

Submission to the consultation on the Second Action Plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032

Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia

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August 2026

Executive summary

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Second Action Plan under the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*.

The Consultation Paper appropriately places renewed emphasis on sexual violence, gender inequality and misogyny, primary prevention, emerging online harms, accountability, victim-survivor expertise and stronger coordination across fragmented systems. It also recognises that sexual violence requires approaches that differ in important respects from those developed for family and domestic violence, and that the proposed priority areas may be refined through consultation.

Commercial sexual exploitation causes serious and often intersecting harms to women and girls, including sexual and physical violence, coercion, trafficking, psychological trauma, economic exploitation and barriers to leaving the industry.¹ These harms are not isolated aberrations or limited to situations formally identified as trafficking. They arise within an industry organised around predominantly male demand for paid sexual access, in which women, particularly those experiencing poverty, insecure migration status, racism and other forms of disadvantage, are disproportionately exposed to exploitation and abuse.²

These principles should therefore be applied more consistently to commercial sexual exploitation. Prostitution, pornography and trafficking for sexual exploitation should not be treated as unrelated policy problems or as neutral commercial environments in which exploitation only occasionally occurs. Rather, the commercial sex industry is itself structured by gender inequality: it is predominantly men who purchase sexual access, predominantly women who are sold within these markets, and commercial actors profit from that demand. The sex industry is therefore both a cause and a consequence of women's inequality, with male sexual entitlement and demand for sexual access to women central to its operation.

This is particularly important in a policy context in which prostitution is increasingly normalised as ordinary commercial activity: normalisation and expansion of the market risk increasing demand and, in turn, the number of women required to meet that demand.

This analysis has direct implications for the Second Action Plan. A genuinely systemic approach to violence prevention must examine not only individual attitudes and behaviours, but also the social, institutional and commercial systems through which gender inequality is reproduced and monetised. This includes prostitution markets, pornography and rapidly evolving digital sexual markets; the role of male demand; and the structural conditions that make some women particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

¹ United Nations Human Rights Council (2024), Prostitution and violence against women and girls: Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, Reem Alsalem, A/HRC/56/48; Boxall, H., Lyneham, S., Black, C. and Gannoni, A. (2023), Sexual exploitation in Australia: Victim-survivor support needs and barriers to support provision, Research Report no. 29, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra; Whisnant, R. (2016), 'Pornography, humiliation, and consent', *Sexualization, Media, & Society*, 2(3).

² Nixon, C. (2023), Rapid Review into the Exploitation of Australia's Visa System, Australian Government Department of Home Affairs; Australian Federal Police (2025), 'Reports of human trafficking nearly double over past five years', media release, Australian Federal Police, <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/reports-human-trafficking-nearly-double-over-past-five-years>.

For example, in Australia, Asian migrant women are disproportionately represented in significant parts of the commercial sex industry.³ Research with women working in Sydney's lower-end brothels and massage parlours found that more than 90% of those accessing the service were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with the large majority coming from Asian backgrounds.⁴ Other studies have found that Asian women are more likely than their non-Asian counterparts to work longer hours, see more clients, live onsite at the brothel and are less likely to be able to enforce condom use, placing them at higher risk of contracting STIs and HIV.⁵ Further, low levels of English proficiency can make it more difficult for Asian women in Australia's sex industry to negotiate with clients, access support services, and report violence or assault.⁶ These findings are reflected in a recent study of women victim-survivors of sexual exploitation in Australia, which found:⁷

- 86% were subjected to exploitation in a commercial setting
- 87% had been trafficked to Australia
- 70% were born in South-East Asia or East Asia
- 77% were on a temporary visa, most commonly a bridging visa (35%)
- 61% had at least one child
- 54% required an interpreter

Despite the important inclusion of migrant women in the National Plan and much of Australia's policy focus on violence against women, commercial sexual exploitation remains insufficiently integrated into these same policy and practice frameworks. Trafficking is often treated primarily as a criminal justice or migration issue; prostitution as a state or territory regulatory issue; pornography as an online-safety issue; and sexual violence through separate specialist systems. These distinctions can obscure the connections between gender inequality, sexual entitlement, commercial demand, trafficking and exploitation.

The Second Action Plan provides an important opportunity to bring these issues together within a coherent, structural approach to preventing violence against women and girls.

³ Donovan, B., Harcourt, C., Egger, S., Watchirs Smith, L., Schneider, K., Kaldor, J.M., Chen, M.Y., Fairley, C.K. and Tabrizi, S. (2012), *The Sex Industry in New South Wales: A Report to the NSW Ministry of Health*, Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales, Sydney; Renshaw, L., Kim, J., Fawkes, J. and Jeffreys, E. (2015), *Migrant sex workers in Australia*, Research and Public Policy Series no. 131, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

⁴ Davidson, J., et al. (2019), *Working with Migrant Sex Workers in Sydney's Lower-End Brothels*, BaptistCare HopeStreet, Sydney.

