

Immigration admits underreporting migrant sex work complaints

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Error! Filename not specified. There have been 57 complaints made to Immigration NZ about illegal migrant sex worker ads since December 2014. Photo credit: newzealandgirls.co.nz
Immigration New Zealand (INZ) has admitted to providing inaccurate information about the number of complaints they've received about illegal migrant sex work.

The sex industry is struggling with an influx of migrants engaging in sex work, putting Kiwis out of work. People on a temporary or student visa are not legally allowed to engage in paid sex work in New Zealand.

Last week an INZ spokesperson told NZME that they've only received eight complaints in relation to migrant workers illegally advertising sex work online.

Newshub has been given a spreadsheet showing 34 complaints made by one person alone via Crimestoppers in August 2017 about suspected migrants advertising sexual services on nzgirls.co.nz.

It lists the names, locations and ages of the women suspected to be working illegally, as well as including a link to each woman's ad on nzgirls.co.nz.

This information seems to contradict INZ's claim that they have only received eight complaints about migrant sex work.

In response to this discrepancy, INZ assistant general manager Peter Devoy told Newshub he wanted to clarify that those eight complaints were all made in January 2018 and were "solely in relation to backpage.com", a classified advertising website recently shut down for human trafficking.

"Since January this year there have been an additional six in relation to the websites [nzgirls](http://nzgirls.co.nz) and [newzealandgirls](http://newzealandgirls.co.nz)," Mr Devoy says.

"That takes the total to 14 complaints that Immigration New Zealand has received in relation to migrants allegedly using the services of these three online websites since January this year."

Those complaints were all made anonymously using the Compliance Investigations email, which is also used for Crimestoppers reports.

He says that contrary to INZ's previous claim that it had only received eight complaints about migrant sex work, between December 2014 and March 2018 there had been a total of 57 complaints.

Those 57 complaints were made about ads on backpage, nzgirls and newzealandgirls.

The spreadsheet template was circulated among New Zealand sex workers to make it easier for them to report what they suspect are ads for illegal prostitution.

Christchurch sex worker Amber O'Hara says there are "certain little giveaways" in online ads that suggest the person advertising their services is here on a temporary visa.

"The first thing they do is list their nationality, and say things like 'just arrived' or 'last few days'," she told Newshub.

"Another thing is they'll say 'text only', and that's because they can't speak English."

Error! Filename not specified. Sex workers on temporary visas often use coded language in their online ads. Photo credit: newzealandgirls.co.nz

She's frustrated at what she perceives as a lack of action from INZ in response to complaints. Many of the ads listed in the spreadsheet Newshub received were still listed online a month after being reported.

"We can't understand why this is so difficult. These ladies are advertising sex services, showing photos of their faces and tattoos, saying they are from foreign countries and are here for a short time only. What more do immigration require?"

Mr Devoy says each allegation is triaged to determine whether there is sufficient evidence for investigation.

"Complaints that are made anonymously and contain information on people who are themselves using a fake name are notoriously difficult to pursue.

"For example, if someone is using a fake name and we can't verify that person's visa status or whereabouts then it gives INZ very limited information to investigate the allegations further."

Lisa Lewis, a well-known Hamilton sex worker, says a lot of girls have come to her directly to complain about ads for people they believe to be working illegally.

She's frank about her feelings towards INZ.

"They f**k me off."

She points to the fact that the price of boosting ads on nzgirls.co.nz has more than doubled in recent years as evidence that Kiwi workers are being priced out of the market.

She says the huge number of "illegal" women advertising on nzgirls.co.nz means local workers are earning less - and the price of boosting ads has more than doubled in recent years.

"Two years ago there was not 32 pages with 25 girls per page," she says of the website.

"You're competing with more girls than ever before. If the girls are legal I have no trouble competing. But they're not." Lisa Lewis says an influx of illegal migrant sex work is putting locals out of work. Photo credit: Supplied/Lisa Lewis

She claims migrants are leaving the country having made up to \$100,000 from a short working holiday, while "some local girls aren't even making hotel money".

Ms O'Hara agrees that the number of migrant sex workers has surged wildly in recent years.

"Back in the day there was the occasional foreign lady, but it's totally out of control now."

She says New Zealand's seen as a "soft touch" when it comes to illegal sex work, which INZ's lack of action seems to prove.

New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective national co-ordinator Catherine Healy recently called for migrant sex work to be legalised, which Ms O'Hara says people overseas might interpret as an invitation to come and work here.

The recent Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) in the United States will also likely lead to a mass exodus of sex workers from a "Trumpified" America, she says.

While many will head to Australia where they can charge more, she predicts plenty will make a bee-line for New Zealand, which could have "serious repercussions" for people like her.

"I feel for them, but that doesn't mean our industry should suffer. As it is we're already outnumbered."

She says the only recourse is a registration system like the one used for sex workers in Victoria, Australia, which would also make it easier for escort sites to know they are only advertising people who can legally work here.

Newshub.

<https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2018/05/immigration-admits-underreporting-migrant-sex-work-complaints.html>