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People are NOT for sale

## Where to take stories of slavery then and now?

During ACRATH's 2021 three-session online conference ACRATH members and friends have had exceptional opportunities to be in dialogue with one another and listen whilst experts answered the question - **Was there slavery in Australia? Yes and still now.**

We listened to stories from Australia's post settlement times, first nations people's experiences of stolen wages and servitude, South Sea Islanders taken from their homes and brought here to Australia and exploited, and contemporary accounts of exploitative employment practices and sex work. Our guest speakers took us on harrowing accounts, with generational effects, leading us to **think - judge - act.**

Active solidarity is a hallmark of ACRATH's way of being, and there has been a strong sense of the need for this as our conference closed and we take personal and collective action, in the hope of a reckoning with our past and a slavery free future.

In this newsletter we feature Umes Acharya, who spoke about the exploitation of international students. In future newsletters and campaigns we will revisit and respond to some of the challenges put to us during the conference.

*Cindy Bohan*  
*ACRATH Community Development Worker*

## ACRATH 'handpicked' to join workplace giving program

ACRATH is excited to be one of only four organisations included in the recently launched St Vincent's Health Australia Workplace Giving Program, **Give 4 Good.**

The G4G program means the 20,000 SVHA staff across the organisation will be offered the chance to contribute to one, or all of the organisations, through a payroll deduction scheme.

SVHA is asking staff across its 32 sites, "could you give up one coffee a month? That's all it takes to join the Give 4 Good program...We have handpicked four different benevolent organisations you can choose to donate to."

ACRATH President, Sr Louise Cleary, said the generosity of SVHA could mean a significant financial boost for ACRATH, which receives no government funding.

ACRATH and SVHA connections go back a long way. In 2007, the late Sr Joan McKenna, a Sister of Charity who also worked in ACRATH's national office, brokered free health care at St Vincent's in Melbourne for trafficked women who were not eligible for Medicare. Back then few people knew that human trafficking happened in Australia.



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One of the key partnerships has been training 'Advocates for Change'. The Advocates are staff trained by ACRATH to better identify and support vulnerable people who have been trafficked, forced into labour or into a marriage. Already, at Melbourne and Sydney hospitals trafficked people have been identified and safely referred to support services.

As well as the Advocates for Change, SVHA's procurement team joined a global push to bring about fairer conditions for people working in rubber glove factories in Malaysia. This has led to another 'win'. In October 2020 these companies committed to the repayment of US\$40 million of illegal recruitment fees to migrant rubber glove workers from Myanmar, Bangladesh and Nepal.

Dr Lisa McDonald Group Mission Leader SVHA, said "The work we do to combat human trafficking is about more than complying with the Modern Slavery Act, it's about ensuring the dignity and flourishing of every human being, especially where a person is vulnerable".

SVHA and ACRATH will continue working together to combat human trafficking, modern slavery, forced labour and forced marriage.

Please join SVHA staff and [donate](#) today to ACRATH so that life saving programs like Advocates for Change can continue and grow.



Advocate for Change Sarah Iser (pictured above), from St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne, said the ACRATH training was both inspiring and confronting as participants realised the very real presence of trafficked people in Australia and how they might present to SVHA hospitals.

"I think a lot of us, when we look back with the knowledge we now have, recall someone who might have triggered some concerns," Sarah said.

"ACRATH has developed great tools to use to help us identify people who may have been trafficked and the pathways for supporting them," Sarah said.

## Time to speak up for exploited workers

Umes Acharya, ACRATH member and researcher, is urging people to treat the exploitation of international students as modern day slavery and work for change. During his presentation at ACRATH's conference, Umes painted a harrowing picture of the lives of some international students working in Australia.

Alexandra Baxter, PhD candidate, Flinders University and ACRATH member was also a key speaker at the conference session which looked at *Exposing Modern Slavery – the Lived Experience*.

Much of Umes' work has been with international students and issues around wage theft and slavery like conditions in work places employing young people. He cited the documented breaches by 7Eleven where many workers were paid less than \$12 an hour and no penalty rates. The 7Eleven case became about forced labour because many franchises required the students to break their visa conditions of only 40 hours work per fortnight. Once that visa condition was broken, the franchise holder could threaten the student with a report to the government and deportation, thus making them compliant. This has the elements of human trafficking and forced labour.



