

Exposed: Human trafficking happening right here in NZ

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An interview with Immigration and Workplace Safety Minister Iain Lees-Galloway over human trafficking. /

At least three investigations probing the scale of human trafficking in New Zealand are underway as examples of restaurant workers being underpaid and sex workers being blackmailed come to light.

The cases are revealed as part of a *Herald* investigation into human trafficking, which is defined as the movement, deception or coercion of people for the purpose of exploitation.

We can also reveal:

- Experts are worried an app described as "Tinder for teens" is leaving Kiwi kids open to exploitation.
- Immigration NZ has launched a industry-wide investigation into massage therapy businesses and parlour. The *Herald* aware of raids and a closure.
- Sex workers overseas are being recruited on Asian chat sites and told New Zealand is where they can make \$1000 a day.
- Migrant sex workers who come here are encountering violence, blackmail and slave-like working conditions, including working 14 hours a day and having to be available at all times.
- Training programmes are being proposed as a direct response to trafficking - one for restaurant owners on how to be good employers and one for hospitality workers on how to spot child exploitation.

"Modern slavery is hidden in plain sight," Immigration Minister Iain Lees-Galloway told the *Herald*.

"Individuals with information . . . may be apprehensive about contacting authorities for assistance, for example due to fear of reprisals," he said.

"Although it is very difficult to detect these crimes, we know it is happening."

Lees-Galloway has called for an inquiry into worker exploitation, and proposals will be presented to Cabinet for consideration within the next few months.

Immigration Minister Iain Lees-Galloway has called for an inquiry. Photo / Duncan Brown

He said he was in the process of receiving advice from officials, as well as figures and details on cases known, which would help him create the framework for the review.

A new plan to prevent trafficking, which would include slavery and forced labour, was also underway and would be released later this year, Lees-Galloway said.

Meanwhile, the Restaurant Association is surveying its members on the extent of exploitation in the industry. The research will include checking how widespread cases of workers being underpaid are.

It is also hoping to introduce an accreditation system where restaurant owners would be trained to be good employers to avoid trafficking.

And a local group dedicated to preventing child prostitution, Ecpat Child Alert NZ, is appealing to those in the hospitality industry to adopt a set of guidelines, used by Uber drivers in the US, which trains workers to spot signs of child sex trafficking.

Ecpat chief executive Warren Ferdinandus was also worried children were being targeted on social mobile app Yubo, formerly known as Yellow.

Internet watchdog NetSafe told the *Herald* it had received five complaints about the app but did not expand on the nature of them.

The site was dubbed "Tinder for Teens" by the BBC, and hundreds of parents across the United States had tried to get the app discontinued from app stores.

The app had reportedly been used by kids to share nude photos with strangers. And there was no way to verify age.

Groomers usually started by liking photos and posts and moved on to direct messaging.

"In this age of social media, a pimp could be online and operating in your house right now chatting with your kid," Ferdinandus said.

Yubo said it had not been connected to any form of child trafficking and had been in close contact with Netsafe over the last 12 months about the efforts to protect young people on the app.

"The app is heavily monitored and moderated and goes as far as to remove users who attempt to appear partially naked or in their underwear," said spokeswoman Annie Mullins.

She said the app had a safety briefing for online safety advocates.

"It has been designed to help people make new friends, share interests, chat and live stream," Mullins said.

"Many teenagers use Yubo to do just that."

Experts said trafficking was rife in New Zealand, but there had only been three cases brought to court by Immigration New Zealand.

Trafficking became more of a priority for the agency in 2015 when a law change meant the deception of workers didn't have to happen offshore but could happen locally.

New figures provided to the *Herald* by INZ showed it had identified 36 victims of trafficking since.

Immigration also confirmed an investigation was ongoing into some parts of the massage industry, but would not elaborate.

The *Herald* confirmed a Thai massage company in Auckland had closed down and workers shared stories of raids by immigration at other parlours.

The problem of trafficking often started overseas, the *Herald* discovered during a reporting trip to the US, which aimed to show how the crime was combated there.

We met sex workers, including Kim* in the red light district in Washington DC.

She said services were being offered by Korean brokers on Asian online chat group Kakaotalk to bring sex workers to New Zealand.

But they were not told prostitution was illegal for people here on work, visitor, student or other temporary visas.

"They say we can earn \$1000 a day, and we don't have to worry about police because prostitution is legal there," Kim said.

"The biggest attraction is that New Zealand is safe, and where clients don't carry gun."

She said other Korean sex workers, who had done stints in New Zealand, claimed on the chat group that they had earned up to \$100,000 in the three months their visas allowed them to be in the country.

In Houston Texas, another sex worker, originally from Hong Kong, said similar services were being offered on WeChat, another app where users were mainly Chinese.

In a report being launched tomorrow by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, participants shared stories of being exploited, threatened and abused in New Zealand.

Lydia* told of another sex worker being extorted.

"He had shown up and said 'you have to have sex with me for free or I'm going to call immigration.

"I think it happened to her like three times and she was really scared and really traumatised."

Sex workers also found they had reduced control over working hours and were made to pay "unreasonable living costs" to brothel operators for staying on the premises.

China-born Amy* said brothel operators expected sex workers to be available for work at all times.

* *Names changed to protect identities.*

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