⁵ Davidson et al. (2019); Donovan et al. (2012); RhED (Resourcing Health and Education Program) (2012), *Migrant and Multicultural Sex Worker Report 2012*, Inner South Community Health Service, Melbourne; Selvey, L.A., Lobo, R.C., McCausland, K.L., Donovan, B., Bates, J. and Hallett, J. (2018), 'Challenges Facing Asian Sex Workers in Western Australia: Implications for Health Promotion and Support Services', *Frontiers in Public Health*, 6:171.

⁶ Renshaw (2015); RhED (2012).

⁷ Boxall et al., (2023).

Key recommendations

The Second Action Plan should:

1. Explicitly recognise commercial sexual exploitation within the National Plan's sexual and gender-based violence framework.
2. Address male sexual entitlement and reduce demand for commercial sexual access as part of primary prevention.
3. Treat pornography and digital commercial sexual markets as part of commercial sexual exploitation and primary prevention.
4. Ensure consent and sexual-violence frameworks recognise structural and contextual coercion.
5. Address the structurally produced vulnerability of migrant women, including through immigration-safe support pathways.
6. Strengthen coordination between sexual-violence, anti-trafficking, migration and other relevant systems, and improve workforce capability to identify and respond to commercial sexual exploitation.
7. Ensure independent and meaningful survivor participation, with transparency about industry and commercial interests.
8. Provide specialist, long-term exit and recovery support for survivors of commercial sexual exploitation
9. Strengthen research, data collection and evaluation of commercial sexual exploitation under the National Plan.

About the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA) is the Australian branch of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women International, a Non Governmental Organization having Category II consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

Established in 1994, CATWA is a volunteer-run organisation working locally and internationally to end all forms of sexual exploitation of women.

For more than 30 years, its work has contributed to Australian and international research and policy concerning trafficking, prostitution, pornography, gendered exploitation and violence against women. Previous submissions have drawn on government data, legislation, parliamentary and policy materials, court decisions, academic research, survivor evidence and engagement with organisations working in anti-trafficking and gender-based violence.

Consistent with this expertise, this submission focuses on areas where commercial sexual exploitation should be more clearly incorporated into the Second Action Plan.

1. Commercial sexual exploitation must be recognised within Australia's violence-against-women framework

The Consultation Paper appropriately recognises the need to distinguish sexual violence from family and domestic violence, noting important differences in prevalence, prevention, early intervention and service responses. CATWA submits that this differentiated approach should explicitly include commercial sexual exploitation.

Sexual exploitation is highly gendered. Australian Federal Police reporting identifies sexual servitude among heavily gendered trafficking offences,⁸ while Australian Institute of Criminology research on sexual exploitation found that identified victims in the cases examined were women, with most trafficked to Australia and exploited in commercial settings such as brothels.⁹ A large proportion were from East and South-East Asia and held temporary visas.¹⁰

These patterns matter because commercial sexual exploitation currently falls across multiple policy systems. Trafficking is primarily addressed through criminal justice, migration and modern-slavery frameworks; prostitution through state and territory regulatory regimes; pornography through classification and online-safety systems; and sexual violence through specialist violence-against-women services. Those administrative distinctions can obscure the continuity between gender inequality, commercial sexual demand, prostitution markets, pornography and trafficking for sexual exploitation.

The problem is also conceptual. Prostitution should not be treated simply as ordinary work or a neutral commercial market in which trafficking sometimes occurs. The sex industry is an industry organised around the purchase and sale of sexual access. Like other commercial sectors, it involves businesses, intermediaries and platforms that have financial interests in market continuation and expansion. Unlike most industries, however, the commodity being purchased is sexual access to human bodies in a market structured overwhelmingly along gendered lines.

This distinction matters for prevention. If exploitation is conceptualised only as individual criminal conduct occurring at the margins of an otherwise neutral market, policy responses will focus predominantly on identifying traffickers or instances of overt force. A structural violence-prevention framework must also consider how the market itself is organised, who generates demand, who profits, and how gender and economic inequality shape who is available for purchase. Modern-slavery research reinforces the importance of examining domestic commercial environments rather than concentrating only on conventional global supply chains.¹¹ Sexual exploitation can occur through brothels and other commercial settings and intersect with hospitality, property, digital-platform and intermediary arrangements.

Recommendation 1

The Second Action Plan should explicitly recognise trafficking for sexual exploitation and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation within the National Plan's sexual and gender-based violence framework, incorporating these harms across prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing, workforce development, research and evaluation.

2. Primary prevention must address male sexual entitlement and demand

The Consultation Paper proposes stronger action on gendered drivers, harmful attitudes, gender stereotypes, misogyny and institutional conditions that contribute to violence. This is an important foundation for more effective primary prevention. That framework should explicitly include male sexual entitlement and demand for commercial sexual access. Preventing

⁸ Australian Federal Police (2025).

