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BY Cameron Stewart  
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YOUNG ASIAN WOMEN ARE BEING LURED TO AUSTRALIA AND FORCED TO WORK IN BROTHELS. CAN THIS EVIL TRADE BE STOPPED?

Ji-min sits upright in her chair, fists coiled tight against a coffee cup with "Hunny" written on it. She eyes me warily as I enter the room. We stare at each other in silence as the rain outside sheets across the bluestone alleys of inner Melbourne. Slowly, the young Korean relaxes her hands, revealing sparkling pink nails which clutch nervously at a pack of tissues. How does one begin to describe her life as a sex slave in Australia? Where to start? The false promises? The debt bondage? The callous brothel manager? Or the drunken men who threw her against the wall like a rag doll, assaulting her every orifice until she bled and couldn't walk?

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She speaks slowly at first, describing how she was lured from Korea to Australia in early 2012 by a "recruiter" who told her there was great demand in Melbourne for karaoke singers who could dance. It was well paid, it was secure, they said, and she naively believed them. Her shadowy sponsors paid for her flight to Melbourne and for her apartment, which she shared with five other young women. On her first day of "work", Ji-min, who is barely out of her teens, was taken directly to a brothel. She was told she owed more than \$8000 in travel and accommodation costs and that she would become a sex worker to pay off the debt - at a rate of \$70 for each man she serviced. She wanted to run but had nowhere to go. She couldn't speak English and had no money to return to Korea.

"They forced me to work in the brothel," she says, fixing her coal-brown eyes on me. "They didn't care, they said you owe us money, you will work for us." She worked long hours while the owners fiddled the books, ensuring that her debt was never fully repaid. "They treated me like a dog and I had to work like a dog," she says. Her voice becomes sharper, edged with fury. "The men were often drunk or on drugs," she says. "They would hurt me and throw me around. They pulled off their condoms." Whenever the men complained about her, she was not paid. When she was ill and said she could not work they forced her to work anyway. "The other women and I had to look after ourselves because no one else cared," she says.

One day, Ji-min met a representative from Project Respect, which supports trafficked sex workers. She eventually confided in the support worker and the group has since provided her with shelter and assistance. Women like her could potentially access a Federal Government program set up to help victims of trafficking, but only if they agree to work with police, which many refuse to do because they are wary of the authorities.

After telling her story to me in Project Respect's Fitzroy office, I ask Ji-min what her plans are now that she has escaped her captors. She falls silent for a long time before a single tear rolls down her right cheek. "I want to live in Australia," she says. "But I want to live here without stress. I need a friend."

Australia has been slow to recognise the extent of human trafficking into this country at a time when the practice has been spreading quickly throughout Asia and the developing world. In 2012, US President Barack Obama described human trafficking, otherwise known as modern-day slavery, as "one of the

great human rights causes of our time". Laws defining sexual servitude as a crime were introduced in Australia in 1999 but only in 2005 were specific laws introduced to criminalise trafficking into the country.

The following year a 44-year-old Melbourne brothel owner, Wei Tang, became the first person in Australia to be convicted of possessing slaves after she brought five Thai prostitutes into Australia and held them in sexual servitude, demanding they sleep with up to 900 men to pay off their "debts". She was sentenced to 10 years' jail. Last year a Sydney madam, Chee Mei Wong, was jailed for six years for keeping six women - recruited from Malaysia into Australia on student visas - in sexual servitude in a brothel on the city's north shore.

Since 2003, the Australian Federal Police have conducted 416 investigations into human trafficking into Australia, including 29 in the past year - roughly half of which were related to sexual exploitation. Yet there have been only 17 convictions, a grim indicator of how difficult it is to persuade terrified young women to give evidence. "The rate of investigations, prosecutions and convictions in Australia remains stubbornly and unacceptably low relative to the presumed size of the problem," says Anne Gallagher, Australia's pre-eminent expert on slavery, who in 2012 was presented with an award by Hillary Clinton for her global work on criminal justice responses to trafficking.

These slaves in Australia are mostly Thai, Korean and **Chinese** women who are lured here under false pretences and held hostage to debt bondage. A study in 2012 by the universities of Queensland and Sydney estimates that as many as 2000 women each year are trafficked into Australia, and most end up working in brothels in Sydney and Melbourne. "They are facing a lot of immediate health consequences, legal consequences, economic consequences from the situation," says the study's co-author, Professor Julie Hepworth.

"It is a crime, a very profitable crime and it is going on all over the world, but it's very difficult to accurately determine how many victims there are here," says Kelly Hinton, executive director of Project Respect. "We spend massive resources on researching and supporting women who suffer other forms of gendered violence; more needs to be done in this area."

