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UQ study looks at foreign sex worker exploitation and human trafficking

Australia and Canada's records in combating human trafficking were among the worst in the developed world, according to a [University of Queensland](#) researcher.

Dr Andreas Schloenhardt, a senior lecturer in UQ's [TC Beirne School of Law](#) said trafficking in persons remained a phenomenon not well understood and poorly researched.

"This is despite greater public awareness and acknowledgement of the problem by government agencies," he said.

"Strategic policies, concerted government action, along with prosecutions and convictions of traffickers are only slowly forthcoming and the support available to victims of trafficking is only marginally developed."



Dr Schloenhardt

Dr Schloenhardt has received a \$50,000 UQ Foundation Research Excellence Award to conduct the first comprehensive and comparative analysis of the exploitation of foreign sex workers and trafficking in persons — especially women and children — in Australia and Canada.

The UQ Foundation Research Excellence Awards have been run for 10 years and are an initiative of UQ to recognise outstanding performance and leadership potential in early career researchers.

"The true extent of this problem is not fully known, largely due to the clandestine nature of this phenomenon and the taboo nature of the sex industry," Dr Schloenhardt said.

"Reports about the number of trafficked persons in Canada and Australia vary greatly depending on the source of information.

"Government agencies suggest that several hundred persons are trafficked into both countries every year while non-governmental organisations and advocacy groups argue that this trade involves several thousand people."

Dr Schloenhardt said the current prostitution licensing scheme and increased regulation of the sex industry sought to limit the exploitation of sex workers.

However, a recent prosecution in Far North Queensland for sexual servitude and the discovery of 10 Korean "sex slaves" in Sydney by law enforcement and immigration authorities in early March 2008 were evidence that non-citizens are at particular risk, regardless of their legal status in Australia.

Similar reports frequently appeared in Canada, though, unlike Australia, there had been, to date, no single prosecution under relevant offences.

"This risk of exploitation is exacerbated if sex workers have been trafficked into Australia or Canada and lack access to support services," Dr Schloenhardt said.

"Australians and Canadians are living in increasingly progressive and liberal societies which is reflected in the legalisation of prostitution and brothels that began in Victoria in the 1980s.

"However, the licensing of prostitution must be balanced with the protection of persons at risk of sexual abuse and other forms of exploitation.

"The trafficking of persons, especially women and children, frequently involves international criminal syndicates that benefit from the exploitation of their victims."

One of the major obstacles to government policy making, program development by non-governmental organisations, and public awareness about the exploitation of foreign workers and the trafficking in persons was the lack of any reliable and comprehensive account of the nature and extent of this problem, he said.

Anecdotal evidence and statistical estimates without a sufficient evidentiary basis were the only sources of information currently available about Australia and Canada's involvement in trafficking in persons.

This was in contrast to other countries where comprehensive accounts of human trafficking were published annually by government agencies.

Dr Schloenhardt said in international law, the *Protocol against the Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children* came into existence in 2000. This Protocol, together with the *Convention against Transnational Organised Crime*, had created a new platform and new opportunity to prevent and suppress the problem more effectively around the world.

Under Canadian and Australian law, trafficking in persons was made a criminal offence in 2004.

He said the new project would bring greater public attention to the problem. By examining relevant regulations, criminal offences, and protection mechanisms, the work would encourage policy makers to adopt measures to confront this problem more effectively.

Dr Schloenhardt is a visiting professor at the University of British Columbia Liu Institute for Global Issues in Vancouver, Canada. He is also an adjunct professor in the Monterey Institute of International Studies, Graduate School for International Policy Studies in Monterey, California.

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