⁹ Boxall et al., (2023).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Nixon, (2023).

trafficking and sexual exploitation cannot be achieved solely by addressing the vulnerability of those who are exploited. Poverty, housing insecurity, migration status, language barriers, trauma and social isolation all warrant intervention, but they do not explain why a commercial market exists for the sexual access of women experiencing those inequalities.

Demand is therefore a primary-prevention issue. The Palermo Protocol explicitly recognises this principle. Article 9(5) calls on States Parties to adopt or strengthen legislative and other measures - including educational, social and cultural measures - to discourage demand that fosters exploitation leading to trafficking, particularly of women and children.¹² International anti-trafficking frameworks and research have identified demand for commercial sexual services as a central driver sustaining trafficking for sexual exploitation.¹³ The implications for the Second Action Plan extend beyond trafficking law. If primary prevention seeks to challenge the gendered attitudes and norms that underpin violence against women, it should also address the idea that men are entitled to purchase sexual access to women.

Male demand for commercial sexual access extends to acts involving degradation, aggression and violence. Research examining online communities of sex buyers has found extreme levels of objectification and accounts of sexual violation and violence, including buyers referring to women as objects such as “public toilets” and describing pressurised and overtly violent sexual practices.¹⁴ Other research similarly documents buyers seeking unsafe sexual practices and recounting encounters in which women’s consent is pressured, ignored or overridden in legal brothel settings.¹⁵ This matters for primary prevention because commercial sexual markets can provide a context in which male sexual entitlement and violence are not separate phenomena, but intersect through the purchase of sexual access.

This is particularly relevant to Priority Area 4. The Consultation Paper recognises the need to understand not only people who use violence but also the systems and conditions that enable violence. Commercial sexual markets are one such system requiring greater scrutiny.

Full decriminalisation does not address the structural drivers

Full decriminalisation is the wrong framework for addressing these broader social conditions. The central limitation is conceptual: full decriminalisation treats prostitution principally as legitimate commercial activity and removes prostitution-specific criminal prohibitions from buying, selling and third-party facilitation.¹⁶ This concern is particularly important in a policy environment that normalises and expands prostitution as a commercial market.¹⁷ As the market expands and purchasing sexual access becomes more socially and commercially

¹² United Nations (2000), Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, Article 9(5).

¹³ Ibid., Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (2021), Discouraging the Demand that Fosters Trafficking for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation, Occasional Paper No. 11, Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, Vienna.

¹⁴ Jovanovski, N. and Tyler, M. (2018), “‘Bitch, You Got What You Deserved!’: Violation and Violence in Sex Buyer Reviews of Legal Brothels”, *Violence Against Women*, 24(16), pp. 1887–1908, p. 1905.

¹⁵ Tyler, M. and Jovanovski, N. (2018), ‘The limits of ethical consumption in the sex industry: An analysis of online brothel reviews’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 66, pp. 9–16.

¹⁶ Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA) (2017), *Demand Change: Understanding the Nordic Model*, Melbourne.

¹⁷ Cho, S.-Y., Dreher, A. and Neumayer, E. (2013), ‘Does legalized prostitution increase human trafficking?’, *World Development*, 41, pp. 67–82.

accepted, there is a risk that demand and the overall scale of the market will increase, in turn increasing the number of women required to meet that demand. This is why prostitution policy cannot be separated from questions of market expansion, male demand and gender inequality. While decriminalisation is commonly justified on the basis that it will improve safety and conditions for people in prostitution, it leaves untouched the demand, gender inequality and third-party commercial interests that sustain the market.

The evidence raises substantial concerns about claims that full decriminalisation is sufficient to address violence, exploitation or trafficking. International reviews, together with Australian evidence on sexual exploitation, continue to identify significant violence, exploitation and trafficking concerns in commercial sex markets, including in jurisdictions operating legalised or decriminalised regimes.¹⁸ This reinforces the broader structural concern: a policy approach that normalises the market does not address the demand, gender inequality and commercial interests that sustain it.

The Nordic/Equality Model offers a fundamentally different approach. It decriminalises prostituted people, while targeting buyers and third parties profiting from prostitution and incorporating support to leave the industry.¹⁹ The Swedish implementation, for example, included exit measures involving health, housing, job seeking and retraining. Its significance for the National Plan therefore extends beyond prostitution law.²⁰ The model seeks to reduce demand and shift the social norms surrounding prostitution, moving responsibility away from those being purchased and towards buyers and third parties who profit from the trade.

