

‘People are not for sale’: ACRATH and the fight to live freely

Written by Christian Bergmann

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Some problems seem so entrenched, so complex and so enormous that it’s a wonder anyone ever steps up to confront them. But great movements often come from humble places, when a quiet conviction moves someone to do something small, something that grows into a movement beyond their expectations.

The story of ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking Humans) began in a Queensland food court in 2005, when two nuns—Sr Louise Cleary CSB and Sr Pauline Coll SGS—met for coffee.

In 2001 and 2004, 700 leaders of Catholic women had met in Rome to discuss a growing concern: human trafficking. The stories that emerged from those meetings revealed a worrying global problem.

From South America, it was reported that young women were travelling to Japan under the mistaken idea they were going to work in fashion, only to find themselves working in a brothel. Women travelling from Nigeria to Rome left home with similar notions, only to be exploited and kept in family homes and other workplaces as slave labour. Other stories emerged from Albania, England, France, Thailand, Australia. It was clear that human trafficking was a lucrative, multinational business that demanded an organised response.

That day in the food court, Srs Louise and Pauline decided to be part of the solution.

In 2005, in an early but significant step, Australian academics and social justice advocates, including Srs Louise and Pauline, collaborated to prepare a submission to the United Nations in New York—specifically, to the Committee of CEDAW (the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women). The resulting submission was delivered to the UN in January 2006.

Another woman involved in preparing this submission was Christine Carolan, who today serves as the National Executive Officer of ACRATH. Back then, Christine says she was an ‘unbeliever’—not in the importance of tackling human trafficking, but in the idea that drafting anything for the UN would be worthwhile.

To her surprise, it was. ‘We put forward an extraordinary document. It was a 36-page report about human trafficking in Australia and the sorts of issues that needed to be addressed ... I thought, I’m not sure about spending all this time on a document for the United Nations, but it was very successful.’

The report formed the basis of several of the CEDAW Committee’s recommendations to the Australian Government that year, and the newly formed ACRATH brought the recommendations to Canberra on their very first advocacy visit.

Advocacy is a core part of their work. By telling the stories of people affected by human trafficking, and opening politicians’ eyes to the reality of what’s going on, they play an important role in affecting structural change.



The ACRATH team visiting Canberra on their 2023 Advocacy Week visit. (Photo courtesy ACRATH.)

The scale of the problem

Human trafficking is a difficult area of the criminal underworld to investigate, and ascertaining concrete numbers is even harder. By some estimations, more than 50 million people are being trafficked around the world today, and 71 per cent of them are female, both women and children. Of that 50 million, an estimated 40,000 find themselves exploited on Australian shores, with only one in five ever being detected.

Around the world, trafficking takes numerous forms, including debt bondage, sexual exploitation, forced marriage and domestic servitude, among others. In Australia, Christine says, ACRATH is addressing two big areas of concern (although there are many others): forced marriage and support for vulnerable migrant workers.

In both of these, ACRATH has helped win important victories, even on the legislative front.

Forced marriage

On International Women's Day 2013, then Prime Minister Julia Gillard and attorney-general Mark Dreyfus announced a law criminalising forced marriage in Australia. This was in part due to the advocacy work of ACRATH.

It was a long road to that point, beginning in 2008, when they took the stories of girls being coerced into marriage to the Office for Women. At the time the minister for women was Tanya Plibersek. Their advocacy and the work of other NGOs resulted in two parliamentary inquiries and, eventually, the legislation.

In their documentation and submissions, the women and girls are always de-identified, but Christine says there are many stories like that of Rani, a young girl in Australia who is being pulled out of school by her parents and taken to their home country to marry someone she doesn't want to marry. Sometimes the situation is different: the woman is brought to Australia as a bride but discovers that she has entered a 'marriage' that is exploitative and abusive.

'It's not just something that's very quietly happening,' Christine says. 'It's big.'

In fact, according to the Australian Federal Police, reports of forced marriage constitute the highest percentage of filed trafficking reports in Australia.

Alongside their advocacy work, ACRATH also engages in a lot of training and awareness-raising in various sectors, including hospitals, emergency departments, maternity wings and schools. The kind of training ACRATH offers shows workers how to judge when a particular situation might be exploitative and then to know how to safely seek support.

'What we've found is that staff say to us, "What you're talking about resonates with me because I think I've actually met somebody like this,"' Christine explains.

In schools, this kind of training has allowed teachers to tell girls like Rani that they have a right not to marry someone they don't want to. This has given girls the confidence and knowledge they need to say no and walk their own path here in Australia.

Seasonal workers

Although we might not typically think of migrant fruit-pickers as vulnerable to trafficking, Christine explains that sometimes a situation of exploitation can escalate to become one of trafficking.

In 2017, the story of 22 men from Vanuatu made the media when it was discovered they had been seriously exploited by a labour-hire firm. Coming to Australia on the Seasonal Worker Program in 2014, they were either paid nothing at all or amounts far below what they were owed by their Queensland employer, Emmanuel Bani, director of Maroochy Sunshine. They also had savings stolen from them by the labour-hire company.

When the seasonal workers confronted their employer over the lack of wages, he threatened to call the police and have them deported; he convinced them there was nothing they could do, that nobody would care about their situation. It was this that made it more than a wage issue, Christine says. 'That's the issue that takes it into trafficking, when the person does not believe they can leave the situation of exploitation.'

Although in 2017 Mr Bani and his company were fined over \$200,000, with orders to compensate the 22 workers for nearly \$80,000, ACRATH fought for another five years for the Australian government to make an 'act of grace' payment—a monetary gift by the Commonwealth in situations where they bear some responsibility though no legal liability. In 2022, the Vanuatu workers finally got their money.

Christine says:

We were able to say to the government: you're responsible. The finance ministry has to pay this act of grace because it was an Australian government program and it wasn't adequately monitored. And I think because of that, there's now a lot more oversight ... It was a hugely significant thing.



Left to right: Ange Duthie, ACRATH Communications Leader; Christine Carolan, ACRATH National Executive Officer; Attorney-General the Hon Mark Dreyfus; Mary Cameron, ACRATH Victorian Regional Coordinator; and Cindy Bohan, ACRATH Community Development Worker. (Photo courtesy ACRATH.)

Building a knowledgeable world

In a lot of ways, knowledge is key to ACRATH's work. Through knowledge of people's stories, Members of Parliament can legislate in such a way that makes trafficking harder. By gaining knowledge of how trafficking works and its different faces, workers on the frontlines of health and education can raise the alarm to help those suffering.

But everyone else can play a role too. Christine encourages people to subscribe to their free newsletter and even become a member of ACRATH if they are able. People can get involved in the annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, which begins on 25 November, and during the Christmas season ACRATH will be launching their slavery-free chocolate campaign.

A very simple thing people can do, though, is to talk to others about the issue, Christine says.

'We really encourage people to talk to three people within a week of them finding out something, just so that they're building a knowledgeable world,' she says.

Christine has always been encouraged by the sense of empowerment people feel when they learn about the problem and realise they can do something. Helping build a knowledgeable world through conversation is one of those things.

Along with building a knowledgeable world, conversation can also help cut through indifference, as Pope Francis urged us to: 'It is not possible to remain indifferent before the knowledge that human beings are bought and sold like goods!'

Far from being indifferent, organisations like ACRATH fight every day so that people can live free from exploitation and slavery.

Written by

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