### A snapshot

- In 2019 there were 756,636 International students in Australia across every state - highest numbers in NSW and Victoria.
- The economic contribution of international students in 2018/19 was \$37.6 billion.
- Highest numbers come from China, India and Nepal.
- During COVID in 2020 a survey of international students found 65% suffered job losses, 43% skipped meals because of poverty and 24% were homeless.

Umes, a Youth and Community Engagement Officer with St. Vincent de Paul Society, said there has been a lot of media about the exploitation of international students, but not a lot of protection from wage theft. Many students won't speak publicly about the abuse in their workplace because they fear being deported.

"We need to come together to advocate on behalf of and with international students," Umes said.

His challenge to conference participants was to treat wage theft and exploitation of international students as it is – modern day slavery.

Alexandra's challenging presentation, *When the exploited become the exploiters: The incidence and characteristics of female human trafficking victims who become the 'offender'*, was recorded. The full presentation by Alexandra and Umes will be available soon at [acrath.org.au](http://acrath.org.au).

### **Experiences of an international student**

*"I get a call from my family reminding me of the loans they had taken from relatives and friends to send me here ....I cannot simply ignore this because I know the way from their situation rests on my shoulders ... I need to back those debts, pay my university fees, pay my rent, groceries, basic living expenses ... but the only work I can get is cleaning jobs that do not pay fairly. I feel helpless and I am afraid this stress will overcome me."*



## Peter goes to work for seasonal workers

Congratulations to Fr Peter O'Neill following his appointment as ACRATH's representative on the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) Advisory Group. While the position involves meetings and reviewing documents from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), Peter will continue his work on the ground, meeting seasonal workers and finding out what issues concern them.

"I coordinate with ACRATH members who have direct contact with seasonal workers so I know what is happening on the ground and to share relevant information at the teleconferences," Peter said. He has visited seasonal workers in Regional Victoria and accompanied Sr Janine Bliss (Qld ACRATH Coordinator) to visit seasonal workers in Bundaberg.

Peter, head of the Columbans in Australia, hopes that during his two-year term some progress will be made on some of the challenges facing seasonal workers, including:

- Most seasonal workers are paid piece rate (paid for the amount picked, packed, pruned or made). The challenge is for the government to have regular inspections to ensure the workers are paid a piece rate that enables them to earn no less than the minimum wage, and to ensure their working conditions are safe and hygienic. This year the government has employed 19 Pacific Labour Mobility Officers. Is this number sufficient to cover the whole of Australia?
- Some seasonal workers are choosing to leave their place of employment due to lack of work and poor work conditions. They are vulnerable to being used by unapproved employers. After one month these workers are no longer covered by health insurance, which makes their situation even more precarious.
- Costs and conditions of accommodation.

Peter (pictured) is hopeful of progress having served on an earlier iteration of the Advisory Group and contributing to some 'wins' for seasonal workers.

"When COVID hit, our teleconferences were spent discussing the impacts on the seasonal workers. Initially the government gave advice for seasonal workers to apply for a bridging visa when their current subclass 403 SWP visa is expiring. However, with sound advice coming from the unions and welfare and wellbeing representatives, the government took heed and decided that seasonal workers were eligible to apply for a Temporary Activity (subclass 408) – Australian Government Endorsed Event (AGEE) – COVID-19 Pandemic visa".

While the Advisory group works with key stakeholders and policy makers, Peter believes there is a role for ACRATH supporters.

"Our readers are invited to welcome the seasonal workers into their communities and to listen to their stories. If they have any concerns regarding the health and wellbeing of any workers they can call ACRATH for advice and assistance," Peter said.



### St Josephine Bakhita Campus

ACU formally opened its newest addition, the [Josephine Bakhita Campus](#), in Blacktown on Friday 12 March.

Students in Blacktown are now able to study pathways, undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the Faculties of Education and Arts, Health Sciences, Law and Business, and Theology and Philosophy.

Federal Minister for Education and Youth The Honourable Alan Tudge MP officially opened the campus and Most Reverend Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv, Bishop of Parramatta, performed a blessing. The Sudanese Catholic Community choir also treated attendees to a performance. An edited version of the ceremony is available to [view on the ACU website](#).

