

# Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade

## Inquiry into the rights of women and children

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### ABSTRACT

Destiny Rescue's insights into the treatment of women and children being sexually exploited internationally, and the impact of this treatment on their human rights.



7 September 2023

**The Chair**

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade  
Inquiry into the rights of women and children

PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2601

***Destiny Rescue Limited (Australia) – Countering the Sexual Exploitation of children***

Dear Senator,

Destiny Rescue is pleased to make this submission to the Committee's inquiry into the rights of women and children.

Our submission seeks to address the Committee's interest in understanding the treatment of women and children internationally, and the impact of this treatment on their human rights.

Destiny Rescue Limited is an Australian-based international NGO with more than 20 years of experience in countering child trafficking. We recently celebrated our 13,000th rescue of an individual from human trafficking and child sexual exploitation.

Our submission provides an overview of who we are and our activities in countering child sexual exploitation. We have extensive experience in combating abusive behaviour in the field of sexual exploitation and human trafficking, including the growing violence occurring via online sexual exploitation.

Yours sincerely,



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul'.

**Paul Mergard**

CEO Destiny Rescue Australia

## Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	5
Background	6
Structure of this submission	7
<b>a) Understanding the treatment of women and children internationally and the impact of this treatment on their human rights;</b>	<b>8</b>
Terms of Reference	8
Key Issues and Facts	8
The danger of stereotypes	9
Child Marriage	9
Bars & Hotels	10
Silenced	10
Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC)	11
Children have more access to technology than ever before	11
Perpetrators are Taking Advantage	11
Software innovation facilitates OSEC	12
Live-Streaming	12
Link between OSEC and contact offending	13
Australian Policy and Agency Responses	13
Multi-pronged Approach to Address Violence	14
<b>b) The adequacy of support services, including legal services, available to affected women and children</b>	<b>15</b>
Terms of Reference	15
<b>c) The disproportionate impact on women’s education and social inclusion created by global disruptions such as COVID, climate change, and the Ukraine-Russia conflict</b>	<b>16</b>
Terms of Reference	16
The Global Pandemic	16
Poverty drives sexual exploitation	16
School closures during COVID – A Ugandan Case Study	17
Uganda’s schools were closed for nearly two years, creating ugly, unintended side effects for violence against children.	17
The unexpected consequences	17
Dangers in the real world	17
Permanent damage	18
Where does child sex trafficking stand today?	18

<b>d) Related matters: sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism</b>	<b>19</b>
Terms of Reference	19
Definitional and data issues	19
An issue for border protection agencies	20
Proposed action	20
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Destiny Rescue Background</b>	<b>21</b>
Overview	22
Objectives	22
Aims	22
Who we are	22
Our structure	23
Destiny Rescue Australia	23
International partnerships	23
<b>Appendix 2: 2022 Impact Report</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Destiny Rescue Australia, Annual Report, 2022</b>	<b>25</b>

# Executive Summary





## Background

**Destiny Rescue is an Australian-based NGO which has rescued over 13,000 individuals from exploitation overseas. Our 22 years' experience in countering child sexual exploitation spreads across five regions globally, and includes addressing the online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC).**

This submission focuses on Destiny Rescue's activities and experience in countering violence against women and girls in the forms of human trafficking and child sexual exploitation.

The United Nations has identified that for 10 victims of human trafficking detected globally, five are adult women and two are girls. 90% of detected victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are females.<sup>1</sup>

This aligns with Destiny Rescue's experience. For example, in 2022, 90.2% of our 3,144 rescues from sexual exploitative situations were women and girls.

We also wish to highlight the growing role OSEC, in particular live streaming, is playing in escalating violence against children.

