

Report on Human Trafficking Forum
12th Sept 2019

I was privileged to attend the Forum on Human Trafficking on behalf of Catholic Women's League SA. There were 12 very different, very professional and very passionate speakers, who kept me awake and listening all day long.

This forum was organised by ACRATH SA (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans) in collaboration with Flinders College of Business Government and Law and SA Red Cross, who have worked over the last 12 months to sponsor this forum to engage with a wide variety of people including service providers, faith communities, SA police, people from health and education, St Vincent de Paul Society as well as people wanting to find out more information about the extent of human trafficking in South Australia in the context of the global picture.

Associate Professor Marinella Marmo's scoping study on the extent of human trafficking in South Australia is the first such study undertaken in SA. This study was undertaken as a partnership with Flinders University and ACRATH nationally, who contributed funding for the project. This study was instrumental in shaping the day's program.

Associate Professor Marmo gave us lots of facts and figures on the extent of Human Trafficking in South Australia, with Forced Marriage being the highest number. Professor Jennifer Byrne from Anti-Slavery Australia, which is based in Sydney, began exposing this inhumane practice 10 years ago. It is a journey of "Coercion, Threat and Deception". Forced Marriage was criminalised in Australia in 2013. If rape and murder are wrong, how come forced marriage is not wrong? Anti-Slavery Australia has information on line. The problem is that invariably Forced Marriage occurs within the family setting, which makes it very difficult for the girl who is being trapped in this situation. There is a fine line between arranged marriage, which gives freedom to all parties involved and Forced Marriage, where the girl has no freedom what so ever. The girl has to choose between reporting her family or going through with the process. In many cases parents don't see that what they are doing is wrong, as it fits within their cultural norms and is seen as a matter of family honour. Because of this, the emphasis in legal action is for disruption and support rather than prosecution.

ACRATH, which was formed 15 years ago, currently has 80 members in Australia. They are committed to awareness raising and offering support to the victims of Forced Marriage. They have developed a flexible program for use in schools both private and public, which gives teachers options for using it within various curriculum settings. We were shown a picture of the "Wedding Dress of Tears", which had been made by the students at one such lesson. The skirt was made from hundreds of white tissues and the bodice had padlocks attached in lieu of pearls or sequins. ACRATH have trained 1,400 teachers throughout Australia. Because children develop trusted relationships with teachers, it is where children will go if they are threatened. It is very important not to go to the parents to solve the problem, as they are the perpetrators and the first thing parents will do is send their daughter interstate or overseas.

Forced Labour was the subject for the afternoon session. The first speaker was Skye Kakoshchke-Moore, who lost her position in the Federal Senate, because she was a dual citizen. She has put her considerable talents to good use in combatting the issue of Forced Labour. The International Modern Slavery Act only came into force early this year. It is estimated that there are 40.3million people trapped in Forced Labour situations throughout the world, the vast majority of them being women and children. She challenged us to promote the truth by getting our values off the wall and into work by seeking help, working together and not trying to fix the whole problem in one go.

Peter Millard told us about how he had tackled the problem of eradicating slave labour from Haigh's Chocolates after pressure had been put on him by the pre- Easter campaign spearheaded by Stop the Traffik Campaign and ACRATH several years ago. At first he thought it was all too hard but he could not reconcile this with his conscience so he sought help as to how to go about achieving his aim of totally slave free cocoa supply. There is a firm that businesses can go to who will gather information regarding working conditions anywhere in the world. This comes at a cost, which for Haigh's was \$80,000 but he considers that it is a price well worth it for the prestige that comes from being able to promote a quality product with pride.

Steven Woods from Baptist World Aid spoke of their success in the garment industry, which is almost entirely dependent on overseas imports, by establishing a register of all the companies who sell garments within Australia and grading them from A to F in a little book, which was available free of charge at the forum. It was amazing the effect that this had upon some of the suppliers. For example both Cotton On and Kathmandu went from F to A in a very short time, in order to protect their image. The booklet is freely available from Baptist World Aid and makes very interesting reading and will help you to choose garments that are forced labour free. It is expensive work keeping it up to date and the Baptist Church is to be commended for their efforts. It has surely made a huge difference in the working conditions of thousands of workers throughout the world.

A regulation was recently introduced into Australia that Companies with an annual turnover of \$100million must make an annual report showing that the products they buy are forced labour free. As a result of this, Michael Kenny, who is in charge of supply for Catholic Schools in SA suddenly realised that he had not been giving sufficient emphasis to this matter. He admitted that he is on a steep learning curve in order to meet this requirement by the due date of 2020. ACRATH and the other organisations that have been working so hard for recognition of our responsibility to eradicate forced labour are to be congratulated for the results they have achieved.

The final session was devoted to Modern Slavery within Australia. Modern Slavery is an umbrella term which covers a situation where people are treated as a commodity for profit or gain and their personal freedom is significantly affected. Kyla Raby spoke of the support program which Red Cross offers to people caught up in this insidious situation. Because workers can speak very little English and may not trust the police, the Red Cross, which has branches all over Australia is a point of contact for many seeking help.

Professor Alexander Reilly from Adelaide University spoke about his concern that overseas students can so easily become trapped in situations where they are badly exploited. Apart from the fact that it is morally wrong it is imperative that this exploitation is stamped out because the universities are so reliant on overseas students for their cash flow. He spoke about one case when some students were working in a market garden and they received no pay and the only food they were given was what they gleaned from the garden. He also spoke of the need to licence back packer's accommodation, as the owners can offer students jobs if they come to stay in their accommodation, with charges of \$200 per week. At the end of the first week there is still no job but there is a debt and at the end of the second week there is still no job and the debt has risen to \$400.

The most passionate speaker of the day was an international student and member of ACRATH. In this student's country, which is very poor, there are many agents who promote opportunities to young people to study overseas. This person came to Australia as an international student with their partner to study. This person spoke on the topic of wage theft and exploitation of international students, presenting about how international students are vulnerable to wage theft and exploitation. This person took a job in an upmarket hotel in a major Australian city and was paid \$18 per hour for three hours work, which sounded reasonable to them but they did not realise that they

were expected to clean 12 rooms in the three hours. In actual fact, it took them 8 hours to clean those rooms and the student ended up with only \$50 for this work and missed a lecture as a result. The student learnt to work faster in order to get the job done, as they needed this work to pay tuition fees and living expenses. Over time the student collected many similar stories and shared some of these with us. The student told us how different strategies were used by employers to pay workers less than the minimum wage. International students are forced to take these jobs as they are the only jobs that are available for them being new to the Australian job market. In many cases students breach their visa conditions to earn money to support their tuition fees. They are in constant fear of deportation.

Alexander Baxter was the last speaker of the day and she gave us some sad facts and figures from a study that she has done on Human Trafficking for the sex trade. Although this was not the main aspect of the forum she considers it to be one of the worst forms of Human Trafficking. One unusual fact was that, because they know no other field, a trafficked sex worker can end up becoming a trafficker herself, because she knows no other life and has all the contacts.

I think that the most important thing that I learnt from my day at the forum was what a great job many people are doing to combat Modern Slavery and that the secret to their success is determination and the idea of working together one step at a time. We must support them as much as possible and ensure that we learn from their valuable work and do as much as we can to purchase products which are slavery free. May God hugely bless them and help them to continue their work.

Any group wanting a guest speaker from ACRATH should contact Sr. Meredith Evans 0413 208 691 or meredith.evans@mercy.org.au