

Kathleen Maltzahn's book *Trafficked* tells the story of a human rights campaign that succeeded in changing government policy to protect women smuggled into Australia to work in the sex trade. It contains first-person accounts, stories that inspired women's groups to make sure trafficked women could no longer be ignored. As many workers in this sector are aware, there are numerous links between prostitution and domestic violence/sexual abuse. Kathleen is founding director of Project Respect, an organisation working to end violence against women in the sex industry. DVRC's Delanie Woodlock posed the following questions to her, to explore these links, and the myriad of issues covered by *Trafficked*.

Can you tell us how you became involved in anti-trafficking activism?

I was working with women in very poor strip clubs in the outskirts of Manila, in the Philippines, and one of the young women we knew just disappeared one day. She came back a month later, and told us that she'd been tricked into travelling to another town, sold to a brothel, and prostituted for the month until she managed to run away. She was amazing. She tried to run away once and was caught, but succeeded the second time, bringing with her letters from the other girls she'd been in the brothel with, that they wanted her to send to their parents.

We contacted the police and it took a while to get them to take it seriously, but we used to turn up to the police headquarters with a group of ten to twenty women from women's organisations, who made it pretty clear that they weren't going to let the issue drop. Once the police investigated they found 500 women and girls, some as young as 12, living in this poor community that was almost entirely made up of brothels. Local officials, including police, patrolled the perimeters of the community to stop the women running away, and took kickbacks. There were women and girls from all over the country, who had been kidnapped and tricked there. It was deeply shocking, and it opened my eyes up to trafficking. Once I came home, I started doing outreach

to Melbourne brothels, and the longer I worked in brothels, the more I found out about trafficking here.

In your book you talk about the links between domestic violence perpetrated against Filipino women in Australia and the international trafficking industry, can you explain this link?

In the 1980s and 1990s, Filipino-Australian feminists across Australia were seeing women in their community experiencing domestic violence from their non-Filipino partners in really disturbing numbers, and women and their children were being killed. They pushed for more investigation of this, and when the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission examined domestic murders of Filipino women in Australia, they found that Filipino women were six times more likely to be killed than other Australian women. The only group where women were more likely to be murdered by their partner was in the indigenous community.

Those activists made the link back to sex tourism in the Philippines. In the 1980s, there were really significant numbers of Australian men going to the Philippines for prostitution, and they had horrible views of Filipino women (and indeed women doing prostitution). They typically saw Filipino woman as submissive little virgins (unlike

Trafficked

the horrible white Australian feminists they despised), and were then outraged when those women expected respect and equality in their marriages, or as prostitutes, who they seemed to think should cop anything that came their way. In both scenarios, when the women didn't accept these men's distorted views of them, the men were often violent. I argue in the book that this trend is paralleled in trafficking, where women are used as sexual commodities by men.

It seems, as with most violence against women, that the role that men play in prostitution remains hidden and unspoken of, while the women are stigmatised and often blamed for the violence they experience. Can you give an insight into the kinds of men that use prostituted women and why the men use prostituted women?

Men who use women in prostitution are totally invisibilised. Fortunately, internationally, there's been more and more research into men, which is a relief after centuries where women in the sex industry have been studied and exposed and condemned. In Australia, though, we still don't have any research I'm aware of about men's attitudes – it's an area that really needs work. What I know though from talking to women in the sex industry, and from sitting in brothels myself, is that there's no particular 'type' of men who use women in the sex industry; it's like domestic violence, all sorts of men do it.

As to why they do it, again, it's like domestic violence, you could give any number of reasons about why they go – from how powerful it makes them feel, to some men's lack of ability to create a meaningful sexual relationship with women they don't pay – but at the end of the day, I'd say they do it because they can.

What connections do you see between illegal sex trafficking and the legalised sex industry in Victoria?

In states like Victoria where prostitution has been partially legalised, people always assume that women must be trafficked into illegal brothels. It's logical – people assume that crimes happen in illegal spaces. But of course the home is a legal entity, and we all know huge numbers of crimes happen there. Legal brothels are the same. All but one case of trafficking I know about in Australia has happened in legal prostitution contexts. Jennifer Cullen, from the Federal Police, recently stated that 'Melbourne was a "major destination" for sex trafficking and most trafficked women were found in legal brothels' (Lahey & Beck, 2009).

