

# A trade in human suffering

**Victims are lured to Australia with the promise of respectable jobs. They are given false documents to get into the country. When they arrive they are told they have to work in the sex industry until they've paid off impossible debts.**

It's known as sexual servitude - the growing trade in sexual labour for the commercial sex industry.

The need for countries like Australia to keep pace with the global fight against sex trafficking was highlighted at a recent international conference organised by the US Department of State.

Grant Edwards, from the AFP Transnational Sexual Offences Team, was one of the leading experts discussing how best to deal with the growing problem.

"Law enforcement agencies throughout the world are facing a difficult task combating the crime," Federal Agent Edwards said.

One of the main aims of the conference was to come up with a "toolkit" to assist with detection, prevention and prosecution of offenders.

Traditionally victims come from countries where there is conflict, social disruption, political instability and economic depression.

"The trafficking of female family members, whether child or adult, is often deemed an acceptable practice in many cultures," Federal Agent Edwards said.

"These practices can provide much-needed economic prosperity to an already impoverished family and be seen by these people as a potential way out of a life of poverty and oppression."

However, many women who migrate to work in the sex industry find themselves victims of sexual servitude.

Australia is attractive to human traffickers, "mainly due to our geographic proximity to South East Asia, where organised crime groups tend to target women and children for the purpose of sexual exploitation".

It is important to differentiate between human trafficking and people smuggling.

Human trafficking for the sex industry is recruiting people, often by using deception, for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery or servitude. Smuggling is bringing people into a country illegally.

"Human trafficking uses people as a commodity rather than just providing unlawful services as a means to gain entry to a country," Federal Agent Edwards said.

Due to its illicit nature it is hard to quantify the extent of the problem in Australia, according to a recent report, *Trafficking and the Sex Industry: from Impunity to Protection*, prepared for the Australian Parliament Information and Research Services by Dr Kerry Carrington (Social Policy Group) and Jane Hearn (Law and Bills Digest Group).

However, the report suggests that the Australian sex trafficking industry nets about one million dollars each week.

"In Australia, the high and continuing demand for young Asian sex workers, in excess of local supply, creates a market opportunity for traffickers in women and children from countries like Thailand, the Philippines, China and Cambodia," the report states.

The Australian Government is reviewing its laws in light of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking, in which there is an obligation to punish the traffickers and support the victims.

The Government has also established the Transnational Sexual Offences Team, which is part of the AFP's Transnational Crime Coordination Centre, based in Canberra.

The team coordinates national and international sex offences investigations including:

- sexual servitude and human trafficking;
- paedophilia;
- sex tourism (Australians travelling overseas for sexual activity with children); and
- internet sexual exploitation.

Some of the AFP's strategies to combat human trafficking include:

- identifying syndicates;
- tracking money laundering;
- tapping into regional and international networks; and
- liaising with Non Government Organisations, who have an interest in combating sex trafficking and paedophilia.

"Certainly there are a number of critical areas with which law enforcement should focus upon in taking up the fight against organised crime," Federal Agent Edwards said.

"Having multi-jurisdictional and multi-faceted investigation teams will be critical in the battle, which also needs to be backed up by supportive legislation."