

Singapore

Sex trafficking in Singapore: How changes to the law may protect women duped into prostitution

Human traffickers will face tougher penalties as part of the changes to the Women's Charter, which experts see as an important development while also highlighting inherent problems in bringing offenders to justice.



Prosecution against people who exploit women and girls for sex work remains tough, lawyers explained, because those in the sex trade are “trapped” and struggle to report crimes against them. (Photo: Try Sutrisno Foo)

By [Ainslee Asokan \(/author/9884150\)](/author/9884150)

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SINGAPORE: No one in her family knows of her past as a trafficked sex worker in Singapore.

Leah (not her real name) was punished at the hands of traffickers. She says she was physically abused and her phone was confiscated while being made to work long hours until she met a quota of clients for the day.

In Indonesia, Leah had marital issues with her then-husband, and she had a young son to take care of. So when a trusted friend offered her a job in Singapore working at a restaurant, she jumped at the chance for a better life.

That was a lie. Leah soon found herself being forced into sex work and held against her will in Singapore.

Traffickers like those who brought Leah to Singapore will face stiffer punishments with the amendments to the Women's Charter – Singapore's law to keep women and children safe – that were debated and passed [in Parliament \(/news/singapore/pop-up-brothels-mps-question-fairness-of-burden-on-home-owners-12062244\)](/news/singapore/pop-up-brothels-mps-question-fairness-of-burden-on-home-owners-12062244) on Monday (Nov 4).

But how do you catch a criminal with no name, no face and who routinely finds ways to escape getting caught?

► **[READ: Sex work in Singapore: Will changes to the Women's Charter be enough to tackle exploitation? \(/news/singapore/prostitution-sex-work-trafficking-womens-charter-bill-singapore-11991004?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna\)](/news/singapore/prostitution-sex-work-trafficking-womens-charter-bill-singapore-11991004?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna)**

With the changes, someone found trafficking women or girls, or tricking them into sex work, will face a maximum jail term of up to seven years and a maximum fine of S\$100,000 – a ten-fold increase from the current amount.

However, while the stiffer punishments may act as a deterrent, legal experts said there may still be challenges in bring perpetrators to justice, Ms Gloria James-Civetta, head lawyer at Gloria James-Civetta & Co said.

For instance, the prosecution still needs to prove the act of trafficking occurred and that the accused knew they were bringing women in illegally, Ms James told CNA.

There were also questions raised in Parliament during Monday's session if changes to the Charter are enough.

Can simply raising penalties curb exploitation, especially if perpetrators know how to circumvent the law, asked Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Ms Anthea Ong.

Alongside more severe punishment, women who are exploited are the "most powerful ally" who can help authorities bring abusers to task, she said. More can be done to protect those in the sex industry, Ms Ong and [MP Mr Louis Ng \(/news/singapore/louis-ng-on-women-s-charter-amendment-bill-12061926\)](/news/singapore/louis-ng-on-women-s-charter-amendment-bill-12061926) suggested.

HARSHER PENALTIES, BUT PROSECUTING REMAINS TOUGH

Women like Leah are the “perfect” targets for traffickers, according to Lynette Lim, director of development and communications in Hagar, an organisation that helps victims of human trafficking, and youths.

“Because of their inherent vulnerabilities, they are obviously a perfect prey for traffickers. They prey on them and promise them all the false job offers and a good salary.

“A lot of the time, they come from very impoverished backgrounds with at least five to seven dependents. That’s the reason why they have to look overseas for work opportunities so they can provide financially for the families back home.

“All of them who are classified as trafficked victims – they’ve all been tricked. There is a level of deception between what they were told and what the real situation really is.

“By the time they come here, it is too late for all of them. They pay lots of money to the ‘agents’ in their home countries. When they realise quickly that they are in this situation, almost all the time they no longer have the ability to say no or to come out of it,” she explained.

Leah was made to walk to Lorong 12 Geylang on the first day of her job. (Photo: Ainslee Asokan)

For Leah, it was the lies of her “close friend” that convinced her.

“My friend wanted to help me. I agreed because I needed money for living costs because I have a son,” Leah said.

“I met with her - I’m still not thinking about anything - this is my closest friend. She wants to help me.”

Arrangements were made for Leah to travel to Batam, where she took a ferry to Singapore. Along the way, she was meticulously coached by traffickers to avoid raising suspicion when questioned by immigration officers.

An hour after Leah arrived in Singapore, she was taken to a flat in Aljunied Crescent, where she had her passport, ID and documents stripped from her.

From Leah's "friend" in Indonesia to the runners in Singapore who took her to the flat, there were middlemen involved.

The amendments could help arrest and deter those who help facilitate trafficking as well as those who are directly involved, said Ms James.

"The laws are doing their best, as many runners doing the groundwork are being apprehended and in turn, deterring future runners from conducting the groundwork for the masterminds."

"This may assist in making operation of the syndicate even more difficult for the masterminds with fewer runners."

She explained the increased penalties may assist victims of sex trafficking indirectly by deterring potential offenders.

However, lawyers CNA spoke to said prosecuting criminals who dupe and traffic remains difficult. This is because of how the syndicates work, with the ringleaders elusive.

"Sex traffickers operate as a syndicate – there are usually many runners conducting the groundwork and there are many layers of hierarchy within the syndicate before reaching the mastermind", said Ms James.

