

Crime Interrupted
An AFP and Casefile Presents podcast.
Episode 1, Operation Kitrino transcript.

Host – introduction

The Australian Federal Police – or AFP for short – is Australia’s national policing agency. Its aim? To – outsmart serious crime with intelligent action. Officers from the AFP work with local, national, and international agencies to combat serious criminal threats. Their work includes counter terrorism, serious organised crime, human trafficking, cybercrime, fraud, and child exploitation. The AFP exists to disrupt major criminal operations. In 2020-21, they did that over 400 times. They seized 38 tonnes of illicit drugs and precursors, and assisted overseas police services in seizing 19 tonnes of drugs. The AFP charged 235 people with child exploitation, and charged 25 people following terrorism investigations.

For the first time, the Australian Federal Police is opening its doors to give you a glimpse of how their officers investigate the most serious of crimes and stay one step ahead, to keep Australia safe.

Host

The Human Trafficking Team in the Australian Federal Police deals with cases of sexual servitude, labour violations, and slavery. Sex trafficking is by far the worst. Young women recruited from other countries and brought to Australia, become trapped in an existence that consists of little more than long hours of work in brothels, transport back to their apartment, then transport back to the brothel the next day. Day after day after day. They sustain injuries from the sheer number of clients – up to twenty a day. Their world narrows to work, sleep, work. They don’t connect with anyone outside their sphere. They often don’t speak the language. They are told the police in Australia are corrupt and on the payroll, so if any woman seeks help, the brothel owners will know, and they will punish her. For many, there is the threat that the punishment will continue beyond them, to their families back home.

Across Australia, each state has its own laws around sex work. In states where sex work in brothels is legal, it is subject to strict regulations. Anyone operating outside the licensing requirements can be prosecuted. To operate a brothel in Victoria of more than two workers, the brothel must have a Sex Work Service Provider’s license. Smaller businesses still require a permit and must be registered. But despite the attempts to regulate the industry, it is still vulnerable to illegal activity like sex trafficking.

The AFP Human Trafficking Team had investigated smaller-scaled cases where women had been trapped in the brothel industry, but until they heard of an offender who headed up a syndicate managing around a hundred women – mostly from Korea, brought to Australia to

pay off debts – they had never seen a case on such a large scale. It was from this intel, Operation Kitrino was born.

Now, she is an Acting Commander, but back in 2012 when Operation Kitrino began, Danielle Woodward was a Detective Sergeant and Team Leader of the AFP Human Trafficking Team. When it comes to investigative might, when they need it, the AFP can call in the cavalry.

AFP Acting Commander Danielle Woodward (4.30)

Operation Kitrino was the first time that we really engaged in an investigation to encapsulate the whole syndicate. We had partnerships with, with Victoria police, with Border Force, with Consumer Affairs, and a lot of the regulatory bodies in order to just make sure that we were getting information from every aspect in order to disrupt the syndicate. So it was probably the first time that not only using our team of six or seven people, but by the time we went to what we call the overt action, we had 100 plus staff and police working just to try and bring the syndicate down at the time.

Host

Acting Commander Danielle Woodward had been in the Australian Federal Police for over twenty years when Operation Kitrino was launched. She had combined her policing career with a sporting career as a slalom canoeist, which had taken her to three Olympic Games. She won silver in the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. For Danielle, there are a lot of cross-over qualities between sport and detective work.

Danielle Woodward (5.40)

What I found was that being an elite athlete at Olympic level, it really did teach me a lot about that discipline and about resilience, about you know failing and being able to get back up and trying again and trying new ways of actually undertaking the role that I had. I feel that it's been a real benefit for me being a detective in the police force and specifically around a job like Kitrino that was so large scale.

Host

The origins of Operation Kitrino began when word got around that there was an elusive woman running several licenced brothels in Melbourne where the workers were from North and South Korea. It's important to note here that many licenced brothels operate within the law, but sometimes, even when brothels are licenced, that doesn't mean that what goes on behind closed doors is legal, nor does it mean the people running them are licenced. It is in these gray shadowy areas that crime happens. When Danielle arrived at Human Trafficking, she could see the footprint of the woman called Mae Ja Kim who always seemed to evade the police.

Danielle Woodward (6.56)

When I first came into the Human Trafficking team, it was around 2010, and as you do when you take over a role, you research, and you review all the material that you're doing. So not only did we have response work in dealing with the currency of the jobs that we had, but there'd been a lot of whispers through a lot of our other jobs right back to 2003, of this female called

Mae Ja Kim. And she'd sort of popped up as potentially someone that was in a brothel, that was just there with the girls, but she had \$20,000 in her handbag, which was just a little bit different, or she would pop up on telephone lines talking about young adults and ways to get them into brothels, and no one really could tie her into anything in particular, but she just popped up in all of these previous operations, and that's where it really peaked my interest as to how is this particular person manage to get away with not being caught up in all of the other very successful jobs that had come before my time. So that's where the genesis of looking at Mae Ja was around her just being elusive and not being able to quite put our finger on what she was doing and who she was.

Host

So with the scant amount of detail on Mae Ja Kim, all the AFP knew in the early stages of Operation Kitrino was that she was connected to a number of brothels. Her success in keeping under the radar and avoiding detection was that she was adaptable, and tried to keep a step ahead of the police. That had worked for her for a long while, until she came onto the radar of the officers at the AFP.

Danielle Woodward (8.35)

I think that Mae Ja Kim was probably underestimated by police, including myself, initially. Mae Ja Kim was probably the first person that we came across that was well and truly up there in, in the level of criminality and the level of cleverness that she had. She knew that as time evolved, that hanging onto passports of young women was something that police would look for, so then she didn't do that anymore. She would make sure they actually had them, but use different ways of coercing them into not going anywhere. So that's where her level of criminality, just the level of smartness I suppose that people didn't actually attribute it to her. And she was female, which was unfortunately a big piece that people don't think of females as criminal masterminds.