## Naming changes, making statements

Can you make a change this year? Last year we asked our newsletter readers to let us know what they are doing to try and eliminate products from their lives that might be made by forced labour or by people who are paid little money and work in exploitative conditions.

One reader Karen Oxley, after reading our story on ETIKO and the production of Fairtrade t-shirts in India, immediately ordered three t-shirts – one for herself and one for each of her daughters.

“I hope that their friends make inquiries about the t-shirts and so give my girls an opportunity to spread the word about Fairtrade,” said Karen, who is Volunteers Coordinator for the Josephite Justice Network in North Sydney.

“They (the t-shirts) look good, they are for a good cause and they are good for Fairtrade discussion starters.”

Karen said buying Fairtrade t-shirts means you are more inclined to value the product and less inclined to buy into the “throw-away-fashion-culture”.

“I hope that purchasing Fairtrade goes towards easing poor work conditions for workers who have less rights and finally and selfishly, it makes me feel good to think I am helping someone in some way,” she said.

Karen’s Fairtrade goal for 2021 is to spread the idea among friends and family that buying Fairtrade is a win win experience.



Karen’s *wear no evil* t-shirts.

## Students march against ‘bitter’ Chocolate

Students from Sacred Heart Girls College at Oakleigh in Victoria hit the pavement in the days leading up to Easter to raise awareness about slavery-free chocolate.

As part the College’s campaign to highlight the cruelty and injustice of chocolate produced using forced and child labour, a large group of students marched around the College in protest of this practice. The protest was held before Easter, shining a spotlight on the huge increase in chocolate consumption at Easter.

The girls wanted everyone to know that not all chocolate is sweet. Not if a child has been forced to pick the cocoa beans -- a key ingredient of chocolate. About 80% of cocoa comes from West Africa and it is estimated that almost 2 million children are in child labour in these areas. They may never go to school or taste the chocolate they help produce.

Students made their own banners and placards, and some students were dressed symbolically as “slaves” tied together in chains and marched to the beat of a slow drum. Other students followed with placards and promoted ethical chocolate purchasing among the College community.





## Slavery-free tea and coffee wins the vote

ACRATH's successful first 'Name Your Change' zoom morning tea has led to serious moves to slavery-proof some of Victoria's political hubs. About 25 people from around Australia 'popped' in for a cuppa and to 'name their change in 2021'. ACRATH wants this morning tea campaign to be another step into 'slavery proofing' homes and workplaces. It's a small spend item but has the possibility to engage everyone in the knowledge that there is slavery in our supply chains and there is something we can do about it.

One exciting outcome from the morning tea is the enthusiasm of some politicians to push for slavery-free staffrooms. One Victorian politician, Minister for Agriculture Mary-Anne Thomas, couldn't attend the morning tea, but asked her staff to participate with support from ACRATHer Marg Leahy.

Mary-Anne met with Marg over coffee (pictured) before the event to discuss ways of making her Macedon electoral office slavery-free and how to influence change beyond her office.

Ms Thomas, speaking in Parliament on 3 March said: *It is this week that my electorate team and I have committed to learn more about modern slavery and to support awareness raising and action in my electorate.*

Following the zoom morning tea ACRATH's newly formed Victorian Advocacy Group is also hoping to encourage politicians to make their staffrooms slavery-free. Group members have written to their local MPs asking them to consider going slavery-free and offering to support their efforts.

ACRATH has a range of resources to support schools, workplaces, parishes, communities and families wanting to make their staffroom/kitchen slavery-free, including a [kit](#), with tips on how to introduce slavery-free tea and coffee, a sourcing guide and testimonials from those who have made the change to slavery-free.

It is estimated that over 40 million people globally are trapped in slavery or slavery-like conditions – one in four of them a child. Some of these are trafficked into slavery and others forced to work in appalling conditions for a pittance. Much of the coffee and tea we drink, and the cocoa used in the chocolate we eat and drink, can be traced back to these children and adults working in conditions of slavery.

Are you making a change in your home or workplace to buy slavery-free products? Let us know at [media@acrath.org.au](mailto:media@acrath.org.au)



ACRATH needs core business funding and additional funding for special projects.

Please consider a regular donation to ACRATH so that we can plan ahead. Thanks.

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