Recommendation 2

The Second Action Plan should identify male sexual entitlement and demand for commercial sexual access as gendered drivers requiring primary-prevention action. This should include research into commercial sexual demand and sex-buying behaviour; prevention initiatives directed towards men and boys that challenge entitlement to sexual access; and evaluation of approaches designed to reduce demand. The Australian Government should also work with states and territories to strengthen coherence between the National Plan, anti-trafficking obligations and prostitution policy, with the Nordic/Equality Model recognised as the preferred demand-reduction framework.

3. Pornography must be addressed as commercial sexual exploitation and be made a target of primary prevention

The Consultation Paper appropriately identifies violent pornography, harmful online content, deepfakes, online exploitation, harmful sexual behaviours and non-fatal strangulation as emerging concerns for children and young people. Pornography should, however, be understood as more than harmful content. It is a commercial industry that produces,

¹⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council (2024); European Parliament (2023), Report on the regulation of prostitution in the EU: its cross-border implications and impact on gender equality and women's rights, A9-0240/2023; New Zealand Ministry of Justice (2008), Report of the Prostitution Law Review Committee on the Operation of the Prostitution Reform Act 2003, Wellington; Sullivan, M. (2007), Making Sex Work: A Failed Experiment with Legalised Prostitution in Australia, Spinifex Press, Melbourne.

¹⁹ CATWA, (2017), Demand Change.

²⁰ Swedish Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality (2009), Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking for Sexual Purposes, Government Offices of Sweden, Stockholm; European Parliament (2023).

distributes and monetises sexualised representations and acts that commonly portray women as sexually available and subordinate to men, and eroticise male dominance, female submission, aggression and degradation.²¹ It also operates within an increasingly interconnected online commercial sex market involving pornography, prostitution, webcamming, live streaming, personalised content and “sugar dating.”²²

The evidence also supports treating pornography as a primary-prevention environment. Gender stereotypes are recognised within Australian violence-prevention frameworks as important drivers of violence against women. Research documents explicit sexist and racialised stereotypes throughout mainstream pornography, including representations of women as subordinate, passive, hypersexualised and available for degradation, with racialised women subjected to particularly explicit forms of sexual stereotyping.²³

Australian evidence is particularly relevant to young people. Research identifies pornography as the most common source through which participants first became aware of sexual strangulation and the most common source of exposure to it.²⁴ Frontline sexual assault services have also reported pornography playing a role in some clients’ experiences of sexual assault,²⁵ while an Our Watch survey found that young people who regularly watched pornography were more likely than others to endorse beliefs that women should obey men and that things are better when men are in charge.²⁶ These findings do not establish that pornography consumption inevitably causes an individual to perpetrate violence. They do demonstrate why pornography cannot be excluded from an evidence-informed discussion of the social environments in which sexual norms, expectations and gendered power are learned.

Respectful relationships education should therefore do more than advise young people that pornography is unrealistic. It should enable critical examination of the sexual and gendered scripts being communicated, including:

- male dominance and female submission;
- aggression, degradation and strangulation;
- consent and coercion;
- sexual entitlement and women’s portrayed sexual availability;
- racialised sexual stereotypes;
- commercial pressures shaping what content is produced and promoted.

²¹ McVey, L., Gurrieri, L. and Tyler, M. (2021), ‘The structural oppression of women by markets: the continuum of sexual violence and the online pornography market’, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 37(1–2), pp. 40–67.

²² McVey, L., Tyler, M. and Gurrieri, L. (2022), ‘Care as camouflaging capitalism and obscuring harm: The user-generated pornography market and women’s inequality’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 91, 102573.

²³ Woan, S. (2008), ‘White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence’, *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice*, 14(2), pp. 275–301; Vera-Gray, F., McGlynn, C., Kureshi, I. and Butterworth, K. (2021), ‘Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography’, *British Journal of Criminology*.

²⁴ Sharman, L.S., Fitzgerald, R. and Douglas, H. (2025), ‘Prevalence of Sexual Strangulation/Choking Among Australian 18–35 Year-Olds’, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 54(2), pp. 465–480.

²⁵ Campo, M. (2024), *Responding to the New Normal: Exploring the Impacts of Pornography: Review of the Literature and Experiences of the Specialist Sexual Assault Sector*, Sexual Assault Services Victoria, Melbourne/

²⁶ Our Watch (2020), *Pornography, Young People and Preventing Violence Against Women: Background Paper*, Our Watch, Melbourne.

This is particularly important because the pornography industry is not merely reflecting social inequality. It is economically dependent on producing content that attracts and retains consumer demand.

Digital sexual markets

Technological change has further blurred distinctions between pornography and prostitution. User-generated platforms allow consumers to purchase personalised sexualised content and interact directly with people producing it. Research describes the increasing importance of webcamming, real-time streaming and personalised requests within the online sex trade.²⁷ Financial vulnerability is relevant here too. Research demonstrates how economic necessity, debt and pressure from third parties can constrain women's choices within commercial sexual markets, while the growth of digital platforms has created new avenues through which sexualised content can be commissioned and monetised.²⁸

The Second Action Plan should therefore distinguish ordinary technology-facilitated abuse, where digital tools facilitate interpersonal abuse, from the wider problem of technology-enabled commercial sexual exploitation, where digital business models create, expand and profit from commercial sexual markets. This does not mean assuming that every person producing sexual content online is coerced or trafficked. It means recognising that the commercial structure itself warrants scrutiny as part of violence prevention.

