

# Women's Voices Heard in Sex Trafficking Research



Angela Reed and her bilingual research assistant, Marietta Latonio, at the graduation ceremony

Sister of Mercy Angela Reed thought she knew a lot about human trafficking when she managed Mercy Care refuge for six years from 2001. She suspected that some of the women had been trafficked into Australia; now she is certain. In the past decade, while researching and writing her Masters and PhD, Angela discovered that sex trafficking is a very complex global problem and there is no one homogenous sex trafficking experience. Importantly, she can now put a name, a face and a story to the problem, stories that she is keen to share.

Angela was recently awarded her PhD by the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies at RMIT University in Melbourne. In her thesis, *Exploiting Vulnerability: A Study of the Lives of Filipino Women Who Have Been Trafficked into Sex Work*, Angela has given a human face to sex trafficking and explored the complex lives of 40 trafficked women.

Angela, a long-time member of ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans), said for too long sex trafficking has been attributed to poverty alone. However, Angela believes sex trafficking is more complicated and whilst the cause is demand for sex services, traffickers prey on those who have myriad vulnerabilities, which can include childhood abuse, social isolation, lack of education and specific 'local' factors. Tragically, for many women, sex trafficking is part of a lifelong continuum of violence that begins when they are young girls, some as young as three.

"Once we have a better understanding of sex trafficking, we can develop better responses, allocate aid and other resources more effectively and advocate in a more focussed way," Angela said.

Angela's 'interest' in sex trafficking was triggered by her work at Mercy Care. She wanted to know what led to the women being trafficked into Australia and what was happening in the source countries.

After leaving Mercy Care and participating in ACRATH's advocacy work she studied her Masters in Social Work and was awarded a Vincent Fairfax Fellowship at the St James Ethics Centre. She travelled to Cebu in the Philippines and worked at Good Shepherd Welcome House and Good Shepherd Recovery Centre, shelters for women who were, or had been, exploited in the sex trade. Many of the women were trafficked into the sex trade. Her Masters paper, *United in A Bright Future*, told the stories of many women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation. Her PhD thesis built on this research and included more in-depth interviews, with many of the same women, over a longer period of time.



Women participate in focus groups on trafficking run by Sr Angela Reed

"So often people discussing sex trafficking will attribute it to poverty. But one of the women I interviewed in Cebu said to me, that there 'is plenty of poverty in the Philippines, but not everyone is trafficked. It is much more than that'. That really sums up a lot of my thesis," Angela said.

"There has been little research done that involves qualitative, in-depth interviews with trafficked women. Some quantitative research is being done, though that is very difficult because sex

trafficking is an illicit trade. It is more important that we understand the nature of trafficking and its causes if we are to respond effectively.”

More than two thirds of the women interviewed by Angela had suffered sexual abuse from a young age. She said this challenged and even dispelled the common view that sex trafficking is a one-off event, or that young girls are snatched from their villages and safe communities and sold, or forced into sex work.

“It is more sinister than that. For the majority of the women in my study, sex trafficking was part of a life journey that began with their experiences as children through to being trafficked as adolescents,” she said.

Angela argues in her thesis that sex trafficking needs to be considered through multiple paradigms including, the localised paradigm which recognises the historic, socio-economic and political contexts in which trafficking occurs in that region or country. For example, Angela contends that sex trafficking in the Philippines has been influenced by local factors including the presence of the US military and the subsequent development of sex tourism. Sex trafficking in countries such as Cambodia would have different local influences such as the Khmer Rouge’s reign. The other paradigms are globalisation, economic, migration, criminal, gender, human rights and the life course paradigm that recognises the continuum of violent abuse from childhood to adulthood.



Another women participates in a focus groups on trafficking

Once the research was completed, Angela asked the women featured in her study, what they wanted her to do next. They didn’t hesitate asking Angela to write the stories in a more accessible, non-academic format that could be read by the general public, anti-trafficking activists, and policy makers. She and her bilingual research assistant, Marietta Latonio, are now working on this book, which they hope to publish.

Importantly, the women asked Angela to try and work with social workers and social work students in the Philippines to ensure they have a true understanding of the lives of the women they seek to help in their work. A pilot project is already being considered with a university in the Philippines.

The women’s stories will challenge perceptions and demand that people see sex trafficking through a different lens or paradigm.

“When we hear policy makers, or organisations talk about sex trafficking, we need to constantly ask, who will benefit from what they are saying or doing. Is it the women who are being sex trafficked who will benefit?” Angela said.

Angela has been running workshops for groups such as ACRATH, Sisters of Mercy and other organisations in a bid to share the women’s stories. She is now also doing a one-year post-doctoral residency with ourcommunity.com with a focus on social change and advocacy. The residency is a partnership between ourcommunity.com and the Sisters of Mercy.

For more information on anti-trafficking actions in Australia go to [www.acrath.org.au](http://www.acrath.org.au).