



THE UNIVERSITY  
OF QUEENSLAND  
AUSTRALIA

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING WORKING GROUP

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## NEWS REPORT

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The boss would kick her awake. Every time she opened her eyes, the nightmare began again. There was no escape from the men - their hair, their sweat, their predatory breath. Many were using amphetamines. They hit her. Sometimes one would hold a gun to her head. But there was no choice, she says. She was owned by the mob. "I was so scared of them. Even now I am still scared." Once, the boss took her for a drive into the bush. "She told me 'a girl like you, I can bury anywhere here.' If something happened to me ... nobody would know."

For seven months, she was locked in a brothel, seeing 15 men a day, in round-the-clock shifts. As she speaks tears stream down her cheeks and her breath shudders. More than five years later, the memories still haunt her. "It was like in prison," she says.

She calls herself "Mae" but that is not her name. She still fears the people who bought and sold her. She speaks softly, in halting English and in Thai. But she is not in Thailand. The prison-brothel she describes may sound like something from the slums of Bangkok or Mumbai, but the reality is closer to home. Mae was trafficked to Melbourne and the brutal things done to her took place in suburbs where we live.

Her story begins with poverty — and a plane ticket. Mae was born into a poor family in Thailand. Her mother worked three jobs, desperately trying to get enough money to pay for her daughter's education. When Mae was in her early 20s, a cousin offered her a restaurant job in Australia. Mae leapt at the chance. She thought she could send money back to help her mother.

But as soon as she got to Australia, her cousin deposited her with the madam of a Melbourne brothel. The woman took her passport and told her she owed \$40,000 for her visa and travel costs. Mae's English is broken, but her meaning is clear: she had been sold. "I didn't have no choice," she says. "The first day, I was so confused. I couldn't believe this was happening to me. The boss showed me how to use the room, how to use the condom, and how to use KY." Once the customer came in, he would wait in the waiting room and all the girls would have to take turns to come to walk in front of him. He would pick anyone and we would go to the room."

Mae says she had never seen the inside of a brothel before. For the next seven months, it was all she would know. "I could not get out of the brothel, even to get fresh air." Mae had to work seven days a week, often 24 hours a day. She lived in the brothel, sleeping on the couch or in the "working room", if it was free. The boss' husband was allegedly a drug dealer, heavily involved with organised crime. Mae says many of the women in the brothel took speed and ecstasy. Soon, she was taking drugs, too. "We couldn't put up with the situation ... 15 customers a day and 24 hours a day. We couldn't do it without drugs." It took its toll. For a time, Mae was so sick that she could not walk. "I thought I wasn't a human," she says. For seven brutal months, Mae was never paid. When she finally bought back her freedom, she had paid with \$40,000 worth of sex.

Mae is not the only woman to have done this. The United Nations ranks human trafficking as the third largest transnational crime, after drugs trafficking and the arms trade. Melbourne is a "major destination" of trafficked women in Australia, says federal policewoman Jennifer Cullen, national coordinator of the Australian Federal Police's anti-trafficking team.

About 258 suspected cases of sex trafficking have been referred to the AFP since 2004. During this time, the Federal Government has identified 112 victims, 60 per cent of whom are from Thailand, and another 20 per cent from South Korea. Thirty-two of these victims have been found in Victoria, and according to Tanya Plibersek, Minister for the Status of Women

and co-ordinator of the federal victim support program, the number is likely to be much higher as many cases are not detected.

A spokeswoman for anti-trafficking organisation Project Respect says the group helped seven trafficked women in Melbourne during 2008, only two of whom are included in Federal Government statistics.

The key element of trafficking, says Jennifer Cullen, is "removing the right to choose". Trafficking contracts are illegal, she says, because they involve threat, force, and deception. The exploitation ranges from debt bondage through to literal slavery. (Last August the High Court upheld the conviction of Wei Tang, a Brunswick Street brothel owner, for keeping five Thai women as sex slaves.) While some women are rescued by AFP or Department of Immigration raids and others escape, or are freed after they pay off their whole "debt", for many, the ordeal does not end when they leave the brothel.

Kathleen Maltzahn, former brothel outreach worker and founder of Project Respect, says trafficking "is about erasing a person. It is about saying you are an animal, you're not a person. You don't count for anything. The psychological and physical impact of that is very profound." When I talk to women years later, they talk about the change in their lives and how hard it's been to recover, how they lost their sense of who they were."

One way in which the ordeal continues for some women is the Federal Government's response to trafficking, which has been widely criticised for failing to take a more human rights-based approach to victims. At present ongoing assistance is linked to the victim's role in a viable prosecution of a trafficker.

Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick says: "At the minute, the main thrust of Australia's response to human trafficking is around law enforcement. But with that approach, when we look at the person who has been trafficked we see them just as a witness in the case against the trafficker." Victim support and visas enabling them to remain lawfully in Australia are only available to those women who are "of interest" to law enforcement agencies.

These victims receive a 30-day visa and support while law enforcement agencies decide whether their presence in Australia is necessary to assist in a prosecution or investigation. If the trafficker has vanished, or if victims are too afraid to speak to police, they face deportation. Those who do help police often feel as though they have moved from "debt bondage to witness bondage", says David Manne, a human rights lawyer who has represented several allegedly trafficked women in Melbourne. They feel forced to testify, he says, so they can stay in the country. In cases he worked on, he says, "the human rights of the women involved were ignored".

A Department of Immigration spokeswoman says that following discussions with community and government agencies, the Federal Government is considering changes to the visa framework for trafficked women to make it simpler and more flexible.

For Mae, the road out of the brothel has been long and hard. For several months after she finished her "contract" she had little choice but to stay in the brothel. She was addicted to drugs, and trying to save money to return to Thailand. Although the conditions were better than before, she says she still felt trapped. She was only able to give up prostitution when a client offered to support her and gave her a place to stay.

Since then, she has met a loving husband, and has children she describes as "the hope of my life". It is because of them that she quit drugs. But unless she is granted a humanitarian

visa that will enable her to stay in Australia, she will be sent back to Thailand without them. She is not eligible to receive victim support or a witness protection visa, she says, because she is too afraid to speak to police." My life is better now but it is still not the same as other people," she says. The memories of life in the brothel are still too real, and she is haunted by the thought of those she left behind.

Traumatised and alone in a foreign country, many trafficked women like Mae struggle to escape the cycle of substance abuse and prostitution. But one remarkable woman, forced into prostitution in Sydney, is throwing them a lifeline.

Maria (an alias) was recognised as a victim by the Federal Government, and accepted into the victim support scheme. But she knows many others are not so lucky. So with the help of Project Respect, she is starting a Thai noodle bar in Melbourne to employ trafficked women. It will be a way out of prostitution, she says, and a place where women can regain their sense of identity. Mae will be one of the first to work in the noodle bar, if her visa application is successful. Like Mae, Maria came to Australia thinking she would work in a restaurant.

The project has received \$65,000 in funding from the Victorian Government, and Maria hopes to raise another \$170,000 by the middle of this year. "I think women can help each other to run the restaurant and they won't need to work in the brothels," Maria says. "We don't want to do prostitution."

A lot of people don't know this is happening. They don't know what is happening behind closed doors." But a hint of what is happening is there for all to see. Every day the services associated with trafficked women are openly advertised in newspapers and online: "exotic", "new girls every week", "will do anything".

But even those who buy sex from these women do not see the brutal reality of their imprisonment. "I didn't think this would happen in a civilised country like Australia," Mae says. "But it did. It happened to me."

Mae spoke to *The Age* with the help of an interpreter.

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