Recommendation 3

The Second Action Plan should treat pornography and digital commercial sexual markets as part of Australia's primary-prevention environment, including through:

- age-appropriate critical education about pornography within respectful relationships and consent education;
- age-appropriate resources examining gender, dominance, aggression, coercion and racialised sexual stereotypes;
- building educator and prevention-practitioner capability to address pornography's influence on gender norms and sexual expectations;
- research on pornography, sexual practices, gender attitudes and harmful sexual behaviours; and
- coordinated violence-prevention, online-safety and anti-trafficking responses to commercial sexual exploitation facilitated through digital platforms.

²⁷ Tyler, M. and Coy, M. (2021), 'Pornographication and Heterosexualization in Public Space', in J. Berry, T. Moore, N. Kalms and G. Bawden (eds), *Contentious Cities: Design and the Gendered Production of Space*, Routledge, London, pp. 49–59; McVey, L., Tyler, M. and Gurrieri, L. (2022).

²⁸ McVey, L., Tyler, M. and Gurrieri, L. (2022); Recio Burgos, C. and Plaza Del Pino, F.J. (2021), "“Business can't stop.” Women engaged in prostitution during the COVID-19 pandemic in southern Spain: A qualitative study', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 86, 102477.

4. Consent must be understood in the context of power and coercion

Consent is central to preventing sexual violence, but it cannot be treated as detached from the circumstances in which choices are made. This is particularly important in trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation.

Trafficking does not always involve physical captivity or overt force. International trafficking frameworks recognise that exploitation may involve coercion, deception, abuse of vulnerability and other forms of control, which in practice can include debt, psychological manipulation, social isolation, economic dependence, migration insecurity and third-party control.²⁹ Consent to one part of a process, for example migration, employment or an initial commercial transaction, does not establish consent to subsequent exploitation. Research likewise demonstrates the importance of recognising forms of trafficking that operate through relationships, institutions and conditions of dependency, rather than relying on stereotypical understandings of trafficking centred on physical confinement or stranger coercion.³⁰

Digital commercial sexual markets add further complexity. Research identifies grooming, partner pressure and economic coercion as circumstances that can coexist with apparently self-produced sexual content.³¹ Recognising these structural conditions does not mean denying women's agency. It means avoiding an overly individualised framework in which an apparent decision to participate is treated as sufficient to exclude exploitation. Focusing exclusively on individual consent can also obscure the conduct and interests of other actors: buyers, traffickers, pimps, brothel owners, platforms and intermediaries. This is consistent with broader developments in violence-against-women policy that recognise coercive control as a pattern of power rather than requiring isolated incidents of physical violence.³²

Recommendation 4

Consent and respectful relationships initiatives should explicitly incorporate economic, migration-related, relational and psychological coercion, and relevant workforces should be equipped to recognise exploitation where apparent agreement or participation is present.

5. Migrant women's vulnerability must be understood as structurally produced

The Consultation Paper appropriately emphasises culturally safe and accessible responses for migrant and refugee communities. Cultural competency alone, however, is insufficient. Australian evidence demonstrates that migrant women's vulnerability to sexual exploitation is shaped by migration status, economic insecurity, dependency and barriers to accessing

²⁹ United Nations (2000), Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Article 3(a); Schloenhardt, A. and Bowcock, H. (2015), 'Sex Slaves and Shrewd Business Women: The Role of Victim Consent in Trafficking in Persons in Australia', Melbourne University Law Review, 39(2), pp. 592–628; Davy, D. (2016), 'Human trafficking and slavery in Australia: Pathways, tactics, and subtle elements of enslavement', Women & Criminal Justice, 26(3).

³⁰ Quek, K. (2018), Marriage Trafficking: Women in Forced Wedlock, Routledge, London and New York.

³¹ Donevan, M., Svedin, C.G., Dennhag, I. and Jonsson, L.S. (2026), 'Behind the Illusion: Unmasking the Coercion in Pornography Production', Violence Against Women; McVey et al., (2022).