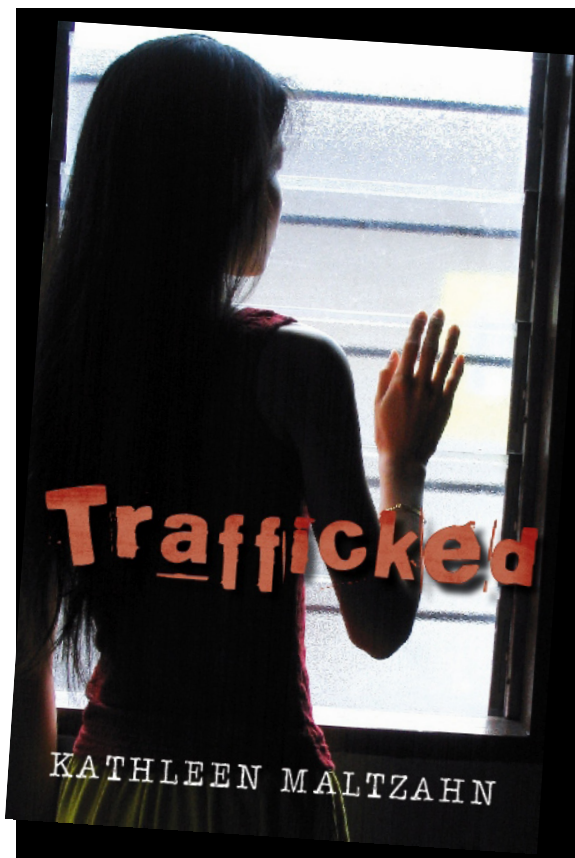
The thing is, brothels are legal in places such as Victoria, but there is very little scrutiny of what happens inside them. I think the idea that legalising prostitution gets rid of the violence is a myth – it's just made everyone think the problems have been fixed, and so they've lost interest, but the violence goes on. It's interesting at a time where violence in the home is seen more and more as a community issue, that violence in brothels is almost completely ignored. It's almost like the brothel is the new domestic space – it's seen that men should be able to do what they want, and if anything happens to the women they interact with, people say either that the women choose it, or that if it was that bad, they'd leave. There are strong parallels between domestic violence and prostitution – one is the way any harm to women is either ignored or trivialised; another is the way that men's entitlement to women's bodies (and a whole lot more) is rarely questioned.

What sorts of resistance have you found in attempting to create awareness of the slavery of women and girls in systems of prostitution and trafficking?

For many years, the government just insisted there wasn't a problem, and some elements of the sex industry certainly encouraged that view.

I think too, feminists retreated from the issue of prostitution, in part because it has been so contentious. There are a small number of feminists who have strong views on prostitution – either that it is empowering or, conversely, that it is harmful, and for a time this was argued out in a pretty unpleasant way. I think many feminists walked away because they didn't like the conflict. I can understand that, but it did mean that the many women in prostitution, including trafficked women, were on their own. I'm not saying of course that the main resistance to talking about trafficking and other violence in the sex industry has been feminists, but I do wish more feminists had taken up the issue more strongly, early on.

The main resistance, I think, beyond the recalcitrance of the Immigration Department, or the initial failure of police to do something, is the view that women in the sex industry deserve whatever they get, that brothels are fine, that men's entitlement to prostitution shouldn't be questioned. It's still a battle to get journalists and policy makers to look seriously at violence and sexual exploitation in the sex industry, and too many men just won't recognise that there could be a problem.



What sort of connections do you see between racism and sexism in the ways in which trafficked women (either for marriage or prostitution) are treated in Australia?

I'd argue that prostitution is an absolute expression of sexism, and trafficking is the mechanism by which the sex industry makes sure that men always have women they can have sex with (or do whatever else they chose to do in a brothel room), so it's sexism – or male privilege, or patriarchy, or whatever else you want to call it – in a pure form.

Both prostitution and trafficking are highly racialised – white men here often want Asian women because they're seen, bizarrely, as both submissive and sluts. One man Project Respect interviewed years ago about his use of Asian women in prostitution said 'Asian women are made for this'. Asian men from one area will

Trafficked

want Asian women from another area, for example Chinese men might want Korean women. It all shifts a lot – prostitution has fads, where women from one country or ethnic group will become more desirable – but ethnicity is one of the ways it's calibrated.