Destiny Rescue is actively engaging in Australia and ASEAN to achieve policy and legislative change to counter the violent abuse of children via sexual exploitation. To date in 2023, we have lodged the following submissions:

## Australia:

- A *Pre-Budget Submission 2023-24* recommending that a *Safe Children, Safe Traveller* awareness campaign for Australian travellers to the region be undertaken. Australia has not funded a *Child Safe Tourism* campaign in ASEAN since 2012-2014 (January 2023);
- A submission to the JSCFADT inquiry which is examining the role of Australia as a hub in support of tourism in the Asia Pacific region (the region) (March 2023); We believe this current inquiry should investigate potential awareness-raising campaigns to counter Australian travellers being involved in the sexual exploitation of children in the region;
- A response to the *Targeted Review of Divisions 270 and 271 of the Modern Slavery Offences in Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)*, regarding slavery, slavery-like offences and trafficking offences (March 2023);
- Destiny Rescue's submission was widely referenced in the *Findings Report* (August 2023);
- A submission to the Joint Committee on Law Enforcement regarding Law Enforcement Capabilities in Relation to Child Exploitation (April 2023).

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures#notes>



### **Structure of This Submission**

This submission provides Destiny Rescue's comments and experience against the terms of reference of the inquiry, as follows:

- a) **Understanding the treatment of women and children internationally and the impact of this treatment on their human rights;**
- b) **The adequacy of support services, including legal services, available to affected women and children;**
- c) **The disproportionate impact on women's education and social inclusion created by global disruptions such as COVID, climate change, and the Ukraine-Russia conflict; and**
- d) **Any related matters.**

## a) Understanding the treatment of women and children internationally and the impact of this treatment on their human rights.

### Terms of Reference

a). Understanding the treatment of women and children internationally and the impact of this treatment on their human rights.

### Key Issues and Facts

Modern slavery and human trafficking are at the forefront of gender-based violence and breach women’s and children’s basic human rights.

Children now account for 30% of those who are trafficked.<sup>2</sup>

Women and girls who are forced into the sex industry, either through trafficking, desperation or poverty are degraded to such a degree that they’re often seen as products for sale, stripped of their humanity. This mindset amongst traffickers and their clients makes them capable of shocking brutality and violence against their victims.

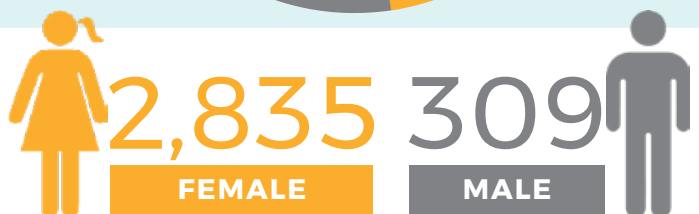
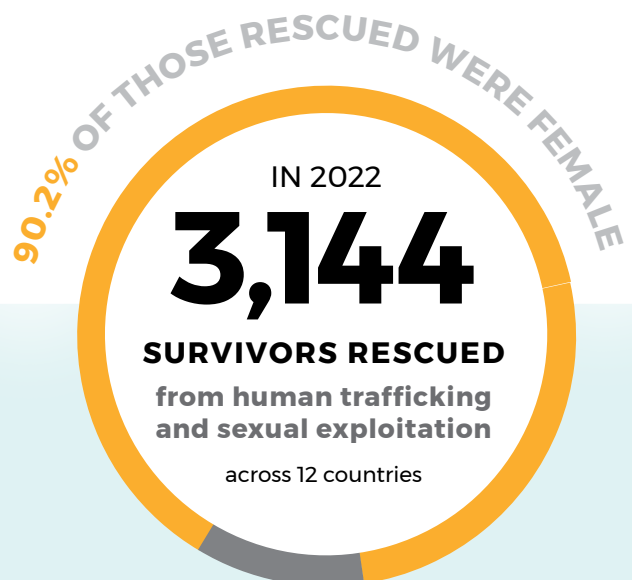
*“Every day I was sold, forced to go with up to 25 customers,” reports Laxmi, a survivor from South Asia. “They would hurt me badly. I still have the scars all over my body.”*

Destiny Rescue is at the front line of this dire fight, recognising that women and girls are disproportionately affected by human trafficking and sexual exploitation. **In 2022 we saw 3,144 survivor rescues from human trafficking and sexual exploitation, 2,835 (90.2%) were female; 309 rescues (9.8%) were male.**

With over 13,000 rescues, we at Destiny Rescue are working tirelessly to end the horrors of sexual exploitation.

The UN continues to raise awareness of the problem by promoting “**16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence.**”<sup>3</sup> [The campaign](#) starts on November 25 and “... aims to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls around the world, calling for global action to increase awareness, promote advocacy and create opportunities for discussion on challenges and solutions.”

Destiny Rescue works actively to free women and children from the impacts of sexual exploitation and fights for the equality of all. From border agents backed by local governments, to undercover operatives working alongside police forces, to social workers canvassing at-risk communities. Our incredible and diverse teams, including local female agents, are united in one mission: to rescue children and help them stay free.



<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018, UNODC, Vienna, 2018 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.19.IV.2), <[https://www.unodc.org/e4j/data/university\\_uni/global\\_report\\_on\\_trafficking\\_in\\_persons\\_2018.html](https://www.unodc.org/e4j/data/university_uni/global_report_on_trafficking_in_persons_2018.html)>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/unite/16-days-of-activism>



### The danger of stereotypes

Gender based violence occurs in all countries and cultures but often with a higher frequency where there are widespread suppressive stereotypes relating to the role and status of women in society.

The World Health Organisation has identified that one in three women and girls worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence at some point in their life. Most of the time, it is by an “intimate partner,” which is either a current or former partner or spouse.<sup>4</sup>

*Cambodia:* Gender-based violence remains widespread in Cambodia. According to the *United Nations Population Fund (UNPF)*, the most commonly reported perpetrator of physical and sexual violence was a women’s current husband/partner. One in five women aged 15-49 has experienced physical violence since the age of 15 and domestic violence remains a major concern.<sup>5</sup>

### Child Marriage

The UN has estimated that there were 650 million girls and women alive in the world who were married before their 18th birthday.<sup>6</sup>

*Nepal:* Nepal has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. Some wives can face forced reproduction, marital rape and dowry-related violence, according to the Walk Free Foundation.<sup>7</sup>

Under a dowry concept, a bride’s family will typically give the groom or his family a gift such as money or property during or after the wedding. However, it can be abusive if the groom begins to demand more money or property, and the family cannot afford it.

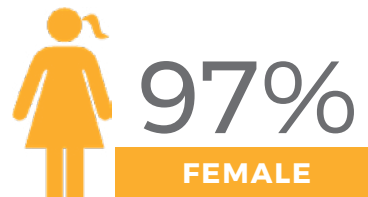
The tradition also strips the bride of her humanity.

A dowry symbolises her exact worth, reducing her status to a mere commodity.

The low status of girls opens the door to child marriage and trafficking risk. It is estimated 25,000 young women and children are trafficked across the Nepal border every year. Due to the scale of the problem, Destiny Rescue operates 18 border stations in Nepal in partnership with government authorities.

Our team of 70 trained border agents—all female Nepalis—have authority granted by the Nepal Border Police to stop, and interview anyone trying to cross the border. If they identify trafficking-risk indicators, suspected victims and perpetrators are detained separately for further interviewing.

Post-rescue interviews consistently demonstrate that more than 97% of victims/survivors are female.



50% rescued at the border were girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 20 years old.



The combined efforts of our border stations rescue about two people a day, with 90% of victims being rescued **before** traffickers or others had the opportunity to sexually abuse them.

<sup>4</sup> Global status report on violence prevention 2014, (the World Health Organisation, the United Nations Development Programme, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)).

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), [Cambodia.unfpa.org](https://www.unfpa.org/cambodia), website accessed on 3 September 2023

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund, 2018

<sup>7</sup> Walk Free Foundation, 2014



### Bars & Hotels

Women and girls account for 4.9 million of those in forced commercial sexual exploitation, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO).<sup>8</sup>

In Southeast Asia, many women and girls are being sold for sex in a brothel or bar. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that over 150,000 people are trafficked annually within the region, with women and girls making up 44% and 21%, respectively, of trafficking victims.<sup>9</sup>

This style of abuse can become two fold. Women and girls are not only sexually exploited, but can also fall victim to additional abuse, including spitting, hitting and rape.

### Silenced

Many of these women and girls cannot speak out. According to anti-modern slavery organisation *Walk Free Foundation*, female victims in Nepal fear they could face repeated abuse or social stigma if a complaint is reported.

Destiny Rescue sees this silence after rescuing women and girls from trafficking at the Nepal borders. Often, the survivor's family refuses to press charges against their daughter's trafficker, fearing she will then face shame and stigma in her community.

Sadly, this silence is not exclusive to Nepal.

About 40% of female victims of abuse in most countries have not spoken up, according to a report by the United Nations.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> International Labour Organisation, 2017

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank: Towards Safer Migration: Countering Human Trafficking in an Integrated South Asia <https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2022/11/30/16DaysofActivismSouthAsia#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Office%20on,of%20trafficking%20in%20the%20region>

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Affairs (2015). *The World's Women 2015, Trends and Statistics*, p. 159. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures#notes>

## Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC)

OSEC by Australians is a grave issue of community concern as it relates to violence against women and children. Australia ranks third behind the US and Sweden when it comes to cases of live-streamed child abuse reported in the Philippines.<sup>11</sup>

Destiny Rescue International is encountering cases where technology providers are being used by perpetrators to commit the crime of OSEC in all 12 countries in which we operate.

The expansion of internet access has also allowed traffickers to learn that posting sexually explicit videos of their victim's online enables them to access a wider audience and, therefore, more potential income.

The online sexual exploitation of children is an area of particular concern for anti-trafficking advocates around the globe.

Often, traffickers connect desperate families with paedophiles online for abhorrent livestream events, where paying viewers request the child's guardian to perform sex acts on or with their child for money. The trafficker gets the lion's share of the profit from such sales without ever being in physical proximity to either party - making them extremely difficult to track.

The rapid growth of OSEC has motivated many governments and agencies to develop special task forces to combat the issue. In August 2022, Filipino authorities joined with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to announce special efforts to combat offenders in their nation, declaring war on OSEC.

## Children Have More Access to Technology Than Ever Before

Online activities in relation to child exploitation have grown exponentially in recent years:

- Young children may be especially vulnerable: 82% of known *Child Sexual Abuse Material* (CSAM) in 2021 portrayed children under 13;<sup>12</sup>
- In 2019, estimates showed one in three children were internet users;<sup>13</sup>
- Fewer than half of Filipino children say they feel safe online;<sup>14</sup>
- In 46% of our rescues in Nepal in 2021 and 2022, girls met their traffickers online.

Being subjected to online sexual solicitation is often associated with online risk behaviours. These behaviours include exposure to online pornography, posting personal information or pictures online, having unknown people as friends on social media, voluntary sexting, video chatting with strangers, and high levels of gaming.<sup>15</sup>

## Perpetrators are Taking Advantage

The increasing availability and access to the internet has been a contributing factor in the rise of OSEC, with an estimated 750,000 predators online at any one time.<sup>16</sup>

Before the internet, perpetrators had to physically leave their home to sexually exploit children. Now abusers who are located anywhere in the world, including Australia, can exploit children without ever leaving their homes.

Internet usage has accelerated more since the pandemic than in the four years prior,<sup>17</sup> thanks to the widespread implementation of 5G networks. Even remote, rural populations suddenly had access to the possibilities and horrors of the web.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute of Criminology: Trends and Issues  
[https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/ti671\\_overlap\\_between\\_csa\\_live\\_streaming\\_contact\\_abuse\\_and\\_other\\_child\\_exploitation.pdf](https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/ti671_overlap_between_csa_live_streaming_contact_abuse_and_other_child_exploitation.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738224/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)738224\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738224/EPRS_BRI(2022)738224_EN.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/GKO%20Summary%20Report.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/media/2616/file/UNIPH-2021-PKO-Executive-Summary.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Investigating-Risks-and-Opportunities-for-Children-in-a-Digital-World.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://ijm.org.au/blog/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-osec/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2022/social-media-children-teens>

The US Secretary of State, in the US State Department's 2023 *Trafficking in Persons* (TIP) report, specifically highlights that the stories of survivors identifies emerging tactics used by traffickers - like cyber operations - and provides recommendations for how we can all work better together to address this crime.<sup>18</sup>

The U.S. State Department's 2022 *Trafficking* report<sup>19</sup> confirmed that in 2020 and 2021, traffickers increasingly used the internet and social media to target their victims. By setting up fake profiles on social media, traffickers develop faux romantic relationships with underaged girls in order to gain their victims' trust and access their personal information. This process is known as "grooming" and could end with the child "willingly" walking into the trafficker's hands, or in some cases being kidnapped.

A common technique is posting fake job descriptions in neighbouring countries. Human traffickers will advertise well-paying jobs in the domestic or service industry, specifically targeting poor populations in countries where it's common to travel across a border to obtain work.

Once the victim agrees to take the job and meet with the potential "employer", perpetrators will often take the victim's passport and other forms of ID in transit, making it easier to manipulate them into sex work through ultimatum or desperation.

A recent Destiny Rescue raid in the Dominican Republic rescued over 70 women and girls from traffickers who employed this technique.

### *Software Innovations and OSEC*

Technology has also dramatically enhanced the electronic connection between potential perpetrators and vulnerable communities. In non-English speaking countries, the language differences between western-based abusers and local communities previously provided a barrier between these two groups.

However, over the past five years, the rise in automatic electronic translation software has broken down these barriers. Within Thailand, for example, this simple development in technology has opened the door for abusers, paedophiles, and potential traffickers to freely communicate with non-English speaking co-offenders and victims in vulnerable communities in rural and remote parts of Thailand.

In 2021, reports of OSEC increased by 35% for a total of 29.3 million reports, making it a record year. Of the 29.3 million total reports, 29.1 million of these reports were from social media providers.<sup>20</sup>

Destiny Rescue assists children from OSEC in Thailand via covert missions. 63% of all rescued survivors in 2021 were found online. In 2020, 9% of 12-17-year-old internet users in Thailand were victims of OSEC.

### *Live-Streaming*

Technology has not only enhanced and facilitated traditional forms of sexual exploitation of children, but it has also spawned new forms and variations of this crime type.

The live streaming form of child sexual exploitation is facilitated by two co-conspirators who meet online through social media providers. The two conspirators (who are commonly remote from each other, in different countries) form an agreement to sexually exploit a vulnerable person, commonly a child, in exchange for a fee.

The contact offender sexually exploits the victim at the direction of the online perpetrator and the exploitation material is transmitted through the internet for their sexual gratification.

In exchange, the online perpetrator sends payment through electronic money remittance to the contact abuser abroad. In this form of sexual exploitation, the recruitment, exploitation and compensation are all facilitated through electronic providers.

<sup>18</sup> Trafficking In Persons Report, July 2023 <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Trafficking-in-Persons-Report-2023>, Foreword

<sup>19</sup> Trafficking In Persons Report July 2022; [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/22-00757-TIP-REPORT\\_072822-inaccessible.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/22-00757-TIP-REPORT_072822-inaccessible.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738224/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)738224\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738224/EPRS_BRI(2022)738224_EN.pdf)

## Link Between OSEC and Contact Offending

The extent to which contact offending is linked with OSEC activities of offenders is becoming increasingly clear. A recent 2022 study<sup>21</sup> found that:

*This analysis identified a notable sub-group of live-streaming offenders that also engaged in contact sexual offending. This is the first study to empirically demonstrate an intersection between live streaming of CSA, and contact sexual offenses against children and adults. This research highlighted the importance of financial transactions data in detecting, and disrupting this crime type. Further, the identification of an intersection between live-streaming CSA offenders, and contact sexual offenders suggests that these individuals may pose a risk to both local and international communities.*

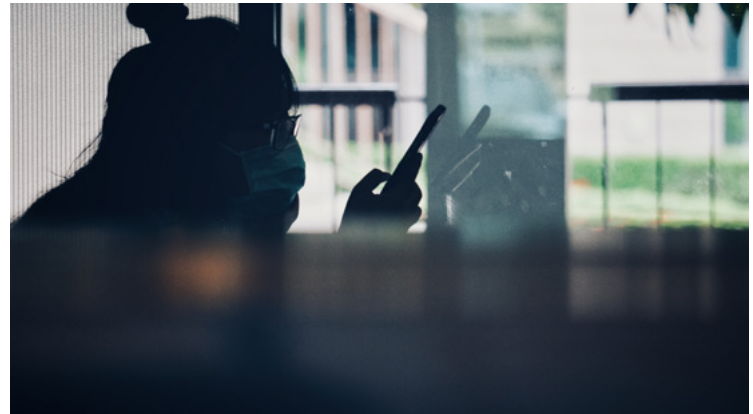
It is clear that the vulnerabilities that put children at risk online, often put children at risk from contact offenders.

A recent 2023 report found that:

*Travelling to offend against children, use of CSAM and CSA live streaming appear to be interrelated and should be considered by law enforcement as potential risk factors for one another.*<sup>22</sup>

Destiny Rescue believes greater action needs to be taken to reduce the extent to which Australian overseas travellers, who may have been involved in OSEC, are involved in the physical sexual exploitation of children in the countries which they visit.

Australians have been identified as the largest group of sex tourists prosecuted in Thailand (**31% of the total**).



This shocking statistic was quoted by the then UN Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography in her Report to the UN Human Rights Council on 24 December 2012 (the UN Special Rapporteur Report).<sup>23</sup>

Australians account for 9% of sex tourists arriving in the ASEAN region, with almost 100,000 Australian citizens visiting Thailand alone.<sup>24</sup> Indonesia (especially Bali) and the Philippines are also currently amongst the most favoured destinations of Australians.

## Australian Policy and Agency Responses

The issue of law enforcement capability in the area of child exploitation is vital to our community's ongoing efforts to counter this issue.

Destiny Rescue commends the Albanese Government for continuing with a range of policy and law enforcement agency initiatives to combat the sexual exploitation of children, in the context of human trafficking and modern slavery, including:

- The ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking Initiative (ASEAN-ACT Initiative);
- The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE);

<sup>21</sup> Understanding the Offline Criminal Behavior of Individuals Who Live Stream Child Sexual Abuse, Cubitt, Napier and Brown, Journal of Interpersonal violence, Vol 38, Issue 9-10. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/08862605221137712>

<sup>22</sup> Teunissen C & Napier S 2023. The overlap between child sexual abuse live streaming, contact abuse and other forms of child exploitation. Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice no. 671. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://doi.org/10.52922/ti78993>

<sup>23</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Najat Maalla M'jid; A/HRC/22/534 page 7.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/national/love-thy-neighbour-australias-shameful-fetish-20081119-gdt3dh.html>

- The recent establishment of the *Australian Institute of Criminology's Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery Research Network*;
- The 2022 signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Royal Thai Government to establish a *Centre of Excellence to Counter Human Trafficking*;
- The McMillan report on the statutory review of the *Modern Slavery Act 2018*;
- The *Findings Report of the Targeted Review of Modern Slavery Offences in Divisions 270 and 271 of the Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth)*;
- The expansion of the remit of Australia's Ambassador to be the *Ambassador to Counter Modern Slavery, People Smuggling and Human Trafficking*;
- The 2023-24 Budget funding boost of \$24.3 million to prevent and disrupt modern slavery; and
- The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) development of a new *International Gender Equality Strategy*, which will recognise gender equality as central to Australia's foreign policy, international development, humanitarian action, trade and security efforts.<sup>25</sup>



### Multi-pronged Approach to Address Violence

So, what is the antidote to violence against women and children? The answer is a multi-pronged approach.

Among a myriad of ideas are tightening - and then enforcing - laws against gender-based violence, raising awareness of the issue and its consequences, and educating societies on how to view and treat women as equals to men - no less, no more. It is also vital to pave a path for women to have equal opportunities for education and careers.

A UNODC report concluded:

*"The reality is that a multifaceted approach is required to effectively counter online child sexual exploitation and abuse, which includes not only law enforcement tactics, but also laws, regulations, and policies, the coordination of services provided to victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse, cooperation among all institutions involved in child sexual exploitation and abuse cases, and education programmes and awareness campaigns addressing these crimes and Internet safety ..."*<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/gender-equality/new-international-gender-equality-strategy>

<sup>26</sup> UNODC, Lecturer Resources, Personal Cybercrime Module, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/cybercrime/module-12/key-issues/online-child-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse.html>

One of the biggest antidotes, especially in Southeast Asia, is empowering women. Destiny Rescue has been at the forefront of this, offering a range of services for survivors of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Trauma-counselling is a must, but we also offer language classes, life-skills workshops, access to higher education, vocational training, and our team helps find them safe jobs too. These are all practical ways to combat the disadvantages they face as girls and help

shape them into someone who can be successful in their respective country.