³² Australian Government Attorney-General's Department (2023), National Principles to Address Coercive Control in Family and Domestic Violence, Commonwealth of Australia; ANROWS (2021), Defining and Responding to Coercive Control: Policy Brief, ANROWS Insights 01/2021.

protection, rather than simply by cultural difference.³³ Australian Institute of Criminology research found that sexual exploitation cases disproportionately involved migrant women on temporary visas.³⁴ Relevant vulnerabilities included insecure migration status, limited English proficiency, economic precarity, debt, dependency on employers or facilitators, and restricted access to rights and support services.³⁵

The Australian Government's *Rapid Review into the Exploitation of Australia's Visa System* also identified temporary migrants as vulnerable to exploitation because of insecure visa status, dependency on intermediaries, limited protections and fear of immigration consequences.³⁶ These factors demonstrate why migrant status should not be treated merely as a demographic characteristic within the National Plan.

Government policy can itself affect vulnerability. A woman who depends on an employer, intermediary, migration agent or partner for visa status, accommodation or income may face significant barriers to disclosure. A woman who fears immigration consequences may not approach police or support services even when experiencing coercion or exploitation. A service may therefore be culturally competent while remaining practically inaccessible. Other jurisdictions have recognised some of these risks through specific migration safeguards. New Zealand prohibits temporary visa holders from providing commercial sexual services, while Canada restricts foreign nationals from working in specified sex-trade-related businesses where there are recognised risks of sexual exploitation.³⁷ These approaches demonstrate that migration settings themselves can form part of the prevention environment.

Recommendation 5

The Second Action Plan should establish culturally and linguistically accessible and immigration-safe pathways for migrant women experiencing trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation.

These should include qualified interpreter access, independent migration and legal advice, specialist trafficking and sexual-violence support, safe referral mechanisms and workforce capability to recognise visa-related coercion, debt and intermediary dependency. The Australian Government should also examine how temporary migration settings, labour and migration intermediaries and prostitution markets interact to create or intensify exploitation risk.

6. Trafficking and sexual-violence systems must work together

Fragmented systems are already identified in the Consultation Paper as a significant barrier to safety and recovery. The proposed system-integration priority emphasises coordination across health, housing, police, courts, child protection and specialist services.

³³ Boxall et al., (2023); Nixon, C. (2023).

³⁴ Boxall et al., (2023).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Nixon, C. (2023).

³⁷ New Zealand, Prostitution Reform Act 2003, s 19; Government of Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2012), Ministerial Instructions protecting vulnerable foreign workers from the risk of abuse and exploitation in sex trade related businesses.

Commercial sexual exploitation exposes a further set of institutional boundaries.

A person may simultaneously be experiencing:

- sexual violence;
- trafficking;
- migration-related coercion;
- debt;
- housing insecurity;
- economic abuse;
- third-party exploitation.

Yet the systems responsible for each issue may operate separately. Relevant agencies can include sexual-assault and DFSV services, specialist anti-trafficking support services, the Australian Federal Police, state and territory police, Home Affairs, health services, housing systems, income-support services, legal assistance, online-safety bodies and labour or commercial regulators. Therefore, government responses should be coordinated across migration, labour and anti-trafficking systems to address the overlapping conditions that contribute to trafficking for sexual exploitation. The practical objective should be simple: a woman experiencing exploitation should not need to understand the administrative difference between “trafficking”, “sexual violence”, “migration abuse” and “labour exploitation” before receiving appropriate assistance. Workforce capability is part of this response. Commercial sexual exploitation may not resemble stereotypical trafficking. Debt, visa dependency, psychological manipulation, restricted information and third-party control all need to be recognised as potential indicators.

Recommendation 6

Commonwealth, state and territory governments should develop formal trafficking–sexual violence response and referral pathways, including:

- shared indicators of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation;
- warm referrals between specialist services;
- access to migration, legal, housing, income, health and trauma support;
- appropriate privacy protections and information-sharing protocols;
- pathways for people who do not initially identify themselves as trafficked; and
- reciprocal workforce training between anti-trafficking, sexual-violence and relevant universal services.

7. Survivor expertise must not be conflated with industry representation

Victim-survivor expertise is appropriately recognised throughout the Second Action Plan consultation. Survivors of trafficking and prostitution possess distinctive knowledge of recruitment, coercion, violence, demand, barriers to exit, service responses and the consequences of different regulatory approaches. International survivor-informed, victim-

centred and trauma-informed approaches likewise recognise that survivor expertise should inform the design, implementation and evaluation of anti-trafficking policies and responses.³⁸

Meaningful participation, however, requires attention to who is represented as having authority to speak about the industry. The commercial sex industry is an industry. Like other industries, it contains businesses, intermediaries, platforms and advocacy organisations with interests in regulatory outcomes. Recognising this does not mean conflating individuals in prostitution with commercial actors, nor does it mean excluding people currently in prostitution from public consultation.

It does mean distinguishing between:

- survivor evidence, particularly from people who have experienced coercion, trafficking, violence or barriers to exit;
- independent research and specialist service expertise; and
- advocacy or evidence produced by organisations with commercial or institutional interests in particular regulatory outcomes.