Host

Here's what Mae Ja Kim was doing. She would traffic women – mostly from South Korea, but some were refugees from North Korea. The women usually worked in the karaoke industry and accrued debts in a combination of easy credit and the pressure to spend money on cosmetic procedures so common in the industry. Traffickers would swoop in and offer them a chance to pay back their debt by working in the sex industry in Australia. The karaoke industry in Korea had a footprint in sex work, but the difference was fundamental. The distinction lies in agency and choice for the workers. Danielle Woodward's colleague in the Human Trafficking Team, James Cheshire now Detective Inspector, but back in the time of Kitrino was a Detective Leading Senior Constable, says that in Korea, the women choose, and in Australia, the women have no choice. Rather, they are chosen.

Detective Inspector James Cheshire (10.28)

The karaoke bar industry in Korea is something that's a bit different to what most Australians are used to when they think about doing karaoke in a pub in Australia. So a great deal of them are where the sex industry operates. The difference between the sex industry within karaoke

bars in Korea, and the sex industry in Australia, is really about where the power lies and the decision making lies in who goes with who, to provide a sex service. So within the karaoke bars in Korea, it's up to the girl to offer that service to a particular client and then the negotiation will go on and generally, the sex service will be provided off site. And a license brothel within Australia, what would generally happen is that the client will attend the brothel, and there'll be an introduction where the client is introduced to all the girls that are on duty, working that evening then the client will choose who it is that they wish to go off and engage in the sexual acts that they're paying for during that session.

Host

So how do the women accrue the debt that makes them vulnerable to traffickers? In the karaoke industry, there is pressure on the performers to cosmetically enhance their looks, which costs money. Credit cards are easy to get, and some of the more unscrupulous lenders don't require proof that the borrower can service the loan. Debt can quickly accumulate.

James Cheshire (12.02)

Within the karaoke industry, looks are very important, obviously, because that's the nature of the work that's involved so there's a big push for cosmetic procedures, be that fillers or Botox or even to have surgery conducted. So that means that these people have got credit cards or other loans from people, be it loan sharks or other non-bank type people who stand over them, that then leave them vulnerable to offers from other people who then provide them with the potential way of paying off their debts.

Host

In that world of easy credit and karaoke bars full of young women unable to pay back their loans, that's where human trafficking predators step in. They offer the girls a trip to Australia where they can work to pay off the debt, away from the prying eyes of people they know, or the shame such work would bring onto their families. The travel is arranged through legitimate visas.

When the predators have contacts within the karaoke industry, James Cheshire says the women are easy targets.

James Cheshire (13.18)

They know the girls that are working already. They know who's in debt, who's in trouble, because it's just common knowledge within those venues of who's vulnerable and perhaps more willing to accept an offer when it's made.

Host

Syndicates like the one run by Mae Ja Kim use Australia's visa system to legally bring the women in from Korea.

James Cheshire (13.44)

The principal visas that they would come out on would be working holiday visas or on student visas. Both of those types of visas have ah, the ability to work whilst they are in Australia, particularly the working holiday visa had at the time an option where if you were working in a rural setting, you were able to get a longer duration visa for that time. So they would pay an intermediary to make the application for them for the visa. They would have various people in Australia that would be able to provide references that they would be employed in various industries or would be undertaking studies whilst they're here to meet the requirements of the visa itself.

Host

The whole recruitment process is designed to deceive the women. They are told that Australian officials are corrupt and, having seen corruption at work in their own countries, they believe it. There is a language barrier, and they can't understand government advice. So, when the trap is set, there is no way out for these women.

When stories about the elusive Mae Ja Kim and her syndicate began circulating, the Human Trafficking Team decided to team up with officers from the Victoria Police Sex Industry Coordination Unit – or SICU for short – and visit all licenced brothels. The best way to gather intel was to ask the workers. To investigate what was outside the normal practices, police had to know what was 'normal'. James Cheshire describes the operation.

James Cheshire (15.27)

We established the idea that we would go out and target every single brothel in the Melbourne metropolitan area over a very short period of time and doing it at a time where they are at their busiest. So we did that over the course of the weekend where we went out and visited effectively every operating licensed brothel in the Melbourne metropolitan area and spoke to 500 people that were working in the industry at the time. Speaking to them and creating contacts with them, that would then be the start of how it was that we were able to draw in more specific information about what it was that Mae Ja was doing, the nature of her syndicate and how it was that it was operating.

Host

Over those three days, the AFP and Victoria Police officers visited 91 brothels, they found everything from top end establishments right down to places that were not clean or well managed. From the well-run to the grimy, there was everything in between. Danielle Woodward was one of the officers taking part in the brothel visits. She remembers some aspects as being particularly distressing.

Danielle Woodward (16.45)

When I started in Human Trafficking, part of our role was to engage with Victoria Police and go out and visit the 90 plus brothels that were registered in the Melbourne area and get to know the managers, the owners, and particularly the women because we knew that there was exploitation occurring, and it was really trying to build up a trust factor with police, and with the foreign nationals in particular because they came from a world where police were corrupt

or they were not trustworthy, so we were trying to build a bond with them, and it was really interesting. I didn't go out on all of the visits but in the few that I did go out on, I was actually quite shocked; to go into these places the ones that I visited were pretty bare and stark in their surroundings and the type of the furnishings that they had. It was a bit cheap and, I think it's romanticised a lot through television, and it's really not. Probably what I found the most distressing is walking out to the back with all the girls sit, is sort of their work room or restroom, and along the shelving there's bottles and bottles of Listerine mouthwash to clean their mouths all the time. And there's lubricant everywhere and there's antibiotics that are sitting there. And even things like Botox, there's small vials of Botox and things so it's a production line and it's a line where using mouthwash and antibiotics and lubricant, I found it really distressing that this is people's bodies that they're pushing this through and it was just a pretty distressing scene for me.

Host

And it was really over the course of the weekend of brothel visits that Mae Ja Kim solidified as a major player in the type of sex work that is illegal. She was bringing women over from Korea and using debt bondage to keep them working. The women did not have freedom of movement and there were certainly elements of human trafficking in what the AFP suspected was going on. The first thing they had to do was find her. And as Danielle points out, that wasn't easy.

