## Input for UN Human Rights Council SR VAWG's report on violence against women and prostitution

## Provide examples of the hidden forms of prostitution, and explain to what extent they are recognized and dealt with as such?

It is estimated that hundreds of illegal brothels operate largely outside law enforcement in Australia. This means many women are likely being kept in slavery and slavery-like conditions.[[1]](#endnote-2) Some victims, mostly from SE Asia, have recently been located.[[2]](#endnote-3)

Most illegal brothels in Australia operate under the guise of massage shops. In Melbourne, where prostitution is decriminalised, there are over 500 illegal brothels trading as ‘massage parlours,’ advertising in Thai/Chinese on websites and forums for women who will do massage and “extra” (hand jobs), particularly targeting Chinese students.[[3]](#endnote-4) Arrest rates are low.[[4]](#endnote-5)

Prostitution is hidden through the sex industry’s use of online platforms.[[5]](#endnote-6) Social media, brothel/escort websites, OnlyFans,[[6]](#endnote-7) sugar dating, and Pornhub all profit from the use of trafficked women. These platforms rarely enforce prohibitions against trafficking, and non-consensual material or community guidelines if they have them.

Sales of victims are conducted online via websites, increasingly via webcam. Threats of image based abuse are used to control victims - traffickers can easily obtain intimate images and footage. Technology-enabled abuse includes use of passwords to control finances or devices, smart watches, phones and GPS that allow victims to be tracked.[[7]](#endnote-8) Bitcoin is used to make hidden or anonymous transactions launder money obtained by trafficking.[[8]](#endnote-9)

Content on Snapchat, OnlyFans and TikTok desensitises and groom teens into being vulnerable to[[9]](#endnote-10) sex trafficking.[[10]](#endnote-11)

Also at special risk of hidden prostitution are vulnerable and homeless Indigenous women and those in institutional care, selling themselves for drugs, alcohol and gifts. Journalist Paul Toohey exposed the phenomenon of indigenous women in the Northern Territory trading sex for food and cigarettes: "Men cruise Darwin’s streets and parks targeting homeless Aboriginal women, known locally as long-grassers, whose lives are mired in poverty, social exclusion, stigma, hunger, trauma, violence, deteriorating health and addiction. Young women in residential care are at particular risk of grooming by gangs.[[11]](#endnote-12)

Describe the profile of women and girls affected by prostitution in your country, and provide disaggregated data, where possible.

Demand for prostituted women is not met by local women, who are mostly unwilling to work in the sex industry. Australian men frequently seek out women who are young, inexperienced, and of Asian background.[[12]](#endnote-13)

The use of poor and vulnerable Asian women, mostly from China, Thailand and South Korea, is critical to the supply and financial success of Australia’s sex industry. Advertising women by their ethnicity is a selling point permitted by the Victorian government.[[13]](#endnote-14) Women at risk are often poor, isolated, having few prospects in their home country, or being lured with false promises. They are frequently deceived by migration agents working on behalf of traffickers to provide student and humanitarian visas.[[14]](#endnote-15)

## What forms of violence are prostituted women and girls subjected to (physical, psychological, sexual, economic, administrative, or other)?

In NSW, under legalised prostitution, crimes include: the violent murder of a 24-year-old woman in 2019;[[15]](#endnote-16) the death in 2009 of two women dispatched to hotel rooms by an escort agency;[[16]](#endnote-17) a brothel owner raping the young daughter of a woman prostituted in his business;[[17]](#endnote-18) a prostituted Korean woman doused with petrol and set alight outside a Sydney brothel in 2012;[[18]](#endnote-19) the organised trafficking of Korean women into the Sydney sex industry;[[19]](#endnote-20) and the prostitution of a 14-year-old girl through a brothel.[[20]](#endnote-21)

A 2012 survey of prostituted women revealed that less than 10 percent of survey respondents reported any contact with police via the brothels where they worked.

Violence against women is endemic in the industry, considered a routine part of the ‘work’. Prostituted women have multiple experiences of violence and have levels of PTSD comparable with those reported by treatment-seeking war veterans.[[21]](#endnote-22)

## Who is responsible for the perpetration of violence against women and girls in prostitution?

Pimps, brothel owners and aggressive male buyers. In Victoria, the ‘Ugly Mugs’ initiative delivered by state funded RhED (Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry) alerts women to violent or dangerous clients.The ‘Comparing Sex Buyers’ study finds that, in systems of prostitution, sex buyers are motivated by the opportunity to control and dominate a woman so they can perform degrading sex acts against her.[[22]](#endnote-23)

Prostitution is inherently violent, experienced by many as paid rape. In a recent piece for the ABC, Survivor Rose Hunter wrote:[[23]](#endnote-24)

