

SEPTEMBER NEWSLETTER 2025



People are NOT for sale

ACRATH marks two decades of mission

Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH) is marking two decades of mission and impact with participation this week in Parliament House to advocate for the rights of victim/survivors of modern slavery.

Twenty years ago, a group of women, Louise Cleary csb, Margaret Ng rsj, Tania de Jong rgs (deceased) and Pauline Coll sgs (deceased), gathered to discuss the global tragedy of modern slavery and reports of people being trafficked into Australia for sex work and other forms of exploitation. Two decades later, ACRATH continues to companion victims/survivors, advocate for their rights, educate the community, and raise awareness of human trafficking and modern slavery within Australia and globally.



Image: ACRATH Staff and Members Parliament House 3 September, 2025

This year, ACRATH advocates for:

- A National Compensation Scheme for victims/survivors of modern slavery,
- Increased protections for workers participating in the PALMS, the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme, from unscrupulous operators who engage in exploitative practices, and
- Changes to the Human Trafficking Visa Framework to ensure it meets its intended purpose - providing adequate protection and support for survivors of human trafficking, slavery, and slavery-like practices.

ACRATH members Judy Lamb and Marg O'Shea reflected "We learnt that in the corridors of power, along with the voices of many others, the ACRATH voice could be heard. The experience of participating in advocacy gave us a sense of hope that systemic change may occur. It was enlightening, enriching and informative".

ACRATH remains committed to the future and the milestones achieved with partners, including the introduction of the Modern Slavery Act (2018), the establishment of Anti-Slavery Commissioners, an additional pathway for victim/survivors into the Support for Trafficked People Program and pioneering work on forced marriage, in collaboration with Anti-Slavery Australia.

Sarah's got so much more to do

It's almost a decade since Sarah Puls sgs first went to Parliament House asking MPs and policy makers to consider measures to protect vulnerable people from modern slavery and laying the groundwork for the Modern Slavery Act. It was Sarah's first 'appearance' as part of ACRATH's annual Canberra advocacy team and there were big things on the agenda, including a plea for funding!



After the week of advocacy in Canberra in 2016 Sarah wrote

I feel like our job in ACRATH is to be a pebble in the shoe of people who have the power to make the real changes to address these issues. Sometimes we are a pebble that jumps back into the shoe over and over! We come and tell them again about the real people who are affected by these issues.

The Modern Slavery Act was passed in 2018 but this year's advocacy team, led by Sarah who is ACRATH's newly appointed NEO and Community Development worker Carmel Shaw, had plenty to raise with MPs and civic leaders, including the need for:

- A National Compensation Scheme for victims/survivors of modern slavery.
- Increased protections for workers participating in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme (PALMS), from unscrupulous operators who engage in exploitative practices, and
- Changes to the Human Trafficking Visa Framework to ensure it meets its intended purpose - providing adequate protection and support for survivors of human trafficking, slavery, and slavery-like practices.

Sarah recognises that many of the asks' in this year's advocacy trip have been on the agenda for several years and she understands that change takes a lot of work with a lot of people. Her meetings this year included Chiara Porro, diplomat and former Australian Ambassador to the Holy See.

"It feels like we are a million miles from where we were a decade ago. A lot has been achieved but sadly there will always be people who fall through the cracks, and we must be better at supporting these people," Sarah said.

"ACRATH has such a long history in this work, right back to the early days when we were using our networks to help repatriate trafficked girls back to Australia. Our real expertise is in creating community awareness and working with other very skilled organisations to bring about change." Sarah acknowledged one of the challenges facing all organisations involved in modern slavery work is the capacity of offenders to create new exploitation opportunities. The increased reporting of exit trafficking and cyber exploitation are good examples.

Organisations such as ACRATH also must be willing and equipped to meet the modern slavery challenges in the 21st century.

"ACRATH's work in the community with vulnerable groups, particularly seasonal workers, allows us to contribute to work at a systemic level. We know from our work on the ground that many seasonal workers are reluctant to make a complaint against an unscrupulous employer for fear of having their visa revoked or not being allowed to come back to Australia in the future. We need grievance procedures that are safe for workers," Sarah said. "This was a key issue we raised in Canberra."

Sarah was hesitant asking for money back in 2016, now it's part of her job to ensure critical programs are sustainable and programs can be adapted and developed to address emerging issues.

"We have survived through some tough years without government funding because of the generosity of the community but committed funding sources mean programs can continue and be strengthened to meet whatever challenges are ahead."

Seasonal workers need protection



Carla Chung, ACRATH's seasonal worker support person, knows first-hand the 'gaps' into which too many seasonal workers are falling. While the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme (PALM) scheme has guidelines that determine the conditions for workers, too many are being exploited by unscrupulous operators.