Of course, some women arrive in Australia knowing they'll work in the sex industry but without realising this means being held as slaves in brothels until they sleep with enough men to purge their alleged debts; other women, like Ji-min, never imagine they're being trafficked into Australia for sex work.

Candy Club brothel operator Lin Gao throws her hands in the air and rails against the injustice she says her business has suffered. "Newspapers," she says venomously, "say all wrong things, bad for business, very bad for business." The bad publicity was that Gao's brothel in inner-city Richmond was named in the Magistrates Court in July last year as one of four Melbourne brothels allegedly used by a syndicate to employ 10 "overseers" to manage more than 100 women brought from Asia to work in the brothels. Federal Police agent James Cheshire told the court that the brothels set performance targets for the women; 30-minute sex sessions were referred to as "units", with each unit earning the syndicate \$130. Five alleged members of the syndicate are currently facing charges.

Gao denies any wrongdoing and The Weekend Australian Magazine is not suggesting she is involved. But she laments the drop in business since the controversy, pointing towards the nearby room where four bored Korean women are sitting around waiting for clients.

Cheshire has come back to the Candy Club tonight, along with three members of the Victoria Police Sex Industry Coordination Unit (SICU), to talk to the sex workers and make sure they are OK. "Do I look like mafia?" Gao asks them. "Am I part of a syndicate? Ha!" she says, laughing. Over her shoulder is a sign on the wall: "Sexual slavery is a serious crime."

SICU was established last year partly to tackle the growing problem of trafficking in Melbourne's brothels; it works with the AFP to identify victims, remove them to safety and, if possible, gather evidence to prosecute members of trafficking syndicates. It is the first police unit of its kind in Australia.

At another brothel in Melbourne - one of four the unit visits on this night - SICU Senior Sergeant Marilyn Ross is gently quizzing two **Chinese** students, "Saffron" and "Honey", as they wait in dressing gowns near a rack full of multi-coloured stilettos. She asks them where they live, how long they have been in Australia, whether the brothel owners treat them well and what their pay and hours are. "We are looking for anything that is not quite right," says Ross, "a sign that maybe they are here against their will and maybe have been victims of trafficking."

While authorities here try to gauge the extent of the problem, work is also under way in Asia, the epicentre of the slavery business where untold numbers of women, girls and boys are **sold** to others for sex or as domestic slaves.

Sunka clips a toy koala to her long black hair as the pizza is placed in front of her. Over her shoulder a flame-red sun edges low over Cambodia's Mekong River, but she is entranced only by the food, as if it were sent from the heavens. The 12-year-old is wearing her best dress, canary yellow, for this night, which she has dreamed of for months. She takes a bite, closes her eyes and savours the taste. The smile starts even before her eyes open. For a moment she has forgotten about the foreigner who raped her. Over and over. Kept her a prisoner in his house. A week earlier he was convicted in a Phnom Penh court, but only because Sunka somehow summoned up the courage to testify against him.

Yet on this night she is not the unluckiest girl in this pizza restaurant by the river. Across the room is a young Cambodian girl, Thali, who was nine when she was **sold** by her family for \$400 to a man who cut off her hair and kept her in a cage for more than a year. As well as using her as a sex slave and domestic servant, Thali's owner chose to attack her with pliers for no known reason. By the time police rescued her she had more than 200 scars on her body, some of which are still visible as she sits at the table, quietly drawing pictures.

All but one of the 20 girls and boys under the age of 15 who are here tonight have been raped, mostly by foreigners, some of them westerners and possibly Australians. Yet Australia has also been their saviour. It was the charity Hagar Australia that plucked these kids from danger, gave them safe harbour in shelters, placed them back in school and, on this night, took them out for pizza.

The number of people around the world who live in slavery dwarfs the notorious trade that once existed between Africa and America. The inaugural Global Slavery Index released last October, an initiative founded by mining magnate and philanthropist Andrew Forrest, estimates that close to 30 million people are enslaved; more than 70 per cent are believed to be in Asia. Total annual revenue from the global slave trade is estimated to be \$32 billion, with the average price of a human being around \$90.

On a steamy Phnom Penh afternoon, Kate treads gently into the room and takes a seat. The slightly built 18-year-old Cambodian fiddles nervously with her hair. She tells me that being a beggar from the age of 12 was the least of her problems. When she was 13 and in Thailand, her aunt took her to a petrol station where she was collected by a man who told her that he now owned her. For the next year he kept her as his personal slave, abusing her so violently that she still struggles to hear properly. "I was there for a long time, and I was suffering from the violence from the man," Kate says via an interpreter. "I was beaten and abused."

After a year she managed to escape from his house but was captured by Thai police, who jailed her for seven months as an illegal immigrant. Eventually authorities took her back to the border of her native Cambodia, where she stayed in a home for abused children before being admitted into Hagar's care. There she has received shelter, trauma counselling and the opportunity to return to school.