Beyond the way prostitution itself is ordered, the fact that trafficked women in Australia were both women and, predominantly, Asian, meant that for a long time the government just didn't care. Asian women in prostitution are often seen as accepting things other women wouldn't, and that view was imposed on them, even when they were going to the police or immigration saying that they couldn't bear what was happening to them, and didn't accept it. An ex-police officer I know, who has done a huge amount on trafficking, once said to me that his colleagues' view was 'they're just fucking molls'.

Can you explain the ways in which the victims of trafficking in Australia were often seen as criminals and how this has changed due to the work of Project Respect?

Trafficked women used to be treated as having breached immigration laws, despite the fact that, overwhelmingly, they had no control over their immigration status, and invariably didn't have their passports – the traffickers used to take them off them, and only give them back to them if there was an immigration raid and they had to show them. When they were discovered by the authorities, they were simply deported (or 'removed' in the polite language of the immigration department). Our campaign changed that – in 2003, the Howard government announced that it would stop the mandatory detention and removal of trafficked women.

In what ways do the media coverage and investigations assist or hinder awareness and understanding of violence against women in systems of prostitution?

The media was crucial in changing both community and government attitudes to trafficking. Six years ago, almost no-one in the community knew what trafficking was, and people couldn't believe it could happen in Australia. Because of that, the government knew there was no real concern around the issue.

I think one of the most important things that changed that was the reporting by Elisabeth Wynhausen and Natalie O'Brien at *The Australian*. They ran story after story about trafficking, and they did it in a way that was incredibly mindful that real women were involved. Their stories often came from the trafficked women they met, so they knew the human impact of what they wrote. I really admired them, because although they wrote really powerful articles, they never wrote a story that included details the women didn't want published. I know they had some great stories sometimes, but if a woman felt unsafe they just didn't write it up. It meant we trusted them absolutely, and felt confident talking to them about trafficking. And their stories changed government policy. Without them I don't think we would have got the change we did.

You mention in your book that in Sweden, prostitution and trafficking are seen by the government as being clearly linked, and both are seen as violations of women's human rights. What does it say about the governments who have legalised prostitution while in other countries, prostitution is seen as violence against women?

The Swedish legislation is controversial, but I think it is really interesting. It firmly places prostitution within violence against women, and has broken the old stalemate between legalising and criminalising. They've totally decriminalised all selling of sexual services unlike, say, Victoria where street prostitution and prostitution in unlicensed premises are still illegal – but criminalised the buying. Women there are offered a lot of support if they've done prostitution – they're viewed, as I understand it, as a woman leaving domestic violence might be. The Swedish government says they've slashed trafficking, and I haven't seen this challenged.

At the moment in somewhere like Victoria, we've had really important reforms to the way family violence is dealt with, but the sex industry is totally ignored. The Swedish model is much more integrated, and I think is more realistic about the links between different forms of male violence.

Lastly, what can organisations and domestic violence workers do to help support the work of Project Respect?

It would be wonderful if domestic violence organisations and workers would attend training by Project Respect. Too often, workers in all fields see women who've been trafficked and they don't realise. A one-day training can give workers information about what to look for. I don't know how many times I've done talks or training over the years, and had people say, 'Oh, I just realised, a woman I worked last week, or last year, or ten years ago, was trafficked. The more community and government workers know about trafficking, the less likely women are to fall through the gaps.

It'd be great if services could also get training more broadly about working with women in the sex industry, because the

combination of violence and stigma means that women can often have issues you don't expect, and need a lot of confidence to be able to access mainstream services.

Because of the stigma women in the sex industry can feel, Project Respect worked with some women in the industry to develop a poster that services can put up to signal that it's safe for women to say they've done prostitution. Contact Project Respect on (03) 9416 3401 if you'd like some copies.

At the moment Project Respect is trying to fundraise, both to start a business for women who've survived trafficking, and to run the organisation. Any help with fundraising would be a huge help. Project Respect is also lobbying federal government to change the visas available to trafficked women and would like state governments to provide more funding to support women who have been harmed by the sex industry.

More information is available on Project Respect's website:

www.projectrespect.org.au

There's so much that needs to be done, so there are all sorts of ways individuals and organisations can help.

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References

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