► **[WATCH: Anthea Ong on Women's Charter \(Amendment\) Bill](/news/singapore/anthea-ong-on-women-s-charter-amendment-bill-12061828?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna)**
[\(/news/singapore/anthea-ong-on-women-s-charter-amendment-bill-12061828?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna\)](/news/singapore/anthea-ong-on-women-s-charter-amendment-bill-12061828?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna)

Even runners are sometimes unaware of the ringleaders' identities.

"It is also unlikely these runners would take special care and find out who the mastermind is since these runners are doing their job and just wish to get paid upon completion of the job. It is also not uncommon for the masterminds to move their operations and cover their tracks so as to avoid detection by the authorities."

The "many layers of hierarchy" could make it difficult for the law to tackle the problem, especially in cross-border sex trafficking, Ms James explained.

File photo of man threatening a woman. (Photo: Try Sutrisno Foo)

Obtaining key witnesses for court proceedings can be difficult because of fears of the consequences.

“Naturally, the more powerful the syndicate, the harder it is for such witnesses – including the victims themselves – to come forward and testify in court for fear of backlash which can take many forms,” said Mr Cory Wong, senior associate at Invictus Law Corporation.

“Sometimes victims might not tell the truth for fear of repercussions. This is especially where victims have suffered psychological or emotional trauma as a result of being trafficked and are doubtful and are unable to trust others,” Ms James added.

For Leah, she feared the revenge against her son and family.



“DON’T SHOW YOU’RE CRYING. JUST ENJOY IT”

When Leah realised she had been duped into sex work, she tried to escape. In desperation, she turned to one of the other women working with her for answers.

But she was met with a curt response: “Don’t complain. Here you just work, here you just smell nice and speak nicely with the customers so the men will come to you and they will book you.”

“Don’t run away or you will be in trouble. Don’t show you’re crying, don’t show you’re sad. Just enjoy it,” the runners warned her.

The traffickers knew where she lived in Indonesia. To keep her family safe, Leah felt she had to go along with what was asked of her.

“I want to run away - but how to run away - because I don’t know anybody in Singapore and I don’t know how to go anywhere,” Leah recounted.

File photo of woman standing along Geylang's main street. (Photo: Sutrisno Abdul Rahman)

Women like Leah are “trapped” and hesitate to report these crimes to the authorities because of fear of repatriation, lawyers said.

“These women are in Singapore as illegal immigrants without a valid work pass and approaching the authorities would risk the women being prosecuted or given a stern warning or fined under the Immigration Act and being repatriated back to their home country,” Ms Gloria explained.

“They also risk their families back home being put in danger by the middlemen in the event the women or girls decide to report to the relevant Singapore authorities.”

 There is also a possibility they may not be able to work while investigations are ongoing.

“The authorities might allow them to but it is done on a case by case basis and the lack of certainty makes victims reluctant to report,” said Ms Jaya Anil Kumar, casework manager at the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME).

► **[READ: Pimp managed Thai sex workers in 3 brothels, advertised their services on Sammyboy Forum \(/news/singapore/pimp-managed-thai-sex-workers-prostitution-pleads-guilty-11978384?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna\)](#)**

"We need to put in place a better support system to rescue these (trafficked) women from vice syndicates," MP Mr Darryl David said in Parliament on Monday as well.

The Government and authorities should work with local NGOs to support victims before they are repatriated and work with respective agencies in the women's home countries to ensure their welfare is settled before they are sent back, he said.

A woman bows her head in pain. (Photo: Unsplash/Volkan Olmez)

Some women still struggle to escape the clutches of their traffickers even with more punitive measures in place. They still face dangers when they return home.

“Those that may have outstanding loans with the agents in their home countries may be forced to continue working in exploitative conditions to pay off their loans. They may also be harassed by their recruiters for failing to pay off their debt,” Ms Jaya said.

"If we send (these women) away with debt, we are implicitly pushing them to reenter into risky business arrangements and fall prey to other dangerous agents," Ms Ong said in Parliament.

WHEN THE TRAFFICKED BECOME TRAFFICKERS



For some women who are trafficked into Singapore, they eventually become traffickers themselves in hopes of getting more money, explained Sylvia Lee, founder of NGO EmancipAsia.

"Some of the girls are turned into traffickers ... They are actually offered more money if they can bring in more girls. They are incentivised to recruit," she revealed.

"They can't get out, and it is difficult to get out. So if you can't beat them, join them. At least they can earn more money."

Leah escaped entirely. "The last time when I was in Singapore, I saw the pimp still there, but he did not recognise me," she said.

"My heart (was) beating so fast, because I remember the first time I (stood) there waiting for customers."

► **[READ: Leaked sex tapes and child porn: A look into 13 illicit Telegram chat groups \(/news/singapore/telegram-chat-groups-nasi-lemak-porn-upskirt-sex-police-12054340?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna\)](https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/telegram-chat-groups-nasi-lemak-porn-upskirt-sex-police-12054340?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna)**

There are hurdles when taking traffickers to task, but Leah welcomed the proposed changes for more severe penalties.

"I think (the changes) are enough ... but (these syndicates) have many ways to deceive police or maybe governments.

"But I appreciate the Singapore government for the concern about human trafficking cases and they will seek justice for the traffickers."

► **[WATCH: Darryl David on Women's Charter \(Amendment\) Bill \(/news/singapore/darryl-david-on-women-s-charter-amendment-bill-12061896?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna\)](https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/darryl-david-on-women-s-charter-amendment-bill-12061896?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_24082018_cna)**

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