Australians on the slavery frontlines in Cambodia and elsewhere in Asia frequently place their own safety at risk. Kate's protection and care is overseen in Phnom Penh by an Australian, Sarah Bearup, the country director for Hagar Cambodia, which has looked after thousands of trafficking victims in Cambodia since 1994.

Yet Bearup, a mother of three who has lived in Cambodia for almost nine years, was herself charged with trafficking after Hagar intervened to remove a child from a sex predator. The wealthy man, angry that his young slave had been taken away from him, told police that Bearup had herself broken local laws, which do not recognise child protection. The charges were never followed through, but Bearup lives with the fear that Hagar's efforts to help victims of slavery could one day see her locked up. "It was a really frightening experience - I had sleepless nights and conversations with my husband about whether I should leave the country," she says.

In Cambodia and elsewhere in Asia, AusAID's funding to combat human slavery has been largely targeted at improving the ability of criminal justice systems to prosecute those involved in the trade. AusAID says that since 2006, Australian aid has helped to train more than 7000 police, judges and prosecutors in the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking crimes. Prior to last year's federal election, Australia gave more than \$55 million directly and around \$150 million indirectly across 13 different government agencies to combat human trafficking in Asia and into Australia, easily the biggest contribution of any country in the region. "We should be proud of that leadership role," says Hagar's chief executive in Australia, Kate Kennedy.

Even today, it is not uncommon for parents in Cambodia to sell at least one of their children to others for sex and cheap labour. Yet in that country there were only 62 trafficking-related convictions in 2011, a mere fraction of those practising modern-day slavery there.

The dark truth is that trafficking plays a sizeable role in the economies of developing countries in the region. Human rights lawyer Anne Gallagher describes human trafficking as "the dark side of

globalisation" and says the increasing movement of unprotected labour is only fuelling the trade. "Human exploitation is driving much global economic growth," she says. "Cheap labour, cheap sex and cheap goods are woven into the fabric of our economy, our community and our individual lives. Australia is very much a part of this problem and must become part of the solution. It is very clear the problem is not getting better and is likely getting worse."

In May 2012, the then Labor attorney general Nicola Roxon moved to broaden Australia's definition of modern-day slavery or human trafficking beyond the traditional view that it is confined largely to sexual exploitation. "While the majority of victims identified in Australia continue to be women trafficked for exploitation in the **commercial** sex industry, authorities have increasingly identified both men and women exploited in a range of other industry sectors," she said. "Some identified victims were brought to Australia to work in restaurants, receiving little or no pay for very long hours, without rest periods or days off. Others were exploited as domestic workers in private residences, again working without adequate remuneration and with limited freedom."

When, later that year, the then prime minister Julia Gillard announced a new \$50 million Australia-Asia Program to Combat Trafficking in Persons, she said it was aimed at "women and young people [who] are particularly vulnerable, with school-age girls often forced into conditions of exploitative labour, domestic work, or prostitution."

But the future of Australia's funding to help combat human trafficking currently hangs in the balance following the Coalition Government's announcement last month that it will cut \$650 million from Labor's foreign aid budget for 2013-14. The cuts will eventually see Australian aid falling from 0.36 per cent of gross national income in 2012-13 to 0.31 per cent in 2017, a long way from the bipartisan target of lifting Australian aid to 0.5 per cent - which is now described by the Coalition as "an aspirational goal". There is solid support for cutting aid within the Government, which believes the aid budget has grown too fast and has become too bloated to be managed effectively. But there is deep concern among NGOs that the specific funding to tackle slavery and human trafficking in the region will become a casualty.

A spokeswoman for the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, says no final decisions have yet been made about the funding for anti-trafficking programs. "At this stage, details of the implications of budget decisions on the implementation of anti-human trafficking programs, including the Australia-Asia Program to Combat Trafficking in Persons, are being determined in consultation with development partners," she says.

Critics of the foreign aid cuts include the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, which likens them to a rich man chasing a beggar to recover crumbs from his table.

As she cleans the pizza crumbs off her plate in the Phnom Penh restaurant, 12-year-old Sunka has no idea of the backroom discussions in Canberra which may determine whether she will continue to be given Australian-funded protection and schooling as she recovers from her enslavement. As she finishes her dinner, she grabs a pen and insists on drawing a picture: a figure of a bride in a wedding dress, standing in a field with the sun shining on her.

Maybe Sunka's dreams of living a normal life will one day come true, but whether Australia will stay on that journey with her remains to be seen.

Cameron Stewart travelled to Cambodia courtesy of the Pratt Foundation. Some names have been changed. [hagar.org.au/donate](http://hagar.org.au/donate)

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