*When I say that the sex industry is a trauma industry for women, I’m not talking primarily about the trauma caused by the worst buyers. I’m talking about the trauma women experience* *on a daily basis in the sex industry. I was raped in a brothel, but the most intensely distressing thought I couldn’t get out of my head afterwards was this: Was this rape* *really so different to all the other times I’d been penetrated by penises in this brothel? After all, none of them were wanted — not one.*

*This is another way of saying “my consent was repeatedly bought”, and it is what some feminists and many survivors mean when they say the sex industry is* [*“paid rape”*](https://unherd.com/2020/07/how-authorities-in-leeds-enable-paid-rape/)*.*

## Describe the linkages, if any, between prostitution and the violation of the human rights of women and girls.

Australia provides a “relatively hospitable operating environment for the sex industry,” facilitating the trafficking of Asian women to be sexually exploited, according to a major Australian media investigation in 2022. Titled Trafficked, the piece exposed visa scams, migration agents and foreign worker exploitation in a “booming underground prostitution industry.” Detective Inspector Brad Phelps said women were distributed “like cattle” to licensed brothels, paid very little if at all, and worked under threat of their families being harmed.[[24]](#endnote-25) Kept in illegal brothels, massage parlours, apartment buildings, and private homes, many are in debt bondage and have their passports seized.

The US Department of State in its annual report for 2023 states:[[25]](#endnote-26)

*“Traffickers hold some foreign women – and sometimes girls – in captivity and exploit them through physical and sexual violence and intimidation, manipulate them through illegal drugs, and force them to pay off unexpected or inflated debts.  Traffickers attempt to evade authorities by allowing victims to carry their passports while in commercial sex establishments and frequently moving the victims to different locations to prevent them from establishing relationships with civil society or other victims.  Traffickers isolate foreign women and girls from Australian women to inhibit information sharing about rights, regulations, and work standards in commercial sex establishments; foreign women and girls are likely uninformed about legal commercial sex laws and regulations and are more vulnerable to sex trafficking.  Some victims of sex trafficking and some women who migrate to Australia for arranged or forced marriages are exploited by their husbands or families in domestic servitude.”*

The industry is inherently exploitative. It conveys the message that there is a class of women who can be purchased for violence and degrading sex acts. Framing of prostitution as “work” means the Australian Government did not have to “make efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts”. The US State Department states:

*“Authorities pursued labor, immigration, or employment violations in lieu of trafficking charges, which may have resulted in suspected traffickers receiving only fines and other civil penalties that were inadequate to deter trafficking crimes.” Despite persistent reports of sexual exploitation, forced labor, and multiple trafficking indicators among foreign workers in Australia under the auspices of the Working Holiday Visa scheme and the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, authorities did not report proactively screening for trafficking indicators among such workers.”*

We continue to oppose moves to decriminalise and deregulate prostitution on the grounds that the industry is founded on violence, abuse and misogyny and can never be made safe.[[26]](#endnote-27)

## What links are there between pornography and/or other forms of sexual exploitation and prostitution?

Feminist research has clearly shown the links between pornography, prostitution, and violence against women.[[27]](#endnote-28)

Sex discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault and other forms of violence are perpetuated by a culture that normalises women as sexual objects rather than full human beings deserving of respect, and fair and equal treatment. Mainstream pornography is the graphic, sexualised depiction of male dominance and female subordination. It eroticises male aggression towards women .and is a form of hate speech and sexual terrorism against women.

Pornography has been identified as contributing to attitudes which normalise violence against women in Australia’s National Plan of Action Against Violence Against Women.[[28]](#endnote-29)

*Big Porn Inc: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornography Industry* revealed how the pornography industry popularised new kinds of hardcore and violent misogyny.[[29]](#endnote-30) Research in 2020 showed 35%-45% of pornography contains aggression, with women the targets of aggression in 97% of those scenes.[[30]](#endnote-31) A systematic review confirmed that women are overwhelmingly the targets of violence in pornography.[[31]](#endnote-32) The French equality watchdog found in 2023 that 90% of pornographic content online features torture, verbal, physical and sexual violence towards women, with a significant amount of such violence punishable under existing laws in France.[[32]](#endnote-33)

Women in pornography production commonly have experiences in other forms of commercial sexual exploitation. Five women in this study reported experiences in other forms of commercial sexual exploitation: four in prostitution, including “sugar dating,” and three women were previously in stripping.[[33]](#endnote-34)

Women are sold into the sex industry including into the production of pornography. Pornography fuels demands for more women to be sold in brothels and related establishments. Men's sexual preferences are shaped by the porn they consume. Pornography is filmed prostitution.

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