hard to work with. They're either junkies or students who think the work is fabulous for them",' she says.

Maltzahn's investigations into sex trafficking had humble beginnings. For \$50 a month, she rented desk space upstairs in a shabby activist bolthole behind the Fitzroy Uniting Church in Melbourne. By day she would deal with office work. By night, she would doorknock brothels, trying to find harrowing tales from trafficked workers.

Meagre grants trickled in, keeping her dream to save sex slaves alive. \$3000 from the parents of a friend, another donation from the Uniting Church while Maltzahn delivered pizzas to make ends meet. As for the naysayers, they only made the softly spoken activist more determined in her quest.

'The more the message was 'Don't do this!', the more I thought "Oh yeah, I'll show you!";' says Maltzahn, who suggests the likely source for her bloody-mindedness and philanthropic tendencies is genetic. Her mother, Kath, a former school teacher, has been a 'crusader for the underprivileged most of her life', she says. And her great grandmother, Granny Winston, was also struck by the philanthropic bug. At her funeral in Lancashire, England, in the 1950s, mourners included prostitutes whom she had befriended and helped throughout her life.

'I think my mum's family has a real sense of justice and of what's right. I just soaked up those values,' says Maltzahn, 42. Her partner Helena Maher, 39, is a health policy worker.

So what did Maltzahn discover about the flesh trade in Australia? For a start, the victim's stories were incredibly consistent. Most women were from Asia and had been lured to Australia with the promise of legitimate work. Jobs included waitressing in karaoke bars and restaurants while some European women claimed to have been offered bogus jobs as air stewards. Some had worked as prostitutes previously, others had not.

Those recruited to work in the sex industry believed there would be an element of choice about the job when they worked and whom they had sex with. But on arriving in Australia, their dreams were quickly shattered.

'They would be told they had to pay off fake debts of around \$30,000 - \$40,000,' says Maltzahn. 'They were made to do prostitution for very long hours, even when they had their period. They were not allowed to refuse specific customers, sex without a condom, or any type of sexual acts. If they tried to escape, they experienced terrible violence and death threats to family members.'

Maltzahn has helped close to 60 trafficked women in Australia. One of them, 'Amy', was put in touch with her by members of a secret underground network dedicated to helping trafficked women escape their captors. Contacted one Friday night, within hours Maltzahn had packed her bags for a plane to Sydney. Amy, as it turned out, had been brought to Australia from Thailand by a female trafficker who herself had been trafficked in Japan. Forced to work in a Kings Cross brothel, she was regularly beaten by customers and raped.

On discovering her escape, her captors instigated a barrage of threatening phone calls as well as desperate messages to Amy's mobile from fellow trafficked women at the brothel and even her sister in Thailand begging her not to go to the police. Sticking to her guns, Amy, with Maltzahn's help, contacted the Australian Federal Police. Her possessions and passport were returned and, on leaving for her homeland, she clutched in her hand Maltzahn's phone number.

'She said she would tell her traffickers in Thailand that if anything happened to her, we would know about it in Australia and come after them,' says Maltzahn. The activist's unique work provokes a mixed bag of emotions for her.

'You feel angry, sad and relieved when you finally get to talk to these women and tell them there are lawyers, police and medical professionals who can help them,' she says. 'They don't know that. They just feel trapped.'

Another victim, 'Melanie', is also close to the activist's heart. As a young girl growing up in Thailand, she was beaten by her father and later by her husband. Fleeing with her newborn daughter, she moved in with her mother. She set up a small business only to have it collapse in Thailand's economic downturn of the mid 90s. With mounting debts and in complete desperation, she accepted a job working in a bar in Australia. Tearfully she bid farewell to her mother and daughter. Within months she was trafficked as a prostitute.

'She eventually finished her contract,' Maltzahn says. 'Now she is in no man's land, trying to get a visa here, fearful of returning home to Thailand. All the while her daughter is getting older. I've been there when she rings her. She calls her every single day. To witness that level of love and devotion a love that made her come here in the first place it is terribly moving.'

So has Maltzahn ever feared for her own safety in her maverick profession? 'I always felt the risks to trafficked women were much greater because if something was to happen to me, it would draw attention,' she says.

Nevertheless, the job definitely has its perils. A few years ago, the Project Respect team investigated reports of a trafficking ring operating in Melbourne under the guise of a lonely hearts club. A male customer tipped them off about his suspicions, but investigations led nowhere.

'Certainly, whatever it was, it was high stakes because two of the people running it were murdered,' Maltzahn says.

Last year she launched her book *Trafficked*, the first detailed account of the sex slave trade in Australia, which has earned its author high praise from the likes of anti sex trafficking campaigner turned MP Pru Goward.

'She is a saint who would do her work for nothing,' says Goward.

The 125 page book, which took four years to compile, is now considered an essential resource for judges, lawyers, community workers and anyone wanting to grapple with the complexities of sex trafficking.

So could trafficked women be working in Perth? One source in the local sex industry says that not only are women being trafficked here but the practice is 'huge'. The source names three brothels, all on suburban thoroughfares, that are renowned for housing illegal workers. She claims many are students brought across from Asia on visas that are sorted out by a lone operator in Northbridge. Once in Perth, they must pay off 'debts' of about \$30,000.

'The girls go to Sydney and, when they are no longer sellable, they are brought to Perth,' the source tells STM. 'It is killing our industry because people are selling their services at cheaper prices and without protection.'

Former madam Linda Watson, who worked in Perth's sex industry for two decades and now runs Linda's House of Hope, a sanctuary for ex-prostitutes, says from what she's seen and heard, the flesh trade is a 'real problem' in the west. She talks of an Indian woman who was trafficked to Australia at age nine. Her trafficker was her father who would solicit her customers. In Perth, she worked out of a brothel in the city before finally escaping the sex industry in 1999 to live a quiet life in country WA.

'Often women have come to Perth expecting to take on a legitimate job such as cleaning or bar work,' Watson says. 'The next thing they know, they have to pay off a debt. They have no other option because their passports are taken away and they are threatened with violence.'

Watson also claims that during her days working as a brothel madam in the 1980s she was offered \$1000 a week by an international Asian syndicate to turn a blind eye to the sex trade. 'They told me I could keep 40 per cent of the girls takings on top of the \$1000 but the other 60 per cent had to be paid directly to the syndicate,' she says.

These days, like Kathleen Maltzahn, Watson remains on standby for a phone call that could change a life.

'I'm always waiting for the phone to ring and someone to say "Rescue me!" or "Come and get me". If we could just free some of these girls and young children,' she says, her voice trailing off.

'There is so much money to be made in prostitution, it's scary. It's much easier trafficking women than drugs. It is so organised and sophisticated. The traffickers are so clever they have even outwitted our own police department.'

In Perth, raids on brothels have turned up illegal female immigrants, leading to fears that the city is being targeted by international organised sex slave traders. Commenting on one swoop on a West Perth brothel in which three illegal immigrants were discovered, an Immigration Department spokesperson says: 'The women had not revealed any links to overseas syndicates but that's not to say there are no links. You have always got to suspect that there is something broader.'

For Kathleen Maltzahn, the inspiration to continue to help trafficked women is not hard to find. It's in their eyes and their hearts.

'If you have your humanity stripped away which is what slavery is and you have been treated like an animal, yet you still continue to behave like an incredibly ethical person, I think that is remarkable and very moving. People say "Why don't you give up?", but how can I when these women who have been through slavery haven't given up and are still helping other women,' she says.

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