

Sex Trafficking in Australia: Why Females are Disproportionately Victimized

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Article 3, paragraph (a) of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines Human Trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.” Types of exploitation can include sexual services, forced labour, slavery or that similar to or for the removal of organs.¹ The most common type of human trafficking is sex trafficking, which is exploitation for the purpose of sexual slavery. Unfortunately, women are most commonly victimized by sex trafficking, as their rights continue to be disrespected and violated disproportionately due to economic and legal discrimination and social norms. Sex trafficking occurs internationally, in both first and third world countries including Australia. By examining the perpetrators and victims of sex trafficking in Australia and the negative impacts this has on both micro and macro levels, it will become evident that women are disproportionately disadvantaged and at a much greater risk to become victims of this inhumanity.

Trafficking in Australia: this really exists?

Sex trafficking is prevalent globally, affecting men, women and children in both developed and developing nations. However, it is a common misconception that sex trafficking

¹ Unodc.org. (2019). *What is Human Trafficking?*. [online] Available at: https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html#What_is_Human_Trafficking [Accessed 1 Jan. 2019].

does not exist in developed countries, let alone Australia. How can a country with great economic growth, access to healthcare and social services be faced with a tribulation so severe? The scope of sex trafficking is extremely broad, with individuals being controlled by pimps, gangs or family.

Victims do not meet a specific set of characteristics and can range in age from children to adults. However, most women sexually trafficked in Australia are native to South-East Asia and China and many enter on forged visas or other fake documentation. These women are then transferred to brothels around the country, while they are restricted in their movements and have personal identification i.e. passports withheld. It is common for these women to then be forced to pay debts of up to \$40,000 AUD.² Vulnerable women are often lured to developed countries, like Australia, with false guarantee of a stable income and a higher quality life.³ This creates complete control over victims making it difficult for them to escape or for authorities to locate them.

Locating victims: why is this difficult?

The exact number of those trafficked worldwide is unknown, as perpetrators and victims are extremely difficult to track. It is proposed that the number of victims worldwide is in the millions, while “estimates given to a 2004 parliamentary inquiry into sexual servitude in Australia ranged from 300 to 1000 trafficked women annually.”⁴ Due to its commonality, it would seem that police and other anti-crime organizations would be able to easily identify victims of sex trafficking, as victims are the most tangible evidence of the practice. However,

² Phillips, J. (2008). *People trafficking: an update on Australia's response – Parliament of Australia*. [online] Aph.gov.au. Available at:

https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp0809/09rp05#problem [Accessed 1 Jan. 2019].

³ O'Brien E., Hayes S., Carpenter B. (2013) *The Politics of Sex Trafficking*. In: *The Politics of Sex Trafficking*. Critical Criminological Perspectives. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

⁴ Archive.homeaffairs.gov.au. (n.d.). *Australia's response to human trafficking*. [online] Available at: <https://archive.homeaffairs.gov.au/about/crime/human-trafficking/australias-response> [Accessed 1 Jan. 2019].

many factors pose problems with effortlessly identifying victims and in turn, perpetrators. Recognition of this can be done by identifying victims in countries of transit, or most commonly, countries of destination. Trafficking is manifest upon arrival, as this is when exploitation occurs.

National efforts to curb trafficking are often met with intense political pressure to ensure convictions. Each trafficking case poses a number of challenges to state and interstate anti-crime bodies as each situation is unique. This makes it difficult to base legal proceedings on precedent. Police are then responsible for investigating reported trafficking, to then determine if there is a case and if so, which of these will go through with prosecution and which will not. The welfare process, which provides support to victims and the criminal investigation will then occur simultaneously.⁵

Women: why are they most likely to be victims?

Women are undoubtedly the most likely to be victimized by human trafficking in the form of sexual exploitation.⁶ Despite the lack of empirical evidence on the exact number of individuals being trafficked, the focal point of responses has been on females being exploited for sexual purposes. It is important to note that each prosecuted case in Australia is not unique and does not fit one particular stereotype of sexual trafficking.⁷ A report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime claims that approximately seventy-one percent of all trafficking victims are women. It is important to understand the factors that lead to this disproportionality including women more likely being affected by discrimination and poverty, factors that hinder

⁵ Segrave, M., Pickering, S. (2009). *Sex Trafficking*. London: Willan.

⁶ United Nations Sustainable Development. (n.d.). *Report: Majority of trafficking victims are women and girls*. [online] Available at: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/blog/2016/12/report-majority-of-trafficking-victims-are-women-and-girls-one-third-children/> [Accessed 1 Jan. 2019].