Increased protections for workers participating in the PALM scheme was one of the key issues ACRATH took to Canberra in

the recent advocacy trip. ACRATH NEO Sarah Puls said "while the PALMS program is a highly regulated labour scheme that provides labour for Australia's horticultural and meat processing industries, loopholes that significantly increase the likelihood of workers ending up as victims of modern slavery must be removed."

ACRATH is calling for:

- Urgent action on establishment of the National Labour Hire Scheme (by end of 2025) to plug gaps that are exploited by unscrupulous operators.
- Reviewing visa settings for Temporary Work (International Relations) visa (subclass 403) - Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM), to ensure workers are not 'trapped' in exploitative conditions.
- Access to Medicare for PALM Scheme workers.

Carla, who attends many briefings for new arrivals across Victoria, particularly in the south-east Melbourne area, said the instances of workers being exploited is too common and many will refuse to make a complaint for fear of having their visa revoked.

Some of the most common problems facing PALM scheme workers are overcharging for substandard accommodation by their approved employers and failure to pay correct wages "We had an example in Victoria last year of women from Timor-Leste here on a nine-month PALM scheme visa being told after six months that there was no more work for them so they would have to go home. They come here to earn money for their family and community. To go home early is a terrible thing for them. And a lot of the first three months of their wages goes towards paying back the approved employer for flights and other costs," Carla said. "Of the workers told to go home early, only two lodged a complaint and stayed to work their full nine months. The other women were too afraid that making a complaint would prevent them getting another working visa under this program."

Another common complaint is high accommodation costs for living conditions which are often very crowded and unsafe.

The situation of seasonal workers at risk of modern slavery may get worse because the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme — predominantly used to fill labour shortages in horticulture and meat processing — is now expanding into aged care.

An ABC [report](#) in August featured the NSW anti-slavery commissioner, James Cockayne, warning that "Australia faces a potential escalation in cases of modern slavery ... as sectors such as aged care become increasingly reliant on temporary migrant workers."

He estimated that more than 16,000 people in NSW are living in modern slavery conditions. According to the ABC report, Dr Cockayne said he was concerned the aged care sector had "not adequately" prepared for this risk.

Funding boost for higher education work

Educating for Change, a ground-breaking program developed by ACRATH, Flinders University and Adelaide University has received a further year's funding from the Attorney-General's Department. This funding extension means the program, already in 31 universities nationwide, will be able to enhance prevention and amplify awareness raising across more faculties and universities. The extension will also allow the team to create a new module on ethical sustainability and target more sectors in tertiary education.

ACRATH, Flinders University and Adelaide University created Educating for Change, 6 micro-credentialed courses that will equip the next generation of professionals to recognise and respond to modern slavery. The Educating for Change modules went live in April 2025 after a two-year development phase. The modules are free and have been developed for university students studying social work, law, criminology, education, and health care as well as for university staff, particularly those working in student facing roles and in procurement offices.

Melissa Halliday, ACRATH's Community Development Project Coordinator, said during the first stage of rollout, many university contacts asked the team about a module looking at ethical sustainability, that could be undertaken by students in business, engineering or construction. "This funding extension will give us an opportunity to look at environmental and other initiatives and emphasise human rights. Does creating something that benefits the environment come at a cost to vulnerable people? It's an important area to explore and to ask future business leaders to consider," Dr. Nerida Chazal from Adelaide University said.

The first stage of the Educating for Change program has been successful with 31 of the country's 42 universities involved. Some universities are rolling it out across several disciplines and other universities are focussing on educating staff. Some are including the modules in the social work curriculum as preparation for students going on placement.

"We know that many social workers will encounter, or work closely with, vulnerable communities, so it's a really important link the universities are making," Melissa said.

There has also been interest in the modules from professionals working in the health, education and law sectors.

The Educating for Change team applauded the Attorney-General's Department for the extension of funding for a further 12 months and said it was a recognition of the ever-changing landscape of human trafficking and modern slavery and the need for longer term funding.

"There's a deepening conversation around so many aspects of modern slavery in Australia, including the statements organisations submit as part of the Modern Slavery Act. So, we need relevant and up-to-date resources across sectors, that inform people about what is happening today so that we can impact real change for people who are vulnerable to, or experiencing modern slavery," said Professor Marinella Marmo from Flinders University.

The free and on-demand Educating for Change modules for university staff and students can be accessed at <https://acrath.org.au/resources/educating-for-change/>



ACRATH calls for tougher MSA

ACRATH has called on the Federal Government to introduce tougher requirements and penalties for companies as part of the Modern Slavery Act (MSA) review. Strengthening of the Act would ensure penalties for companies that must report annually on slavery risks, but that do not comply with requirements or that submit false statements.

The Federal Government called for submissions as part of its review of the MSA which was introduced in 2018 after a decade of advocacy by organisations working in the modern slavery sector, including ACRATH.

Every day, millions of people around the world are trapped in modern slavery—making the clothes we wear, the food we eat and the goods and services we use. ACRATH saw a Modern Slavery Act as a means of eliminating slavery from the supply chain of goods. It would also give consumers more confidence that their purchases were not tainted by slavery.

Be Slavery Free encouraged submissions saying, “Australia imports over \$25 billion worth of products at risk of being made with forced labour. Right now, our Modern Slavery Act lets companies simply report on what they’re doing.... No penalties for ignoring the law. No consequences for lying. No requirement to fix the problem.”

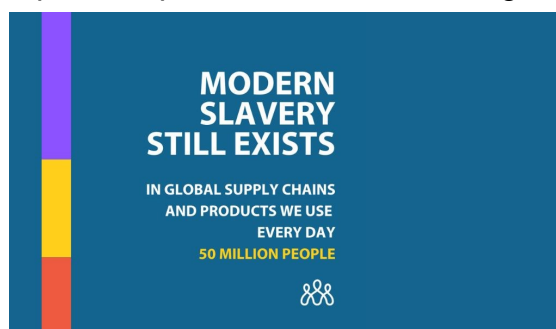
There are no penalties for companies that do not submit a modern slavery report. The Government’s own three-year statutory review which was tabled in Parliament in May 2023 found, “that the Modern Slavery Act has had a positive impact in raising awareness of modern slavery amongst the business community. However, it found a need for:

- greater clarity around what is expected in modern slavery reporting
- practical amendments to the Modern Slavery Act
- further expanding guidance material
- a broader regulatory mix of compliance and enforcement powers to incorporate specific penalties for non-compliance with reporting requirements.”

ACRATH NEO Sarah Puls sgs said the Modern Slavery Act was a huge win for organisations such as ACRATH, but there was always an understanding that it didn’t go far enough. She said the seven years since it was enacted have exposed the loopholes and flaws in the Act that allow companies to continue with slavery in their supply chains with no penalties.

In ACRATH’s submission, developed by Sarah and Community Development worker Carmel Shaw, ACRATH said:

- We acknowledge that the task of reporting and responding to modern slavery risks is significant and requires resources and expertise. If we want genuine compliance and remediation and not just a box-ticking exercise, businesses need advice and support on how to respond in a material way.
- There is no incentive to improve compliance if the only response is further advice. There must be a legislative requirement for businesses to fulfil their duty to prevent modern slavery. Guidance does not carry enough weight for compliance from businesses who are not committed to improvement.
- Legislative change is required to prevent future weakening of protection of vulnerable workers.



SVHA modern slavery work boost

St Vincent's Health Australia (SVHA) continues to lead the health sector in the fight against modern slavery with a funding boost from the Attorney-General's Department. Over the next 12 months, this boost will support the team to expand work building clinician confidence and capacity to identify and respond to modern slavery and exploitation across the national health network. This work will continue to be guided by those with lived experience to better inform initiatives.

During the two-year Modern Slavery Project SVHA has developed learning modules for upskilling frontline healthcare staff in identifying patients presenting to health services who are experiencing different forms of modern slavery such as: domestic servitude, debt bondage, forced labour and sexual exploitation. The work has been done with collaboration and support from organisations including ACRATH, and the Office of Anti-Slavery Commissioner NSW.

SVHA in its Modern Slavery Statement for 2024 reported: In the past year, 13 individuals who had endured modern slavery were identified in public hospitals across Melbourne and Sydney. These cases involved various forms of exploitation, with nearly every survivor experiencing multiple types of exploitation. Approximately 70% of these individuals were victims of human trafficking, and nearly half of them showed signs of sex trafficking, domestic servitude, or forced marriage. Additionally, more than one-third of the survivors exhibited indicators of family and domestic violence, disability, and mental health issues. An important part of the Modern Slavery Project has been changes to the family violence screening process to include modern slavery identification. This has been developed at St Vincent's in Melbourne and now looks set to be considered by St Vincent's in Sydney where different identification and response protocols are currently used.

Nurse Eve Wintergreen, who is Project Manager of SVHA's Modern Slavery Project, said the screening tool will help clinicians distinguish modern slavery and family violence indicators in patients and cater to the niche needs of modern slavery survivors. A lot of work has also been done developing the six modules and rolling them out to frontline staff.

Procurement is a major focus for SVHA at all levels and includes assessment of staffing and services used by the hospitals. Eve said SVHA, has over the years, developed a greater understanding of the risks of modern slavery in supply chains and service provision, particularly in relation to staff working at the hospital through labour hire companies. Another learning module has been introduced targeting managers involved in hiring and labour hire agencies supplying to St Vincent's so modern slavery risks in the recruitment of migrant workers can be identified and mitigated making St Vincent's a safer workplace. The Modern Slavery Project builds on the work that first began at SVHA in 2017, even before the Modern Slavery Act of 2018 introduced reporting requirements.

Back then ACRATH partnered with SVHA on a ground-breaking program recruiting Advocates for Change who educated colleagues about modern slavery, how to identify it in a patient and pathways to support people. Eve was one of the first Advocates for Change. There are now 12 advocates as well as clinical champions and SVHA is a leader in the health sector.

"When we first began years ago, most of my colleagues had no idea about modern slavery in Australia and there were lots of myths and misunderstandings. COVID saw an increase in the numbers of people coming to the hospitals who were victims of forced labour and sexual exploitation, who no longer had any work, no place to stay and no visa protection or access to support," Eve said.

"We have in a short time gone from colleagues thinking modern slavery is a niche area and who were uncertain in identifying signs of exploitation, to most staff now understanding it is a public health issue. We have also developed these education materials and programs to ensure our staff are better equipped to support victim/survivors."

"When you care for someone who has been trafficked you feel a profound responsibility to not just care for them but to get them to safety."

Call to action September 2025

ACRATH supports the work of many like-minded organisations both in Australia and globally. Many produce resources that can be used in a variety of settings and some have campaigns underway. Our newsletter regularly includes this page, encouraging people to find out more and consider becoming involved in actions and advocacy.

ACRATH's week

<https://cathnews.com/2025/09/05/acrath-marks-two-decades-of-mission/>

Albanese Government must act on modern slavery after UN sounds alarm

<https://www.hrlc.org.au/news/albanese-govt-modern-slavery/>

Changing Australia: Professor Jennifer Burn and fighting slavery and human trafficking (Audio)

<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/changing-oz-jennifer-burn-fighting-slavery-and-human-trafficking/105434556>

Talitha Kum Annual Report

<https://www.talithakum.info/en/report2024/>

Sr. Abby's message for the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons; Grace's Story

<https://www.talithakum.info/en/news/world-day-against-trafficking-in-persons-july-30-2025/>

Thousands in NSW could be modern slavery victims, but one scheme may worsen the situation

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-01/nsw-anti-slavery-commissioner-on-modern-slavery-exploitation/105594322>

UN Special Rapporteur report spotlights gaps in Australia's anti-slavery response

<https://www.antislaverycommissioner.gov.au/news/un-special-rapporteur-report-spotlights-gaps-australias-anti-slavery-response>

Kmart denies sourcing any products from factories linked to forced labour in China

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-05/kmart-products-allegations-forced-labour-source/105600184>

UNANIMA, prominent sister-led coalition at United Nations, to end its ministry

<https://www.globalsistersreport.org/social-justice/unanima-prominent-sister-led-coalition-united-nations-end-its-ministry>
<https://unanima-international.org/>

Pacific workers face 'appalling' housing, fear deportation if they seek medical care, inquiry told

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/pacific-workers-face-appalling-housing-fear-deportation-if-they-seek-medical-care-inquiry-told/wno7uq2ui>

Volkswagen's Brazil ranch probed for human trafficking; Catholic priest exposed it

<https://www.osvnews.com/volkswagens-brazil-ranch-probed-for-human-trafficking-catholic-priest-rezende-exposed-it/>

Catholic religious receives top anti-human trafficking award in Thailand

<https://www.licas.news/2025/06/06/catholic-religious-receives-top-anti-human-trafficking-award-in-thailand/>

Woman who allegedly lured PNG nationals to Australia with fake scholarships charged with human trafficking

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-06-12/woman-png-nationals-human-trafficking-charges-australia/105408656>

'I Was Married at 14 to a Man 3 Times My Age, Now I Work to End Child Marriages in Bihar'

<https://thebetterindia.com/484787/child-marriage-bihar-roshni-perween/>

Warm welcome for Ambassador's visit

<https://hobart.catholic.org.au/2025/08/20/warm-welcome-for-ambassadors-visit/>

ACRATH needs core business funding and additional funding for special projects.

Please consider a regular donation to ACRATH so that we can plan ahead. Thanks.

<https://www.trybooking.com/au/donate/acrath>
 or <https://acrath.org.au/donate>

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