Policy and consultation processes should require transparency about industry affiliations and financial interests, while giving particular weight to survivors, survivor-support organisations and independent civil society working directly with those experiencing trafficking and exploitation. This principle is relevant not only to government consultation but also to research and knowledge production. Universities and publicly funded research institutions can materially influence law and policy by determining which questions are asked, which experiences are included and which conceptual frameworks are treated as authoritative. A process framed only through “sex work” and labour rights may recognise harms experienced by people in prostitution, while failing to examine whether the commercial sex industry itself, including male demand and third-party profit, contributes to those harms.

Recent Australian policy and research processes illustrate the importance of representational balance in consultation on prostitution law and policy. In both publicly funded research intended to inform legislative reform and state-level decriminalisation processes, survivor-led organisations, and those critical of full decriminalisation have not been represented on an equivalent basis to organisations supporting decriminalisation, and, in some cases, have been excluded from key consultation processes.³⁹ Survivors who publicly challenge dominant sex-industry policy positions have also reported experiencing hostility and intimidation. Events associated with the Australian publication of *Prostitution Narratives: Stories of Survival in the Sex Trade*, were repeatedly disrupted by pro-sex-industry groups, with survivor speakers reporting harassment and abuse, including at a Melbourne gathering where women speaking publicly about violence and exploitation they had experienced in prostitution were targeted by protesters.⁴⁰

³⁸ U.S. Department of State (2022), Trafficking in Persons Report 2022, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons; U.S. Department of State (2017), Trafficking in Persons Report 2017, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

³⁹ PEACE, SPACE International, NorMAC and Wahine Toa Rising (2021), ‘Sex trade survivors excluded from Victorian Gov prostitution review speak out on abuse of process’, published by Collective Shout, 7 July 2021, https://www.collectiveshout.org/decrim_review_excludes_survivors

⁴⁰ ABC News (2016), ‘Former sex workers claim harassment by pro-prostitution groups after speaking out’, 12 October 2016; Norma, C. and Tankard Reist, M. (eds) (2016), *Prostitution Narratives: Stories of*

Publicly funded, policy-oriented research and consultation should demonstrate methodological transparency, intellectual pluralism and appropriate accountability. They should ensure that survivor evidence concerning coercion, violence, debt, exploitation and barriers to exit is meaningfully represented, and that survivors are able to participate without intimidation, harassment or pressure to conform to dominant policy positions. The broader principle is straightforward: lived experience is not a single perspective, and no advocacy organisation or industry-aligned position should automatically be treated as representative of all people with lived experience or as neutral expertise.

Recommendation 7

The Australian Government should establish independent and appropriately supported mechanisms for survivors of trafficking and sexual exploitation to contribute to National Plan policy, research, implementation and evaluation.

These mechanisms should:

- include survivors with diverse experiences, including people who have exited prostitution;
- provide appropriate remuneration and trauma-informed participation support;
- ensure transparency regarding organisational, advocacy and commercial interests;
- include independent survivor-support and anti-trafficking expertise; and
- require publicly funded research and consultation informing policy to demonstrate methodological transparency and genuine plurality of relevant evidence.

8. Exit and recovery must be materially possible

The National Plan's recognition of recovery and healing is particularly important for women subjected to commercial sexual exploitation. Recovery cannot, however, be separated from the material ability to leave exploitation.

Exit may be constrained by:

- lack of safe housing;
- poverty and loss of income;
- debt;
- insecure migration status;
- control by a pimp, partner or other third party;
- trauma and health impacts;
- childcare responsibilities;
- lack of alternative employment;
- social isolation.

The Nordic/Equality Model as implemented in Sweden included access to NGOs providing health, housing, job-seeking and retraining assistance, illustrating the importance of treating

Survival in the Sex Trade, Spinifex Press, North Melbourne; Tankard Reist, M. (2017), 'Prostitution Survivors: Backlash in Australia', *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*, 2(1), Article 7.

exit support as part of the policy model rather than as an optional service added after legislative reform.⁴¹

Australian evidence indicates that a substantial proportion of identified victim-survivors of sexual exploitation have children, while research with pregnant and parenting women in prostitution identifies financial insecurity, partner violence, lack of social support and fear of child-protection intervention as barriers to accessing assistance.⁴² These findings reinforce the importance of housing, income security and family support as components of prevention, exit and recovery. This has a broader implication for the National Plan: housing and economic security should not be understood solely as recovery measures. For some women, they are conditions that determine whether violence or exploitation can be escaped at all.

Material supports therefore operate across all four National Plan domains:

prevention → early intervention → response → recovery and healing.

Recommendation 8

Governments should establish or expand specialist long-term exit and recovery pathways for survivors of trafficking and prostitution, integrating:

- safe and affordable housing;
- income and economic support;
- physical and mental health care;
- specialist trauma services;
- legal and migration assistance;
- education, retraining and employment pathways;
- childcare and family support where required; and
- sustained case management.