Danielle Woodward (18.55)

We started off with just our team and Mae Ja was on our radar and it was a proactive exercise for us to see whether we could find her. And that took us probably about three months of just, good old police work, and good old detective work, just following little leads down all over the place, putting trackers on different people's phones that had potential access to her, to be able to try and locate and shore up the information that we did have. And then we just slowly built from there until one day our physical surveillance teams actually managed to find her in the city. It was the first photograph we had of her and confirmed probably in 10 years, and so that was a real milestone, and once we got that piece, we were able to construct a strategy in how we were gonna go about it.

Host

Detective James Cheshire explains that the police officers got the distinct impression that Mae Ja and her syndicate members were teaching the women how to respond when questioned by the police.

James Cheshire (19.57)

The girls, had limited English capacity and would tend to be skilled or trained in providing rote learnt answers to questions that police might ask them about what's going on, how long have you been here, you know, how many clients do you see, how much money do you get from each client that you see, how are the conditions here. The answers would be strikingly similar between each of the girls that you spoke to. The girls would tell us that they were coached.

Host

The women in Operation Kitrino were trapped in debt bondage. Just say, their original debt in Korea was \$5,000. James explains just how quickly that number exploded once they signed up to come to Australia.

James Cheshire (20.49)

One of the girls that sought our support and was able to exit out of the syndicate, provided us with some detail. So before she left Korea, the flights and visa to Australia, she was charged 2½ thousand dollars for. She was provided an advance of \$5000 to clear the debts that she had at the time. She was required to provide an accommodation bond of \$1000, before she came to Australia, then she was charged rent of \$1500 per month. The accommodation in which she was in was shared room accommodation so most of the time with one other girl, sometimes with two other girls in the same room. Then there was initial costs she went into debt for, of hair, make up, clothes of about \$10,000. These are all costs that have happened before she's even started working in the brothels in Melbourne. During the course of working, she would be charged \$10 for the transport from home to the brothel and then charged \$10 to be brought home again. There would be the monthly medical check-ups where she would be charged somewhere between \$200 and \$300 each month for that medical examination and the provision of that medical certificate. There was also a range of fines. And during the time she was working, if she didn't turn up to shift, she would be fined \$500 for not attending that shift. There was a period of time where she felt that she needed to curry favour with the member of the syndicate who was her immediate supervisor or overseer, so she paid \$3000 as a one-off payment to be looked after. After she's been here 12 months, the particular visa that she was on was falling due and she was needing to apply for a second visa. She was charged \$2,500 for that visa application to be made for her. She would need to make a payment at the end of each day in relation to trying to pay off these debts which would increase over time. The amount that she would pay would be directly related to how much work that she had done during that shift, and it would be not less than between \$300 and \$500 each day that she would need to pay to the syndicate in order to try and reduce the debt.

Host

With these kinds of charges, the Korean sex worker with the original \$5,000 debt, then had another \$20,000 added on top of that to get her tickets, visas, and accommodation bond. She paid back an estimated \$60-\$70,000 for that original amount. On top of that were the ongoing costs of hair and make-up, clothing, and sometimes, more cosmetic procedures. Danielle Woodward explains the pressure on the women to service the ever-increasing debt.

Danielle Woodward (23.56)

I think that the horror comes from they are quite often in debt before they leave the country and when you leave something like South Korea, and they'll actually have a friend of theirs go guarantor, so they put their friends in debt. Then they come out to Australia thinking that they might be working in karaoke bars. And then they find out that they owe all this money once they're here so it's quite a bit of a shock, so you know it jumps to 20,000 straight away. It could

take up to a year depending on what was going on and they would be fined as well so the whole concept was to keep them in this debt bondage situation for as long as possible.

Host

Fortunately, some of the women reached out to the AFP for help.

James Cheshire (24.36)

We had a number of girls over time that would seek our assistance, and would be exited from the environment in which they were. Within the Human Trafficking Team, we've got access to an Australian government funded program called the Support for Trafficked Peoples Program which is run by contract by the Red Cross, where they're able to provide support and guidance and referrals to everything from medical to psychological, and other assistance.

Host

Operation Kitrino confirmed that not only did Mae Ja Kim have over a hundred women working for her, she also supplied workers to other brothels. From the time Operation Kitrino was set up, Danielle Woodward and her team had to figure out ways to gather evidence to prove human trafficking had occurred. Fortunately for the team, a legal precedent occurred in 2009 in the Wei Tang case that changed the way the courts looked at human trafficking. It didn't necessarily have chains and locked doors. Coercive control was much more subtle than that.

Danielle Woodward (25.48)

I think the Wei Tang trial and the High Court decision really changed the way that the courts looked at imprisonment or slavery and specifically around the lack of physical constraint. And they really concentrated on the idea of ownership, without physical constraints, so the psychological constraints or the isolation was part of what was so important about Wei Tang. And whilst it wasn't particularly well known in the public sphere, it became very well known in the policing sphere and particularly for us being able to pursue prosecution such as Operation Kitrino, where there was no visible levels of constraint whatsoever, and being able to prove psychological constraint is quite difficult, but when the courts have a precedent like Wei Tang, it makes it a lot easier for us.

Host

Indeed, the Wei Tang precedent changed the game for investigators.

James Cheshire (26.42)

So what the High Court found was that all the circumstances that are present within a person's environment can be taken to look at whether or not slavery or slavery like conditions exist. So whether someone has restricted movement or is made to do various activities, or has restricted contact with people, all these types of features can be taken into consideration in assessing whether or not it is slavery or a slavery-like condition that the person is experiencing.

Host

And this is exactly what it looked like for the women brought to Australia by Mae Ja Kim and her syndicate. Once they arrived, a level of imprisonment occurred that well and truly trapped them. As James Cheshire said, there were no visible chains, but they were completely controlled by Mae Ja's syndicate. With their ever-increasing debts coupled with high living expenses, there was no way out for the women.

Once the AFP investigators understood how Mae Ja Kim operated, they could see just how trapped the women were.

James Cheshire (27.59)

The environment in which they're living and working is a very insular one, so their contact is principally with the other girls that are working within the industry. They'll have the contact with the client when they're at work, but as far as having an understanding of what the Australian environment is, and the culture, and the community, they are not exposed to it, so they don't understand. Most have very limited English ability, and most of that English is around the English that they need to be at work. So when members of the syndicate say to them that the syndicate are paying off officials, be it police or immigration, the girls believe that, because they don't have any other information to be able to draw upon to provide them what's actually going on.

Host

It is a sad reality, but for some of the women, the situation they found themselves in when they arrived in Australia was preferable to the one they left. And this was confronting for Danielle Woodward.

Danielle Woodward (29.04)

Earlier on, with an operation that was linked through to Mae Ja Kim loosely, and that was when we had two North Korean girls that managed to come to escape North Korea. They got trafficked by an associate of Mae Ja Kim's in China. Then they made it to South Korea, and then they got trafficked out to Australia. And by the time we actually were able to talk to them, they looked at us and basically said, 'Well I live in a nice apartment. I earn a lot of money. This is better than the life I've ever had.' And it's really distressing to hear that throughout the world, people actually thought that this was better. And their main drive was to get home, to be able to ring home to North Korea, the few times they can from South Korea. And send money home to help their families have a better life.

Host

Mae Ja Kim was a different kind of operator to what the AFP had seen in the past. Danielle explains why.

Danielle Woodward (30.00)

Mae Ja did stand out because of the length of time that she'd been in the industry. Everyone knew of Mae Ja Kim, whether it was the sex workers, whether it was a brothel managers, even the general Korean community knew about Mae Ja Kim. And that's partly how we managed

to find her, was actually through community information and snippets of information about where she would be, what she was doing. She had an incredible taste for high-end fashion, for shoes, for handbags, for cosmetic surgery, and for hairstyles. So her level of influence around the Korean community was enormous. And we never really realised how big that was.

Host

When Mae Ja Kim came on the AFP radar, she was a shadowy figure with no social media presence except when she appeared in the background of photos others posted. But as Operation Kitrino progressed, the intel gathered began to tell her story.

James Cheshire (31.03)

During the course of our just normal operations even before the investigation targeting her kicked off, we knew of the way that the syndicate worked in a general sense. We knew she existed, but she had no everyday sort of footprint that someone living in the community would have. Apart from having a learner's permit and a passport, there was no other normal documents that you would have. There was no phones in her name, there was no premises rented in her name, there was no property owned by her in her name, there's no car in her name. None of that usual footprint that people have within the community didn't exist. She would regularly turnover phones so that she wouldn't have the same phone number for too long. She would move between apartments frequently so she wasn't in the same spot for too long. So it was difficult for us without targeting her, to have a good understanding of who she was and how it was that she was directing the operation of this syndicate.

Host

What did emerge was that Mae Ja Kim had turned her fortunes around when she moved from sex worker to syndicate boss.

Danielle Woodward (32.19)

She came into Australia and was in the sex industry working and then she worked her way up into a managerial role, and then I believe came up with these ideas about how to make money and how to exploit the brothel system by controlling all the Koreans that were moving into the system so she could hold the brothels hostage as to which girls that she would provide to them and when. So she became a very powerful, almost matriarch of this particular syndicate. And sadly her journey up from sex worker to manager to being the syndicate head was a journey that a lot of the women end up doing as well not so much to syndicate head, but certainly to manager because once they're in sex work and they've had the amount of money that they can earn in sex work, they get encouraged to then move in, and basically almost like a pyramid scheme, if they can go and get girls to come out from Korea, then they can make more money and do less in the way of being a sex worker. So they get entrenched into the system and then they know no other way of working, particularly in a foreign country and so they become the managers themselves.

Host

At the heart of any operation like Kitrino, the women are being exploited. The AFP knows that disrupting the syndicate might free the women from the life of debt bondage and sexual servitude, but that doesn't mean the women are willing to give evidence against the syndicate.

James Cheshire (33.46)

One of the hurdles that was experienced by my colleagues in previous years in looking at the activities of the syndicate, was being able to have one of the victims be willing to give evidence against the syndicate. The nature of the human trafficking offences are obviously that there has to be a victim, someone who's been entered into debt bondage, they are engaged in sexual servitude, or other offences like that. So there is a victim, a person who is being exploited as part of that offence. They need to give evidence in court against the syndicate, which has controlled their life over many years, who have made threats against them and have made threats to them about family members. It's understandable that they are happy to talk to us about what's gone on, but not take that next step and give evidence in a court against the people who have exploited them. They are scared. They're scared about what the syndicate might do to them. Some people are embarrassed about the information getting out about them having worked in the sex industry. So there was a range of reasons why it was that they didn't feel comfortable in providing a statement and giving evidence against Mae Ja and the other members of her syndicate

Host

Once the AFP began concentrating on the human trafficking and debt bondage within the brothel system, they saw an opportunity for a broader community benefit. Danielle Woodward teamed up with VicPol's Senior Sergeant Marilyn Ross to design a program called Look a Little Deeper which aimed to educate people to identify the signs of trafficking.

Danielle Woodward (35.32)

Marilyn and I worked very closely as heads of our respective units across VicPol and AFP. Kitrino was probably the culmination of that work that really showed what you can do when you've got really good relationships and collaboration, using the expertise of both the forces and their specialist capabilities to really try and help out our first responders, being state police, border force, even as far as hoteliers or anyone who is on the front line, to help them understand what human trafficking actually is, because it doesn't necessarily appear like the females are actually in any level of distress. And that was probably the biggest piece that really drove us to it.

Host

Senior Sergeant Marilyn Ross headed up the Victoria Police Sex Industry Coordination Unit. The unit's role was to identify illegal activity in both the licenced and unlicenced sectors of the sex industry, and most importantly, to protect vulnerable people from exploitation. Teaming up with the AFP gave Marilyn more opportunity to highlight and educate the public about human trafficking. She remembers back to things she saw early in her career. There were probably signs of human trafficking, but she just didn't realise.

Senior Sergeant Marilyn Ross – VicPol (36.55)

I remember going into a licensed brothel, and I was only a young constable, from the country no less and I found all these passports and I go, ‘What’s going on here?’ And I knew something wasn't quite right. But of course, back then, I had no idea what human trafficking was. I just knew that it wasn't something right with the situation. And so for me, it's been great in coming full circle to be able to go, ‘Well, I know what it is. I can identify it, and I know what needs to be done.’ And to now be able to pass that on to well, everyone, that everyone understands because personally I think stopping human trafficking and slavery is everyone's responsibility.

Host

The investigators working Operation Kitrino had to match their wits against Mae Ja Kim. While she always tried to stay one step ahead of the law, the AFP used every resource available to them to turn the tables. As head of the team, Danielle Woodward explains the resources the AFP were able to utilise.

Danielle Woodward (38.00)

So at resolution, we had about 100 staff with about 60 to 70 police in that space. In the lead up to that, we actually had a number of phone intercepts on Mae Ja Kim, and she would change her phone over almost weekly, so she was extremely disciplined. So we had a person that had no ID apart from a learner’s permit, we had a cash industry only, no bank accounts. She didn’t drive anywhere, and we had her changing her phone with burner phones every week, so it took an enormous amount of effort and time just to keep up with the interceptions that we had, and I think in the end we had some 60,000 phone calls that we had to then get translated. About, I think 90% of those were in foreign language, and we had to get those summarised and then we had to categorise them and then get them translated later for the brief of evidence so it was an enormous amount of work.

Host

Pitted against the resources of the AFP, Mae Ja Kim’s syndicate’s days were numbered. Operation Kitrino identified which brothels she was operating, and saw the impact on the workers when five women reached out for help.

James Cheshire (39.13)

What we’re able to do in concentrating our resources in relation to her syndicate, is able to pull all those little individual pieces together to put together the bigger picture of what it is that’s going on. It’s not that it’s not just that brothel, it’s one two doors down, and it’s also the one in Richmond and it’s also the one in West Melbourne. So we were able to then pull all of that information together and build the picture as it goes. During the course of Kitrino, we had five girls that reached out to us to be rescued from the environment in which they were working. Each of those girls to different degrees was able to give us different pieces of information. The way it works, who is using you know, what phone, how they communicate, where people are living, the names of people that are involved. All that sort of information is able to be collected so we were able to pull this picture together.

Host

The Human Trafficking Team worked with the Victoria Police and immigration. They would re-visit the brothels and try to gather supporting evidence, but the record keeping in the brothels provided a further challenge.

James Cheshire (40.23)

So one of the difficulties with the record keeping within the brothels is that it's very limited, and most of the record keeping is within the girls' working names rather than their legal names. So, for example the medical certificates which are mandated under the legislation, for them to provide monthly, don't have to be in their legal names, they can be in their working names. This means that if you went and inspected the medical certificates at any particular brothel, you would go through the names, and there might be two or three Roses or there might be a couple of Cocos, and you don't know whose medical certificate that actually is. The other issue that we had was actually being able to identify what girls were working in which brothel. Because of the nature of the syndicate, and the punitive action that Mae Ja would take against girls who weren't getting enough work as she saw it, she would move them from higher traffic brothels or brothels with greater work, to brothels with less work. So for us to have an understanding of who was who, who was working, that made it difficult for us. The way we were able to get an idea was those visits about going out and being able to see who was there and chat who was there. So that's how we were able to chip away at finding out who was working where, who was moving between brothels, and how that control was going on.

Host

Even though, their aim was to disrupt the syndicate, when the AFP are dealing with human trafficking, the team never forgets that it is all about the victims and their safety.

James Cheshire (42.08)

Within human trafficking, it's a tightrope to walk between prosecuting someone for a human trafficking offence and looking after the victim. And whenever we had that decision to make, obviously we would lean towards looking after the victim. It's far more important for us that we are able to rescue someone from a horrendous situation and take them and provide support for them through the Support for Trafficked People's Program, to empower them to be able to make decisions about what it was that they wanted to do next. And that was always the way that we would go forward. It's always about what that person wants and the effect of that sometimes is that it means that we are not able to at that time charge someone with the offending that's going on. It doesn't mean that we walk away from it and do nothing about it.

Host

When Operation Kitrino was underway, the team got an unexpected bonus when they secured the help of a Victoria Police officer who was a native Korean speaker.

James Cheshire (43.10)

Early on within Operation Kitrino, we were very fortunate to be able to secure a secondment from Victoria Police of a Senior Constable who was a native Korean speaker, and who not only

was able to communicate as a native speaker with a lot of the girls, but he also culturally had a much better understanding about things than a bloke who grew up in Melbourne like me.

Host

When Victoria Police officer, Senior Constable Lee pulled over a vehicle in a routine traffic stop, he saw a couple of young Korean women inside. He asked a couple of routine questions of the women and the driver, and their answers seemed rehearsed. Lee became suspicious. He took down their details and completed an information report for the AFP.

Senior Constable Lee – VicPol – (44.08)

It was a routine vehicle interception while I was on patrol and I saw van, a sort of people remover with a male driver and the two females sitting in the back. But as soon as I saw the vehicle with those people, like, and I felt, they didn't look like tourists. Well, not sort of father daughters, so I decided to pull the vehicle over. And so then I spoke to the driver and the driver was forthcoming with all these details. He was pretty good. And when I start talking to two females and they are very, very cautious and reluctant, and then I found that the driver was talking on behalf of them. So that could mean something. So I told the driver to be quiet and I start talking to the females and then, because I'm an Asian background, I could have figured out, you know, where those two ladies were from even looking without looking at their passport. In the beginning I was talking to them in English because I didn't, I wasn't sure exactly what country they're from. And then when I confirm the origin of those two ladies, I start speaking my own language. And, but then even when I asked for passports or any ID from those ladies, they were following the driver's instruction. So at that stage, like in terms of the traffic offence, they didn't commit any traffic offence. So I took quite detailed notes of vehicles and ladies and their names and passport details. And I let them go.

Host

For Senior Constable Lee, there was something not quite right about the women in the van. They weren't able to speak freely and they deferred to the man. On a hunch, he wrote up a report and forwarded it to the AFP who were able to confirm that the people in the van were part of the syndicate. They were quick to realise what an asset Lee could be to Operation Kitrino. The women didn't trust police in general, but over time, they came to trust Lee. And trust was vital. Both Victoria Police and the AFP have a dual purpose when it comes to policing the sex industry. They need to investigate its illegal aspects, but they also need to protect the women.

Senior Constable Lee has never forgotten a story one of the sex workers shared with him.

Senior Constable Lee – VicPol – (46.43)

She told me one occasion, she was in a room and then she heard yelling and shouting in the other room, but she and other ladies weren't in a position to run out to help the girl. But then she found what happened was that there was one girl who refused unusual sex requested by the client and she refused it. But then the client contacted pimp and the pimp sent a few people and

then she was bashed up and her nose was bleeding profusely, but they couldn't call ambulance or police because they knew what's going to happen.

Then the next day, the same syndicate people came over and they raped her in the room and none of the girls couldn't do anything.

Host

That was the harsh reality for the women caught in the syndicate's trap. No freedom, long hours, sometimes dirty conditions, and the chance that – if they didn't comply – the threat of violence. Over telephone intercepts, AFP operatives heard Mae Ja and her syndicate members talking about how the women were paid by 'units' which were 30-minute sessions with clients.

James Cheshire (48.12)

We had telephone intercepts on key players and in those telephone intercepts, we were getting their weekly stats. They would refer to a 30-minute session as a unit and they would talk in the number of units that a particular brothel had transacted on a particular shift. They would talk about various girls and the number of units that they had worked in a particular shift, so we had a good understanding, knowing how much clients were paying for a unit, about how much money was actually going through those brothels at that time, just from the telephone intercepts.

Host

The amounts were vast. Remember James said the women would each pay up to \$500 per day to pay off their debts. Mae Ja had over a hundred women working for her. With the huge sums of money coming in every week, Mae Ja Kim received a good percentage of it. Having her under AFP surveillance, the covert operatives watched her spend a small fortune.

James Cheshire (49.20)

We had a range of tools that we were using to keep tabs on what Mae Ja was doing and how she was spending her day and how she was spending her money. So what was pretty clear from our physical surveillance of her, was her shopping trips to high-end boutiques in the top end of Collins Street or out to Chadstone where she would buy a range of designer brand shoes, handbags, clothing, perfumes, and she would spend tens of thousands of dollars on these items, very frequently, almost weekly where she was spent this sort of money on a new gift to herself. She's paying in cash.

Host

And it wasn't just the obsessive shopping, buying more things than she could ever use. Danielle Woodward's team saw her spend a fortune on entertainment.

Danielle Woodward (50.15)

She would go to karaoke bars and spend \$15,000 in a night time just on scotch and karaoke. She had a habit of \$4000 a week in hairstyles with hair extensions. Her nails are always done. She had Botox every other week, She had dresses in her apartment that still had all the labels on them. She'd never even worn them.

Host

Operation Kitrino investigators documented the hierarchy in Mae Ja Kim's brothels. The workers could move up the rungs of the syndicate to become overseers.

Danielle Woodward (50.49)

The syndicate's basic plan was that Mae Ja sat at the top and then her sister and her sister's son and Mae Ja's husband took care of the syndicate itself, and then she had a whole lot of managers under her which were quite often sex workers that had actually progressed up through, so being trafficked potentially, and then progressed up to being managers, overseeing their own sex workers. And they used to get a cut of the money as well. But if you were a sex worker or you were a manager, and you recruited eight girls and those girls weren't performing or they had less units per shift, then Mae Ja would punish them by moving those girls out to the brothels that were more in the industrial areas, in the outskirts, that had less customers so they had less income, so you would basically fall back down the food chain and you would fall out of favour with Mae Ja as well which was something that none of the girls wanted to do.

Host

During the AFP's physical and electronic surveillance on Mae Ja, they discovered that she met with her overseers on a Thursday for business meetings at restaurants, sometimes at someone's house, or even at a hairdressing salon. At these meetings, cash in envelopes was handed out to each of the supervisors to pass on to the sex workers. Slowly but surely the AFP collected evidence to build their case. But how much would be enough? As the Human Trafficking Team leader, it was a decision Danielle Woodward had to make.

Danielle Woodward (52.30)

How much is enough? I think that comes down to when we do charge, we look at the elements of the offence and we've really got to get enough information there where we think there's enough to satisfy a jury that they believe what we're talking about, so it's about the reasonable belief. So, we normally matrix it out to actually try and work out what is good enough, so an example is that we collect a lot of information. So we had 60,000 phone calls but we really only presented 500 to the court because that was enough to be able to demonstrate the behaviours against the elements of the offence. So we actually gather a lot more information and evidence potentially than what we need and then we cull it down so the work's in actually deciding how much to present, so that's enough that you understand but not so much that it becomes onerous to the juries.

Host

The challenging part of all of this for the AFP is that while many of the components of human trafficking were present, the investigators needed a victim or victims to come forward; to give a statement; to be interviewed; to turn up in court for the committal; to stay around a year or two for the trial; to be named in open court, and to have the people they're testifying against sitting opposite. This is a difficult enough process for anyone, let alone a trafficked person, who doesn't speak English, is far from home, and has no other supports.

Like catching Al Capone for tax evasion, the Human Trafficking Team came up with something that would be equally effective in shutting down Mae Ja Kim's syndicate and freeing the women working in her brothels. It's illegal to deal in the proceeds of crime. So, because Mae Ja was not actually licenced to run brothels, then the money she was spending at the high-end stores in Melbourne was the proceeds of crime.

James Cheshire (54.30)

So, part of our assessment of what's going on, our continual assessment of the evidence that we were able to collect is: *have we got enough?* Have we got enough evidence here to go and arrest and charge this person? We're wanting to charge with human trafficking offences, but we have no victim. We've identified that we can use these deal proceeds of crime offences in relation to the activities that have gone on. So we've assessed this. We believe that we've got enough that we can go and arrest and charge Mae Ja. We've got overwhelming evidence on the TIs. We've got excellent evidence from our own visits and our own physical surveillance.

Host

A lot of intel was being gathered through the TIs – or telephone intercepts – and then came the infamous 'ten-year phone call' where Mae Ja Kim admits in a conversation with her sister, just how long she had been running the operation. This was exactly what the AFP were trying to catch her on – operating the brothels without being a licenced operator. The phone call that was the proof they were looking for, to charge her on the deals proceeds charge. In a lot of ways, it was the 'gotcha' call.

James Cheshire (55.45)

So one of the phone calls that we were particularly taken with, was an argument, a very heated argument between Mae Ja and her sister about the reduction in profit that was going on. So during the course of that phone call and the abuse that she was giving her sister, she said that it was the worst week that they had in 10 years. And so what that meant for us was not only confirming everything that we knew that she'd been involved in the industry for an extended period of time, and exploiting girls for an extended period of time, but it also was very close to us. We were making our plans to go to an overt action phase, to execute warrants and to arrest Mae Ja and her syndicate members. And that call, at that time, was extremely significant because it's her obviously admitting that this is a business for her. It's a long-term business, and she knows exactly what's going on.

Host

And how much money did Mae Ja Kim make in her worst week in ten years?

James Cheshire (56.51)

The money that she had made during that week was \$82,500 and that was her worst week in ten years.

Host

And remember, that weekly amount of \$82,500 was just Mae Ja's share of the profits which was a fraction of the income her four brothels generated. So, the 'ten-year phone call' was a game changer and the AFP planned to bring Operation Kitrino to a conclusion. For Danielle Woodward, it was the beginning of the end of the investigation.

Danielle Woodward (57.31)

It was a wonderful moment that we could say hand on heart that she's been doing this for 10 years and importantly, she actually said that this was the worst week she had in 10 years. It was a real watershed moment for us to actually say yes, everything that we've believed for such a long time is actually true.

Host

Once the AFP had the proof from Mae Ja herself, they planned to move to the resolution phase of Operation Kitrino.

James Cheshire (58.01)

So we decide, we plan for a particular date to go to resolution, in July. So we plan with our partners at VicPol, with our partners within immigration, that we're going to go out and execute these warrants and arrest five people in relation to what's gone on. The importance of the individuals that are being preyed upon by the syndicate, the messaging was very important to us. So not only did we plan to go to the traditional overt police action of executing raids, arresting people, and putting them before the court, we also had a Phase 2 and 3 of that overt action plan which was to go out to the brothels in a couple of days afterwards and let all the people working in the brothels know what it was that we'd done, that we've gone out and we'd arrested people in relation to what had gone on.

Host

Even though AFP surveillance had recorded Mae Ja's shopping expeditions, when the officers raided her apartment, they found more handbags, shoes and bottles of perfume than any one person could use in a lifetime.

James Cheshire (59.09)

So, one of the interesting things for me in going to her apartment and arresting her on the day, we knew how much she was spending on designer label kit, so be that, the shoes or the handbags, or the perfume. We were expecting to see what we saw in her second bedroom of an entire wall of designer handbags, an entire wall of designer shoes, and a dresser of designer label perfumes, a top end apartment in Melbourne's Southbank with magnificent views across the city and the bay. That was not unexpected at all. What is bizarre to contemplate is that with all this money, and all this money going through her hands, that none of it was put into any sort of asset. Other members of the syndicate had invested in property, but Mae Ja had no assets. The apartment was rented in someone else's name. She had no car. She had various people driving for her, but no assets, that she had stockpiled cash for a rainy day. There was no forward planning by her to provide into the future or to make money legitimately from all this cash that she had got in.

Host

After the raids and arrests, Mae Ja Kim and her syndicate were taken into custody. When it came time to interview her, Mae Ja claimed she could not speak English. The investigators knew she could because they had heard her on the telephone intercepts. With an interpreter, she sat down and faced the investigators who'd been on her trail for months.

James Cheshire (1.00.58)

During the course of the record of interview, my plan was to play her a number of the phone calls which she's been involved in. So I decided that I would play one call, the 10-year call to her. I played the call. Mae Ja was presenting as having absolutely no English at all. I played the ten-year phone call to her, and as it starts, there's probably less than 30 seconds in, she turns to me and says, 'Stop! Turn it off.' And that moment was a key moment for me in the course of the investigation. It's the moment in this investigation that moment in that interview room at that time was the point where there is clearly an understanding between me and her that we've got her.

Host

And the moment Mae Ja Kim asked the detectives to turn off the tape, she knew they had her too. For Danielle Woodward, watching the interview from the major incident room, it was a watershed moment.

Danielle Woodward (1.02.12)

When that question for that particular phone call was played to her, she asked for the interview to be shut down. Yeah, so that was really the watershed moment, a really big moment because she was very, very confident, and I would say cocky about her level of involvement and her knowledge of the industry and thought she get off scot-free, and you know, she nearly did, well, she did for a long, long time but it was incredibly satisfying to bring a person of her calibre to justice.

Host

Eventually, the case would go to trial, but it was the first appearance before the court that perhaps meant the most to James.

James Cheshire (1.02.52)

Putting Mae Ja before a bail justice on the night that we arrested her and having her remanded in custody till the next day was significant for me. And it happened just after concluding the interview.

Host

For Danielle Woodward, seeing Mae Ja and her syndicate locked up was a good moment.

Danielle Woodward (1.03.11)

To get her off the streets, and actually get her put behind bars was a significant success for us but I think my worry was always about the sheer size of the syndicate and her reach was: would this actually bring the syndicate down ultimately. And with her spending the time she did in jail, it certainly changed the way that the syndicate ran. I think it disrupted it almost completely and got a lot of girls out of the position that they were in, so I think it was really good. But I was probably still you know, thinking that we had the trial to get to, so I was thinking a little bit more about we've still got a long way to go.

Host

After the raid and the arrests, naturally, the officers from the AFP Human Trafficking Team did hope to bring a human trafficking charge against Mae Ja and her syndicate. They did everything they could to help women come forward.

