



## Asia

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# Sex, Human Trafficking Thriving In Australia

*Phil Mercer | Sydney*

Anti-trafficking campaigners say human trafficking is thriving in Australia, with women brought from Asia forced to work in the sex industry. The warning follows the release of new details of two police investigations in Australia that have identified alleged links between legal brothels and illegal trafficking syndicates.

Rights activists and government officials say most human trafficking in Australia involves women from across Asia and parts of eastern Europe who are brought to work in industries ranging from prostitution to agriculture. Many come from Thailand, Taiwan and South Korea.

Only a handful of traffickers have ever been convicted in Australia, although senior officers have insisted they are starting to win the battle. Most women who are trafficked say they are reluctant to go to the police out of fear of deportation or because of threats against family members.

Since 2003, specialist units run by Australia's federal police have carried out more than 300 investigations, and have identified about 150 women working as sex slaves.

Two recent police investigations have allegedly linked brothels in Sydney and Melbourne to international human traffickers. Officials claim that organized criminal gangs lure Asian women to Australia with promises of places at colleges. But they are then forced to work in brothels, which are legal in parts of Australia. Some women are forced to have sex with hundreds of men to repay debts to traffickers, including airfares and accommodation.

Chris McDevitt, the commander of the human trafficking unit at the Australian Federal Police, says customers who visit brothels where women are forced or coerced into prostitution also face arrest.

“If they knowingly go into these situations and knowingly use somebody who is subject to slavery,

they can find themselves at the end of a criminal charge, and I would have no hesitation, and indeed would relish the opportunity of locking anybody up that was actually involved in that knowingly,” said McDevitt.

Rights activists say they believe the number of trafficking cases investigated by the authorities does not represent the full extent of the problem.

There is no reliable information on the number of people trafficked into Australia each year, although various estimates put the figure at around 1,000.

The trade in people is by no means restricted to the Australian sex industry. Officials say men, women and young children are exploited in many sectors.

Australian police say human trafficking is a multi-billion dollar global business that is second only to the illegal trade in drugs and weapons.