



HUMAN TRAFFICKING WORKING GROUP
Dr Andreas Schloenhardt (Coordinator)

The University of Queensland
TC Beirne School of Law

The University of British Columbia
Centre of International Relations

www.law.uq.edu.au/humantrafficking

NEWS REPORT

Headline	Trapped: Asian women tricked into life of sex slavery
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Correction:

The article mistakenly states there are “23 brothels in Australia”. This should be “23 brothels in Queensland”

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INSIGHT

The stories behind the news

Asian women tricked into life of slavery

TRAPPED

It seemed like a proposal of hope but it turned into a living nightmare.

Born into poverty in the Philippines, a 25-year-old girl, lived at home in Manila with nine other family members and worked daily in a sewing factory for \$10 per week.

In 2001, her family was approached by a man offering marriage as a means for her to acquire a visa to enter Australia for work.

Her mother, who was in poor health, encouraged her to accept so she could help out the family by sending money home.

The girl, known as Ms G, arrived in Australia in 2002, and was met by her future employers, who were supposed to give her work in their shop.

She was raped repeatedly, made to work 17-hour days seven days a week in both their shop and their home, for little or no pay, and her passport was confiscated.

Ms G eventually escaped in December 2002 and her "employers", the Kovacs of Weipa, were tried and convicted in 2007.

Zoltan Kovacs is still in prison, serving an eight-year sentence, while his wife, Melita, has since been released.

The couple have successfully appealed the case on evidential matters and a retrial will take place this year.

The case of Ms G highlights the dangers for women entering the country who are brought to live in remote and rural areas.

Without knowing where to turn for help, and having no support network, they are completely vulnerable to exploitation.

Human trafficking in Australia is the subject of a new report released by Dr Andreas Schloenhardt of the University of Queensland, who presented it to MacDonnells Law in Cairns yesterday.

Dr Schloenhardt said the purpose of his report was to cut through the blur of exaggerated reports and generalisations about trafficking in Australia, to find out what are its true patterns and levels.

Trafficking, he said, relates to the way people are brought into the country when they are recruited overseas – usually they are told lies about either what they will be doing or the amount of money they will make – and slavery relates to the conditions in which they are kept, usually it involves extreme work hours, threats of or actual violence and rape.

Dr Schloenhardt said in comparison to other countries, the level of trafficking in Australia is low because of its isolation, but it is extremely difficult to quantify.

Figures vary dramatically, from government and police sources that put the amount in the hundreds per year, to non-governmental organisations – which depend more on word of mouth rather than the amount of official complainants – who place the figure in the thousands.

But Dr Schloenhardt did find a few

Human trafficking in Australia is a dark and sleazy world which is difficult to quantify. DENISE CARTER talks to Dr Andreas Schloenhardt, who has released a report about its myths and realities



Abusive: Melita and Zoltan Kovacs were jailed after a court found they enslaved a Filipina girl in 2002.

They are all women, all adults and all Asian. Often the women are terrified or worried about being sent home.

– Dr Andreas Schloenhardt

common denominators for victims who come to Australia.

"They are all women, all adults, and all Asian," he said.

Having spoken to community members in Townsville he found out from migration agents

that men using marriage as a way of bringing women into the country might be becoming a pattern.

When the women arrive, they are subjected to domestic violence, or enslaved, but many are too afraid to speak out.

"Often the women are terrified, or worried about being sent home," Dr Schloenhardt said.

Some are even coerced into working in the sex industry.

However, it would be a mistake to believe all women who are trafficked into Australia's sex industry are tricked into doing so.

Most trafficked women know they will be working in that field and enter Australia on a student or a tourist visa to do so.

What they don't know is they will be enslaved with a debt bond, usually an inflated summation of their flight and living expenses, and will have to provide sexual services for up to eight months free of charge.

Dr Schloenhardt is now working on a report on the link between human trafficking and the sex industry.

He said legal brothels represented only a small part of the prostitution industry in Australia and that the system was pushing more practices underground.

"There are 23 legal brothels in Australia and about 100 illegal ones," Dr Schloenhardt said.

"And legal brothels are at a disadvantage."

In Queensland, a licence to run a legal brothel costs \$32,500 per year. They are only allowed to have five rooms so there is a cap on the amount of money they can make, and they have to abide by the Prostitution Licensing Authority rules.

Annie Cowell is co-owner of The Forbidden Apple, one of Cairns' two legal brothels.

She said there were about three illegal brothels in Cairns, which made life difficult for her business.

"The Queensland sex industry is not regulated properly," Ms Cowell said.

"All you have to do is put an ad in the paper and off you go."

Ms Cowell said agents can place girls' names in the paper and organise the meetings with clients, the girls don't have to be registered with the PLA, as her brothel girls do, and they don't even have to have a sexual health certificate.

There is no way of knowing, therefore, who they are or what their situations are.

"God knows what's going on," Ms Cowell said.

Another problem in tackling incidences of slavery and trafficking in Australia is the poor success rate of convictions.

"There have only been three convictions of sex slavery and one of trafficking Australia-wide in the past five years, out of 10 prosecutions," Dr Schloenhardt said.

"Victims don't want to testify. In Sydney, there was an operation which involved 18 months monitoring a brothel.

"Finally it was raided by police. Five people were arrested and there were 10 victims, but there was not enough evidence to charge – no one wanted to testify against the brothel owner."

Dr Schloenhardt said the answer needed to come from many angles.

"We need a better level of awareness, changes in policy, victim support, and education," he said.

"The victims need to be made to feel safe, and have the basics, somewhere to stay, work and eat, and to have counselling."

Currently the victims are only allowed to stay in Australia if they help with investigations.

Dr Schloenhardt also suggested getting rid of taboos concerning the sex industry, to improve transparency and so people could speak more openly.

"Moralistic debate about prostitution being good or bad doesn't help," he said.