9. Commercial sexual exploitation must be visible in research, data and evaluation

What is not measured is easily excluded from policy. Existing Australian research provides important evidence concerning trafficking and sexual exploitation, but significant gaps remain. Australian Institute of Criminology research has identified the support needs and vulnerabilities of victim-survivors of sexual exploitation,⁴³ while government and law-enforcement data continue to demonstrate the highly gendered nature of trafficking.

Research should examine not only who experiences exploitation and how often it occurs, but also the systems and conditions that create and sustain it.

This includes:

- pathways into and out of prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation;

⁴¹ Swedish Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality (2009), *Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking for Sexual Purposes*, Government Offices of Sweden, Stockholm.

⁴² Boxall et al., (2023); Duff, P., Shoveller, J., Chettiar, J., Feng, C., Nicoletti, R. and Shannon, K. (2015), 'Sex Work and Motherhood: Social and Structural Barriers to Health and Social Services for Pregnant and Parenting Street and Off-Street Sex Workers', *Health Care for Women International*, 36(9), pp. 1039–1055.

⁴³ Boxall et al., (2023).

- victim-survivor support needs and barriers to exit;
- demand and sex-buying behaviours;
- pornography and gendered sexual norms;
- racialised patterns of commercial sexual representation and demand;
- online commercial sexual markets and platform practices;
- migration-related vulnerability and coercion;
- interactions between sexual-violence and trafficking systems;
- outcomes from specialist exit programs; and
- effectiveness of prevention and demand-reduction interventions.

Research priorities should be informed by survivors and should distinguish independent evidence from research or advocacy shaped by direct commercial interests.

Recommendation 9

Commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking for sexual exploitation should be included explicitly within the Second Action Plan's research, data and evaluation framework, with particular attention to male demand, structural vulnerability, digital sexual markets, service access, exit and recovery outcomes, and prevention effectiveness.

Conclusion

The Second Action Plan has the potential to substantially strengthen Australia's approach to violence against women and children. Its focus on gender inequality, misogyny, primary prevention, sexual violence, emerging online harms, perpetrator accountability, victim-survivor expertise and system integration provides a strong foundation. The task now is to apply those principles consistently.

Commercial sexual exploitation cannot remain peripheral to that work. An approach that seeks to challenge misogyny must also confront the commercialisation of male sexual entitlement and demand for sexual access. An approach concerned with pornography and online harms must examine not only individual exposure, but also the industries, platforms and business models through which sexualised content is produced, commissioned, distributed and monetised. And an approach concerned with the systems and conditions that enable violence must examine prostitution markets, third-party profit and the demand that sustains commercial sexual exploitation.

This requires particular attention to the policy settings that shape those markets. Where prostitution is normalised and expanded as ordinary commercial activity, the underlying gendered structure of the market and the demand for women's sexual access remain largely unchallenged. Prevention must therefore look beyond individual behaviour to the regulatory, economic and institutional conditions that enable exploitation and allow others to profit from it.

Nor should vulnerability be located primarily in the women who are exploited. Australian evidence demonstrates how migration status, economic insecurity, debt, housing precarity, language barriers, social isolation and dependency on employers, partners or other intermediaries can constrain women's choices and increase vulnerability to exploitation. Effective prevention must address these structural conditions alongside the demand and commercial systems that take advantage of them.

The same principle should guide victim-survivor participation. Lived experience is not a single or politically uniform perspective. Survivors who describe coercion, violence, exploitation, debt and barriers to exit - including those critical of the sex industry or full decriminalisation - must be able to participate meaningfully and safely in research and policy processes. Their evidence should not be marginalised by better-resourced commercial or industry-aligned interests, nor should any particular advocacy position automatically be treated as representative of all people with lived experience.

This is also why full decriminalisation is an inadequate response to commercial sexual exploitation. Treating prostitution principally as ordinary work removes attention from the gendered structure of the market, male demand and third-party profit. The Nordic/Equality Model begins from a different premise: it decriminalises prostituted people, places responsibility on buyers and third-party profiteers, seeks to reduce demand, and recognises that meaningful exit requires housing, income security, health and trauma support, legal and migration assistance, education, retraining and other sustained social and economic alternatives. A structural response does not blame women subjected to prostitution or other forms of commercial sexual exploitation. It shifts responsibility away from those being purchased or exploited and towards the individuals, industries, markets, institutions and policy settings that generate demand, facilitate exploitation and profit from inequality.

Commercial sexual exploitation should therefore be explicitly incorporated into the Second Action Plan as part of Australia's response to sexual and gender-based violence. Doing so would not take the National Plan beyond its existing objectives. It would give practical effect to them. Ending violence against women requires confronting not only individual acts of violence, but also the social, institutional and commercial systems through which women's sexual inequality is normalised, purchased and made profitable.