

Trafficking in Australia

An Interview with **Georgie Costello**



By *Jacqueline Musiitwa, JD candidate, University of Melbourne*

“One victim of trafficking is one too many”¹

Georgie Costello, currently a barrister in Melbourne, has risen to the call of refugees and trafficked women in Australia. Georgie has been a part of Project Respect, a Melbourne based non-profit organisation which for the past five years has existed as the only organisation in Australia that specifically deals with trafficked women. Project Respect provides direct services (tools to aid with their daily life) as well as advocates for law and policy reform concerning the rights of trafficked women.

In an effort to increase awareness of the topic, Georgie has used her fellowship with OzProspect to receive mentorship and work further publicising issues related to the trafficking of women.

Georgie and I could only touch the surface of topics relating to trafficked women.

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Why are women trafficked into Australia?

Trafficking for sexual purposes is the most common reason, according to a survey we did. Many of these women are cheated into believing they will be in professions other than the sex industry. Once in Australia, they are forced to pay off the numerous debts they allegedly incur to travel to Australia leaving them no choice but to be prostituted or do whatever else they are told. The debtors are often scrupulous in making sure they exploit the women as much as they can. Other labour industries such as domestic services, construction, hospitality, also have victims of trafficking, however, they have not received as much attention.

What is involved in the process of trafficking?

There are three parts to the trafficking journey: recruitment, transport, and exploitation. During the

recruitment period, the women are often deceived as to what will happen and how much money they will receive at the country of destination. Often, even those who know prostitution will take place never anticipate the amount of service they will be required to give.

Since these women are lucrative commodities they are usually escorted from the country of departure to their destination in Australia. After arrival they are then handed to the next link in the chain. This is the person who ends up exploiting them. It is for that reason that it unrealistic to try to trap traffickers at ports because often no crime committed yet.

Lastly, the exploitation phase includes violent control to exploit their labour potential in order for them to pay off their debts. Women are raped, beaten, locked up, threatened and coerced. Their travel documents are usually confiscated so once they get to Australia and decide they want to leave their situations it is almost impossible for them to do so.

Rather than being seen as victims, the tough immigration approach detains and deports them. The language barrier further traps trafficked women because they are unable to communicate with much of the outside world even if they did escape.

What developments in trafficking have taken place?

Government developments

At the beginning of this year, Australian immigration authorities instituted new trafficking visas. There are now four categories. The criminal justice visa, certified by the Attorney General, allows victims to stay in Australia to assist with criminal cases (witness to crime and/or criminals). The other three new visa categories are the one-month bridging visa, temporary and permanent trafficking visas. The one-month bridging visa allows the witnesses to get welfare support while deciding whether or not to stay. Very little information has been made avail-

able in relation to the temporary and the permanent trafficking visas.

Legal developments

The death of Miss Puongtong Simaplee in the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre², brought about a coronial inquest in New South Wales. Miss Simaplee was found in a brothel notorious for having trafficked women. She was locked up and a few days later was found dead lying in her faeces, urine and vomit. Even after the comment Georgie received of “Ms Costello, this is not a court of human rights,” it is instrumental that the coroner took into consideration several of the submissions made.

The immediate effect of the inquest was media attention and spread of information on trafficking. The lessons to be learned from trafficking and the current government reaction to it are that detaining trafficked women is not a means of solving the problem. Rather than immigration and detention centres where they are treated like criminals, other solutions should be found, not only for their safety but also for their dignity.

How can other people get involved with issues related to trafficking?

Legal and other professionals interested in the issue are welcome to contact Project Respect to see where they can be of use. Project Respect is financed by grants and donations, so we are on a tight budget and donations are always welcome. ■

For more information contact Project Respect

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1. On 13 October 2003, the Australian federal government announced a \$20 million package to combat people trafficking, saying “one victim on trafficking is one too many”. Project Respect was not a recipient of any of these funds.

2. See Project Respect website at www.projectrespect.org.au.