Voices of Sisters

Trafficking



Sr. Margaret Ng of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart of Jesus leads an awareness training session on human trafficking in Sydney, October 2025. (Courtesy of Margaret Ng)



by Sr. Margaret Ng

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Australia has had a long history of human trafficking, beginning with "blackbirding" or the kidnapping of islanders to work on sugar plantations in Queensland, and the plight of the Stolen Generation of Indigenous Australians.

The death of Puangthong Simaplee at the Villawood Detention Centre in 2001 and the subsequent coroner's inquest highlighted the existence of human trafficking here in Australia.

In 2004, I heard about the plight of Thai women who had been trafficked into Australia to be sex workers. Having just returned from Thailand, I felt a strong call to do something about the issue. This is very much in keeping with our Josephite charism as expressed in the words of our founder, St. Mary of the Cross MacKillop: "Never see a need without doing something about it."

In 2005, I established the Josephite Counter-Trafficking Project to look at the issue of human trafficking here in Australia and to provide culturally sensitive holistic care, support and advocacy for victims and survivors of human trafficking. I was also one of four cofounders of Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking.

Initially, visits were made to the Villawood Detention Centre, where I met women who had been victims of sexual and domestic servitude, debt bondage and forced marriage. I also met men and women who had been trafficked into the labor force. With the help of Anti-Slavery Australia and the Federal Police, we helped one of the women to be released, and she was eventually granted a protection visa to stay in Australia.

In 2006, we initiated a scoping survey on the social needs of trafficked persons with organizations around the world, including Caritas International, Anti-Slavery Australia and the Australian Red Cross. This survey confirmed the need for safe, appropriate, suitable and affordable accommodation, as well as the need for culturally sensitive support to meet the needs of trafficked persons.

In 2007, I was pleasantly surprised to be visited by two Salvation Army majors with the proposal to establish a safe house for trafficked women. This refuge began in 2008, providing supportive accommodation and case management. I continue to be the only one allowed to visit the women, providing pastoral care. My multicultural and multifaith background, and the ability to speak Chinese, Malay and Indonesian in addition to English, have helped me in my accompaniment of survivors.

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Visits to the safe house have included guidance for daily living, as well as social skills. Inculturation occurs as we share stories and celebrate important cultural and religious events such as Christmas, Chinese New Year, Ramadan and Deepavali. Together, we explore the Australian way of life and the Western mindset as compared with the Asian or Middle Eastern way of being. It is also an opportunity for them to get a better understanding of what it means to live in Australia.

I am often inspired by their courage and resilience and, for some, their trust in divine providence as they continue their journey to self-worth and wholeness.

In April this year, I was invited to be a panelist at the Women Deliver Conference in Melbourne, funded by Hilton Foundation. (The Hilton Foundation is also a major funder of Global Sisters Report.) The conference theme was "Strengthening Collective Action, Faith, Justice and Ending Human Trafficking in the Oceanic Pacific."

It was a great opportunity to highlight how faith leaders and our trusted partners are on the front lines, supporting survivors and helping prevent exploitation.

At the end of one of the sessions, I was happily surprised to meet one of the survivors who had been part of the Salvation Army safe house. She told me that she was very grateful for the support she had received from us and that she is now helping others. She is married and now lives in Australia. She told me that she has set up a free clinic for women in Africa. This clinic is funded by donations from Europe. At least 200 patients attend the clinic each day. It is her way of paying back for the support she has received.

Many Australians are unaware of the existence of human trafficking and forced marriage in Australia. Consequently, I have made awareness-raising presentations to parishes, Catholic women's organizations, Catholic ethnic chaplains, the wider community, students and second-year teachers from Sydney Catholic schools, with the key question, "Are you eating, wearing or using someone's misery?" (For example, chocolates, fruit and vegetables, clothing, electronics.) Teachers are encouraged to look at ways to include the topic of modern-day slavery with their students.

Donations from the wider community have enabled me to bring victims back to safety, in Australia, with the help of Anti-Slavery Australia and International Organization for Migration. One of the women fled in the middle of the night to the airport, in her pyjamas.

Advocacy for better legislation and support for victims and survivors of human trafficking has included visits to federal parliamentarians in Canberra, as well as submissions to the federal and New South Wales governments. We now have a federal anti-slavery commissioner and a New South Wales anti-slavery commissioner, and they have survivors on their advisory panels.

During the last 21 years, I have met trafficked people from all walks of life, including boxers, construction workers, cooks and nurses. They were promised jobs but ended up being trafficked.

No matter who or where we are, we can make a difference in the lives of trafficked women, children and men, by working in collaboration with each other.

We might think that we are too small to make a difference, but we should remember the wise saying: "If you think that you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito."