



Submission No 24

**Inquiry into Slavery, Slavery-like conditions and People
Trafficking**

Name: Avyi Patitsas

Avyi Patitsas

To whom it may concern,

I am making a submission to the *inquiry into people trafficking and all forms of slavery* because I have seen examples of slavery-like conditions and forced/ servile marriage, and I believe that the related human rights are insufficiently protected. The following are some examples that might be relevant to the inquiry.

One married, 18 year old student confided in me that she hadn't wanted to get married, but that her brother arranged it (within Australia). She also told me that her husband had beat her more than 5 times during the year they'd been married. She had missed school due to this. She also often missed school to do housework. She knew that in Australia she had the right to divorce her husband, or be protected from this violence, but, in her own words, "Muslim people can not get divorced". She also experienced constant surveillance by her husband, was unable to use a mobile phone, outside of calling him and answering his calls. This is an example of forced marriage and a person living in slavery like conditions. From looking at her file I saw she was being treated for depression, one of the most prevalent problems facing Afghan women like herself.

Another example is two sisters just over 18 years old who were not allowed to attend school. After begging their father he eventually allowed them to attend, but with strict conditions, including that they could not go on any excursions. This did not last long however, and they left again shortly after. During the time they were at school they visited counsellors who gave them advice on their situation.

The father would not speak to a woman, even on the phone. The students were not allowed out of the house without his supervision, and a female teacher or counsellor often picked them up or dropped them off home so that they could attend school. The young women did not have mobile phones, and did not even know the emergency phone number. They told us that at home all they did was housework, and they were not allowed to use the phone, internet or even watch television, unless in his presence.

After the students stopped attending school for a time, they returned to visit. During this visit we were told that they were going to Pakistan to marry their first cousins. They did not want to do this, but their father was forcing them. He had told them that they would be able to contact their mother while there, but we knew that this was just bribery, as he had not allowed them to have

any contact with their mother at all since they had been divorced (their father had forcibly taken them away from their mother at the time). The counsellors and their teachers discussed the situation, but we realised there was nothing we could do. As adults, they knew their legal rights here, but were afraid of their father. Again, violence was an issue at home. I do not know where they are now, but certainly they were at risk of forced marriage, and were living in slavery like conditions. I believe that these young women kept trying to access help from the only place they might get it, school, and that the system failed them.

An example of some men's perspective I have encountered, is the belief that a man can force his wife to have sex with him. That if they are married, it is his right, and her duty. Subjugation of and violence against women is very common within some communities. I work within deals with these issues, but only one such lesson is provided over the course of a year.

I have worked at _____ and have had these three direct experiences relating to the inquiry. I have also been told many such stories by other teachers. For example, that students have been ostracised by their community, and even other classmates for questioning the 'traditions' that include forced and servile marriage and discussing their violent husbands/ fathers, being told that they must have done something to be at fault. I also know of many young women who return from holidays married, and a changed person. By this I mean that their previously outgoing, healthy personality has changed to become submissive and shy, something also evident in their body language, i.e. evading eye contact, and clothing. They might avoid socialising or stop altogether, and just keep to themselves. This is a common phenomenon, but as these students are over eighteen, as far as we are aware, we can only inform them of what they can do themselves.

I would now like to give my opinion on the following point:

Australia's efforts to address people trafficking, including through prosecuting offenders and protecting and supporting victims;

I believe we can protect and support victims best through protective laws criminalising such offences, and education. All migrants need to be aware of their rights before they arrive in Australia, but women from certain backgrounds in particular. Their vulnerability stems from lack of education, and a lifetime of social customs and religious beliefs that have not adapted to represent their human rights. This education should be continued in a meaningful way throughout the curriculum at the school they attend to learn English, but the information should also be available beforehand. Many will not go to school, or the language barrier will be too great. It needs to be provided verbally by a translator, as many of these women are illiterate. They need to know where to access more information and direct assistance. Sometimes visa conditions are an issue, and relatives threaten them with deportation if they do not go along with their wishes.

The men should also be explicitly informed that practices such as forced/ servile marriage will not be tolerated, and there need to be laws that protect

women and punish offenders. Often it is not enough for the women to know their rights, as they are under such community pressure and coercion that it makes no difference. This is not good enough. If we are serious about protecting human rights we need to run intensive education programs and provide meaningful support. It is completely unacceptable that women believe they must live under these conditions in our country.

Both men and women from communities at risk of forced/ servile marriage need to be linked with positive community groups who support human rights and understand the protections Australian laws provide. These groups should be from their culture, and support them to deal with these problems, so that they do not feel ostracised. There are many women in such communities who both accept and perpetuate these practices, because they do not know anything else. These communities of migrants need to understand why these laws are in place, and why these human rights exist. If they are seen simply as Australian laws, or cultural/ religious differences, they will not be accepted and nothing will change.

I hope this submission is of use to the inquiry. If there is anything more I can help with, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,

Avyi Patitsas