⁷ Australian Institute of Criminology. (2017). *Trafficking in persons in Australia*. [online] Available at: <https://aic.gov.au/publications/mr/mr19/trafficking-persons-australia> [Accessed 17 Dec. 2018].

access to education, employment and other resources.⁸ Social systems fail to accept that females lack equality in these aspects and need to deal with these individually before dealt with on a macro level.

Australia's response to sex trafficking

The Australian government has responded to sex trafficking by developing initiatives aimed at fostering relationships between local and overseas governments (particularly in the Asia Pacific region). These initiatives attempt to alleviate social and economic inequalities that allow trafficking to transpire. The Bali Process of 2002-2003, co-chaired by Australia and Indonesia, includes 49 members and aimed to raise regional awareness of the consequences of trafficking. The Bali Counter Terrorism Process emerged from this partnership. Both Indonesia and Australia issued a report stating its various achievements.

The Transnational Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking Team, new victim support methods, legislative improvements and extended victim support measures were implemented in October 2003, costing the Australian government approximately \$20 million. The aim was predominately to decrease sex trafficking. The Attorney General's Department produced a 2004 Action Plan to Eradicate Trafficking in Persons, which upheld government commitment in the recognizing the global prevalence of trafficking.⁹

Developments since include Australia ratifying the United Nations' Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (especially women and children), funding into regional trafficking activities and attendance at the United Nations' Vienna Forum to Fight Human Trafficking in 2008, to name a few. "Australia's National Action Plan to Combat Human

⁸ Stopvaw.org. (2018). *Trafficking in Women*. [online] Available at: http://www.stopvaw.org/trafficking_in_women [Accessed 1 Jan. 2019].

⁹ Archive.homeaffairs.gov.au. (n.d.). *Australia's response to human trafficking*. [online] Available at: <https://archive.homeaffairs.gov.au/about/crime/human-trafficking/australias-response> [Accessed 1 Jan. 2019].

Trafficking and Slavery 2015–19 provides the strategic framework for Australia's response to human trafficking and slavery. The plan was developed with government and non-government partners, and was launched by the Minister for Justice, the Hon Michael Keenan MP, on 2 December 2014.” The Department of Home Affairs chairs the Interdepartmental Committee on Human Trafficking and Slavery, which oversees the country’s response to trafficking.¹⁰

What can we do as individuals to curb sex trafficking in Australia or abroad?

It is valuable for individuals to become aware of the signs of those being trafficked. These signs include poor physical health such as showing signs of sexual abuse or lacking medical care, lacking individual control i.e. having few personal possessions, money, identification or not being able to speak for themselves, indicating abnormal behaviour or poor mental health by seeming anxious, submissive or avoiding eye contact. Other signs may include an inability to recognize one’s whereabouts or inconsistency when telling stories.¹¹ These are not all inclusive and indicate the need for professional assessment. Feminist activism is a great first step, as it has accelerated and expanded crime control frameworks, developed a complex approach and understanding to trafficking and increased state control. Becoming individually involved with local and governmental organizations, NGOs, lobbying local policymakers or simply becoming aware of the prevalence of sex trafficking is highly beneficial.

In conclusion

Women are in fact disproportionately impacted by sex trafficking, stemming from factors including inaccessibility to education, economic equality and equal employment opportunities.

¹⁰ Archive.homeaffairs.gov.au. (n.d.). *Australia's response to human trafficking*. [online] Available at: <https://archive.homeaffairs.gov.au/about/crime/human-trafficking/australias-response> [Accessed 1 Jan. 2019].

¹¹ National Human Trafficking Hotline. (2019). *Recognizing the Signs*. [online] Available at: <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/human-trafficking/recognizing-signs> [Accessed 17 Dec. 2018].

Patriarchal social systems only further impede women in gaining equality in these areas and further lead to a higher percentage of female victims. Although the majority of victims in Australia are from Asian countries, victims come from all backgrounds and age groups. The “need to establish reliable data-driven monitoring systems to better assess the nature and extent of trafficking into Australia, and the need to educate the Australian community to improve their understanding, given the important role they play in identifying and supporting trafficking victims,” is extremely important in curbing the number of sex trafficking victims.¹²

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¹² Joudo Larsen J & Renshaw L. 2012. *People trafficking in Australia*. Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice No. 441. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://aic.gov.au/publications/tandi/tandi441>.

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Want to get actively involved in ending sex-trafficking in Australia? Check out [Project Futures](#) who aim to end human trafficking of all kinds in Australia and Cambodia.