Danielle Woodward (1.04.06)

We had always hoped that even at the time of the arrest when we went to all the brothels, that we could still potentially find someone that was willing to actually speak out against Mae Ja, so we never lost hope about the human trafficking offences. We just realised that you know, it's such a difficult crime to prove and it's such a difficult space to be in with the type of victims that we have, in encouraging them to come forward. We have trouble with that in the best of times with you know young women coming forward to our court system, so we realise that it would always be problematic for us. So we never, never gave up hope, but I think that once we'd settled, after the you know, the few days after the warrants and the work that we did a couple of days after, we then settled for the fact that without a victim, we're not going to get her for this, but we will get her in respect to her money and actually get her for serious crimes. So that's what made us quite happy.

Host

At times during Operation Kitrino, there were over a hundred people working the case. Once the arrests were made, the core team of six and a sergeant continued the major task of putting the brief together for court.

Danielle Woodward (1.05.24)

In Victoria when we arrest someone, the normal course of events is that the police have six weeks to put the brief together. We did actually ask for an extension straight away just from the sheer volume of material but we still got the brief up in I think it was around 12 weeks, which was an incredible effort.

Host

Given the strength of the case against Mae Ja and her syndicate members, they all pleaded guilty to money laundering and dealing in the proceeds of crime. A guilty plea is taken into account during sentencing. The judge sentenced Mae Ja Kim to four years with 2 years and six months to serve. Mae Ja's sister was sentenced to three years and two months with two years to serve. Other members of the syndicate got similar sentences.

Like all law enforcement personnel, the investigators of Operation Kitrino have to step back from sentencing. Their job is to deliver the offender to the courts and from there, it's up to the judicial system. Even though, in the end, the AFP couldn't charge Mae Ja Kim with human trafficking, the judge's sentencing summary, showed that he understood the seriousness behind the charges the AFP had been able to lay.

James Cheshire (1.06.48)

It was quite difficult from the sentencing range perspective to have a good understanding about what we were looking at as a possibility. The reason for that is that the deal proceeds offences are usually coupled with other criminal charges, so for example if someone has imported drugs into Australia, they will be charged with that and also dealing in the proceeds of crime. So to try and de-couple the sentence for the deal proceeds from the other offending in, the library of cases that the DPP had was quite difficult. What's pretty clear to us was that this was a significant jail term for a deal proceeds of crime matter. And it is pretty clear that there was an understanding there from the courts that what was going on was human trafficking. It was treating people extremely badly. It was preying on them and preying on the vulnerability, and that was reflected by the sentence.

Danielle Woodward (1.07.53)

But still it was very satisfying that we'd actually manage to put them all behind bars for a significant period of time and I think even more so, in the judge's comments, it was quite clear that he'd taken into account what they were doing in respect to the exploitation of people. It wasn't just the fact that it was a money laundering offence, and so I think I took great satisfaction out of the judge's comments in understanding the type of criminal that Mae Ja Kim and her syndicate were.

Host

Every time the AFP runs an operation like Kitrino, they learn more about human trafficking in all its guises, and they improve and refine investigative techniques. Danielle Woodward and VicPol's Marilyn Ross developed a program called Look a Little Deeper. For Marilyn, it was the chance to educate frontline workers on what to look out for.

Marilyn Ross – VicPol (1.08.50)

So the origins of the program, I suppose, Look a Little Deeper was that I didn't know anything about human trafficking and it wasn't until I did the AFP human trafficking course that I learned about what it was. And as a result, I thought: if I don't know what this is, I'm pretty sure there'll be other people who don't know as well.

Host

The joint AFP and VicPol program, Look a Little Deeper, was shared to other agencies and at law enforcement conferences overseas. It relied on the simple premise of asking four questions.

Marilyn Ross – VicPol (1.09.25)

The four questions of: *What is it? Where may I see it? What are the indicators? What do I do?* can be more broadly worked where people are having that conversation, so that they can pick up if there's any little indicators and most importantly, identify these victims right at the start, in that first instance. Why we actually ended up calling this Look a Little Deeper was that human trafficking and slavery-like practices they're such a subtle crime type. So what we would say to our members is: if something's not quite right, ask more questions and look a little deeper.

Host

Operation Kitrino reinforced the power of collaboration between agencies, especially VicPol and the AFP.

Danielle Woodward (1.10.10)

I think that the lessons from Kitrino taught us about collaboration between all of the different agencies, and how well that can work together. But I think even more importantly, what we learnt from Mae Ja was that this is serious, organised crime. It's systemic, it's long standing. Unfortunately the human commodity is probably the best commodity in the world, because you can keep re-using it. It's not like drugs or anything else where you actually have to transport it, you have to be hands on, and once you've concluded your transaction, that's the end, and then they have to start another enterprise. Whereas the human exploitation is an ongoing, you can reap reward as a trafficker over and over and over again. So, some of the things that Mae Ja really taught us was about their ability to adapt. She knew about Wei Tang and the issues about passports, and so she was clever not to do any of those pieces so that was more difficult for us. We also understood that on one of the phone calls I believe if I recall, she spoke about it's okay it's not slavery, it's only a small offence. And she was actually referring to the offence of debt bondage which, in that time, was only a summary offence that only attracted a 12-months' jail term. Marilyn and myself, and James, went to promote legislative reform to bring debt bondage into serious offences so that it went from a 12 month offence to a four-year offence. That was probably one of our proudest moments about actually getting the law changed to increase those sorts of penalties to allow us to adapt with the criminals so they're not getting away with this, particularly when it's human exploitation.

James Cheshire (1.11.51)

It is possible to target a complex and secretive organised crime group that's operating within the community and be able to break it. You might not be able to achieve it by charging with human trafficking but you can achieve it by targeting the criminality that is involved in the activity. I think that's one piece that comes out of it for me. What you're able to achieve in partnership with people and how willing people are to go on a journey to help others. Dealing with a human trafficking crime type, it's about people being at risk and exploited and being in terrible circumstances and we were able to put an end to that.

Host

Serious crime is getting seriously complex. To stay a step ahead, the AFP is recruiting those with diverse skillsets and backgrounds. Just like AFP personnel Danielle and James and the

roles they played in interrupting the sex trafficking syndicate as part of Operation Kitrino. After all, it takes all kinds to solve crime. With more than 200 roles across the organisation, in Australia and across the globe, you could help the AFP stay a step ahead too. Consider a career with the AFP.

The end