

Shining the Light on the Victims of a Despicable Trade

Castan Centre Academics Investigate Human Trafficking

By Thiloshini Herath-Schmidt

A spate of interviews by researchers throughout the Asia-Pacific region has highlighted the second year of the Castan Centre's Australian Research Council grant on trafficking in women.

The three-year grant, entitled 'Australia's Response to Trafficking in Women: Towards A Model For the Regulation of Forced Migration in the Asia-Pacific Region' was awarded to Professor Susan Kneebone, Professor Bernadette McSherry and Dr Julie Debeljak in 2006. The four Collaborating Organisations that are part of this Linkage Grant are:

- The Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, the Chair of the Commonwealth Government's Inter-Departmental Committee on Trafficking in Persons;
- The Commonwealth Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission ("HREOC");
- World Vision Australia, a non-government organisation that undertakes community-level work and systematic advocacy on trafficking related issues; and
- Cardno ACIL Pty Ltd.

The project is an evaluation of Australia's response to trafficking in persons from the standpoint of criminal justice, human rights law, and migration law. It focuses on Australia's domestic response to trafficking, as well as its role and response in the Asia-Pacific region. The Australian Government has, since 2003 implemented an aid program through Cardno ACIL aimed at addressing the causes of trafficking in the Greater Mekong Subregion. In particular, the program has focussed on Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar and the project has, in turn, focussed on these countries.

The principal endeavour of this project is to strengthen the ability of governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental agencies to address trafficking in persons, through a review of the current legislative, policy and practical responses and reform strategies.

In order to achieve this goal, the researchers are examining and evaluating the international law responses to trafficking, and the domestic responses in the focal countries of Australia, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar. The researchers are also assessing regional initiatives dealing with forced migration and trafficking of persons; exploring the effectiveness of Australia's domestic and regional response to these issues and comparing them with international benchmarks

This research will have significant implications for legal and policy development, and will contribute to more fully informed debate on the issues surrounding forced migration and trafficking in persons. There are also numerous practical outcomes of this research, which include the development of an Integrated Training Programme within Australia, a complementary Training Manual, and a Plain English Information Booklet on the issue.

After initially researching primary and secondary materials, Susan Kneebone and Julie Debeljak began interviewing stakeholders in Cambodia, Thailand, Australia and Lao PDR this year, and intend to carry out interviews in Myanmar in 2008. The stakeholders include a variety of people, from very senior members of government to individuals working in not-for-profit local victim support agencies. The interviewing process, although a novel form of research for both Susan and Julie, has given them invaluable information and insights that simply could not have been garnered from written reports, commentaries, articles, monographs and the like.

"This has been one of my most rewarding research experiences to date. Thanks to our Collaborating Organisations, each of whom was carefully chosen for the interests they represent and pursue, we have gained access to the broadest range of stakeholders working on the issues of trafficking and forced migration, both in Australia and the region. From discussing issues with stakeholders, we have gained a much deeper understanding of the context within which trafficking occurs, the unique legal and policy challenges in each focal country, and the significant gaps that exist in the domestic, regional and international initiatives to date", said Julie Debeljak.

"There is simply no substitute for face-to-face interviews with people at the coalface for confirming or denying the many myths that exist in the trafficking debates, filling in the gaps of our knowledge, and testing out our ideas with the very stakeholders whom we hope to influence and benefit."

"At times, the interviewing process has been quite a challenge and exhausting. With each new meeting, we have had to find common ground and strike up a rapport before we can get to the crux of the issues. Across cultures, across disciplines, across legal systems, across philosophical divides, across language barriers – we have had to build trust and understanding in order to share knowledge, ideas and insights. We have had the delight of meeting many incredibly dedicated people in all sectors – governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental. And, of course, there has been many a colourful character thrown into the mix too. Every day and every interview has provided me with renewed inspiration to pursue justice for the victims of trafficking and to reduce the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators", said Julie.

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