

Sex slavery in Australia

*In May 2003, the police charged Ms Wei Tang with using and possessing slaves. The 2006 trial found her guilty, although she successfully appealed her conviction in 2007. The Commonwealth Prosecutor then took the case to the High Court in the hope of having the guilty conviction reinstated. The High Court heard the case (the Queen v. Wei Tang) in May 2008, and the court agreed with the Prosecutor – **Tang was guilty of slavery.***

In this case, the High Court of Australia acknowledged that what commonly happens to women who are trafficked to Australia for prostitution is slavery - a crime against humanity.

Tang arranged for five Thai women to come to Australia for prostitution. She told them that they had to work six days a week in her brothel to repay a made-up debt of \$40,000-\$45,000 (even though the women did not really owe this). On the seventh day they were able to keep \$50 per customer. The women had very few possessions, spoke little English, knew no one in Australia, lived in a flat owned by Tang, and were usually watched by someone connected to Tang. **Tang used the women as if she owned them:** she bought them from recruiters and another brothel owner, she took most of the money from the women's prostitution and did not pay them properly, and she made them scared for their safety and the safety of their families back home. **Once the women arrived in Australia, they did not have any real choices but to 'work' for Tang.**

The Judges of the High Court said that this was not just a bad job with a bad employer. The Judges stated that what happened to the women amounted to slavery. Even though the women agreed to come to Australia to work, even though they weren't locked behind bars, the Judges still decided this was modern-day slavery.

If you or someone you know is experiencing something similar – if a woman you know can't really say no to doing prostitution or owes an extortionate debt – **there is help available**, including advice and help with visas, counselling, healthcare and financial aid. You can call the non-government victim support agency Project Respect on (03) 9416 3401 or 0400 530 582; or the Police on 1800 813 784. If you want an interpreter, call the Translating and Interpreting Service on 13 14 50 and ask them to contact Project Respect or the police for you.

If you have been trafficked for prostitution, you may be eligible for compensation. In Victoria, the *maximum* total financial assistance awarded by Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT) is \$60,000 to a primary victim and \$50,000 to a secondary or related victim. These totals may include medical, counselling, funeral expenses and other expenses in exceptional circumstances. Compensation is also available in other states and territories.

To be eligible to apply for financial assistance from VOCAT, you must be a victim of a violent crime that happened in Victoria, including a sexual offence, an actual or threatened assault or injury and/or the death of a person. Generally the crime must have been reported to police within a reasonable time and the crime must have occurred within the past two years, except in the case of certain sexual crimes (in these circumstances VOCAT may grant an extension). The conditions are similar for compensation schemes in other states and territories.

Assistance in claiming compensation and obtaining financial assistance is available through the Victims of Crime Helpline or the Victims Assistance and Counselling Program. Alternatively, you may choose to use a solicitor to prepare your application. The tribunal will usually cover the solicitor's fees for preparing the application. **Call Victims of Crime Helpline on 1800 819 817 for more information. Project Respect can also help you access legal help to do this, including in other states and territories.**

This publication has been supported with a Small Grant from the Victoria Law Foundation – www.victorialawfoundation.org.au