

A open message of thanks to the Justices of the High Court of Australia

On the 28th of August, in a 6-1 decision, the High Court found that brothel owner Wei Tang was guilty of five counts of using and five counts of possessing a slave.

On the 14th of November 2008, Project Respect ran a seminar with nine Thai and Chinese women who had been trafficked to Australia for prostitution, where Hui Zhou from the Fitzroy Legal Service outlined the key findings in the High Court judgement on the Queen v. Tang.

On the 15th and 16th of November, Project Respect had a weekend away for women in the sex industry, where the women who attended the seminar the previous day developed this shared statement. This is their message:

We make this statement in response to the 28 August 2008 High Court decision on the Queen v. Tang. We had the same experience as the women in the Wei Tang case.

What happened to us was a nightmare. We can never forget. It comes back to us in dreams. This will affect us til we die. It has changed us.

We were treated very badly. We worked from 11am to 3 or 4 am. We slept only three or four hours a night. Sometimes some of us worked for 24 hours. For four or five months, all we did was prostitution. Even when we had our period, we had to work. Sometimes we worked until we couldn't walk. We had to work until we were very very sick and the customers refused to take us. Only then were we allowed to rest, for one day.

Some owners were not so cruel, but even when they were friendly, they still treated us as slaves.

We were made to feel like animals. Customers were violent. Some of the customers were crazy. They treated us like animals. We were sexually abused, we were dragged, we were hit. Some of us were given drugs so we could work all the time. Some of the women we know have become drug addicts and now they have to keep doing prostitution to pay for drugs.

It was like we were in jail – we had no free time, we couldn't go anywhere, we never had freedom. The traffickers treated us as slaves. We didn't have anywhere to go.

It felt like we survived and died at the same time. We had to keep doing what the traffickers said, for ourselves, and for the people we loved. The traffickers threatened us – we were scared they would hurt us and our families. Some of us thought we could be killed. We blamed ourselves for what happened, because we had wanted to come to Australia.

This changed our lives.

After we had been trafficked, if we met a good man, some of us thought we didn't deserve to be with him, that he deserved someone better. Some of us knew we deserved better, than to be trafficked, but men we loved treated us badly and told us we were dirty and couldn't expect anything better. It was hard to speak when we were treated like that.

Before this High Court decision, we felt the public didn't know what happened to women like us and that they would judge us, and we felt that people like us didn't deserve anything better.

But just because we have been prostitutes doesn't mean we are not good people – we had no choice. We did this to survive.

Even if women chose to do prostitution, they shouldn't be treated this way.

When we were told about the High Court decision, we felt glad. We felt relieved, we felt released. Now we have walked out from the darkness. We can again have a good life, like we did before we came to Australia. We can start a new life now.

We feel now that people believe we are real and understand what we have been through. We feel that the High Court Justices respect and understand us. Because of what happened to us, we didn't trust people. Now it seems there are good people in the world. People outside have believed what happened to us. We feel more valuable.

We agree with the Justices when they say that the situation of the women in the Tang case was slavery. We feel good because the Justices say it doesn't matter what the women did – it was the agents' fault. What they did was slavery.

What should happen now?

We see that even though the government has laws, traffickers still find ways to bring women here. Because each of us has been hurt by slavery, we want to stop other women from being trafficked. We don't want other women to experience what we experienced. We want the government to find more ways to stop slavery.

To help women who have already been hurt by slavery, we want the government to give everyone a new chance. In the past, we felt that people wouldn't give us a chance. Visas are the best thing. Secondly, we need education, so we know how to communicate, so we know how to live in Australia, so we can start a new life. We want help so we can find new jobs, otherwise we have to do the same thing, prostitution. No-one wants to stay with that many men. Of course, we can make a lot of money from prostitution, but it feels there is no respect, no love there.

The High Court judgement has made us happy. We feel we have come from the darkness to the brightness.

The High Court decision is important. Before, all of us were scared to talk. Now, we have hope. We can trust again. We are real. The High Court judgement feels like a blessing, something very good.

Thank you from the heart to the Justices.

16th November 2008

The following day, one of the women rang and said she had more to say for the statement. Her additional statement is included here, and supplements the previous statement, which she contributed to and endorses:

It is important that people understand that the experience of being trafficked is absolutely the worst thing you can ever imagine. I want people to know that this is happening in Australia.

Before I came, I had a nice life in Thailand, a nice job. I was tricked by a family member to come here, who sold me.

I experienced the most extreme brutality. I was in a 24-hour brothel, where I was woken at any time to see customers. They didn't wake me up by speaking to me - they kicked me. They made me take speed, so I could keep working. I had a gun pointed at my head.

The people who brought us here are so bad, they damaged not just one but so many lives. It never goes away. They have made it hard for me to trust anyone again.

When someone treats you like a dog for a long time, you start to believe you are a dog. You never get your voice back. You lose your confidence. You feel like you are an animal.

Afterwards, sometimes I felt like I was too dirty to touch my own son. That kind of experience made me feel like I'm not human, makes me feel so dirty, even too dirty to touch my own baby.

Thanks to the Judges, they help so much, they can help people to understand what we have been through.

These statements have been developed and endorsed by the women mentioned above (they have endorsed the statement having read it in their first language as necessary, as well as English). The women have endorsed that these statements be sent to the High Court Justices, and to politicians, journalist and the wider community, and to women in brothels who may themselves be in slavery or who may be able to help other women they meet in brothels who are.

If you would like to write a response to the authors of this statement, please email info@projectrespect.org.au.

Other information

The Queen v Tang judgement - The Queen v Tang [2008] HCA 39 (28 August 2008) - <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/cth/HCA/2008/39.html>

Project Respect - www.projectrespect.org.au