Violence against women and girls is a tragic and brutal phenomenon in the world and, sadly, it has only intensified during Covid-19, according to the World Health Organisation.<sup>27</sup>

“Everyone has a role to play,” the organisation says. Destiny Rescue is, and has always been, playing a role.

## b) The adequacy of support services, including legal services, available to affected women and children

### Terms of Reference

b). The adequacy of support services, including legal services, available to affected women and children.

### General Comment

Destiny Rescue provides both residential and community care services for victims we rescue from human trafficking and child sexual exploitation.

In each country of operation, we work with local partners, law enforcement, likeminded NGOs and support services to offer a unique pathway of Freedom for each survivor.

This includes offering Destiny Rescue’s *EMPOWER* trauma resilience training program, a standard of care implemented since 2011, and a vital element of our reintegration program.

*EMPOWER* is a trauma resilience training program created by world-renowned clinical psychologist Dr. Robi Sonderegger. The program helps survivors move toward emotional resilience and begin healing from trauma, and is tailored to their local language and cultural context.



<sup>27</sup> COVID-10 and violence against women, WHO  
<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331699/WHO-SRH-20.04-eng.pdf?ua=1>

## c) The disproportionate impact on women's education and social inclusion created by global disruptions such as COVID, climate change, and the Ukraine-Russia conflict

### Terms of Reference

c). The disproportionate impact on women's education and social inclusion created by global disruptions such as COVID, climate change, and the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

### The Global Pandemic

Child sex trafficking continues to surge. While world governments and the general public focused on several global crises, human traffickers quietly took advantage.

The perfect recipe had its origins in 2020. A [report from the United Nations](#)<sup>28</sup> details how a devastating series of events created an environment for unprecedented growth in child trafficking cases worldwide.

It all started when governments reacted to the spread of Covid-19. Authorities looked away, diverting manpower from fighting sex trafficking to combatting the pandemic.

Schools shut down for weeks at a time, affecting some children more than others—for many, it meant more time idle or online, giving traffickers better access to potential victims. For others, lost time in school meant losing meals or even shelter, creating the desperate conditions upon which traffickers capitalise.

That desperation reached critical levels as government-ordered shutdowns crippled already-fragile economies. While some of us may have been inconvenienced by unavailable goods and services, those in poverty-stricken communities suddenly found themselves unable to afford their next meal.

Desperate to survive, some families turned to their absolute last recourse - allowing a child to endure the unthinkable to keep the rest from starvation.



### Poverty Drives Sexual Exploitation

More often than not, child sex trafficking begins as nothing more than a way to find food. A pre-teen with six siblings and a disabled mother is offered a way to pay for their dinner. Parents trying to scrape together enough money for medical bills are told that if they send their 15-year-old to work at a "bar," she'll be able to provide for the family. The majority of these situations are driven by extreme poverty.

And the pandemic made worldwide poverty much worse. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that the median global gross domestic product (GDP) dropped by 3.9% from 2019 to 2020, the most severe downturn since the Great Depression.<sup>29</sup>

Supply chain woes, combined with government intervention, drove inflation to historic heights. And that inflation has proved persistent: the IMF estimates inflation rose to 6.6% in advanced economies and 9.5% in developing economies in 2022.<sup>30</sup>

The effect on human trafficking and slavery is startling. A recent report estimates that 6.3 million people are in forced commercial sexual exploitation situations.<sup>31</sup> That's 1.5 million higher than it was in 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/HTMSS\\_Thematic\\_Brief\\_on\\_COVID-19.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/HTMSS_Thematic_Brief_on_COVID-19.pdf)

<sup>29/30</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2022/07/26/world-economic-outlook-update-july-2022>

<sup>31</sup> Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage

[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms\\_854733.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_854733.pdf)



At least 3.3 million children are estimated to be in forced labour, and over half of those children are sexually exploited. Experts fear that the number may be much higher due to inconsistent reporting and victims unwilling or unable to report their situation.

Even as economies shrank, internet availability skyrocketed, opening up another avenue for exploitation.



### School Closures During COVID - A Ugandan Case Study

*Uganda's schools were closed for nearly two years, creating ugly, unintended side effects for violence against children.*

For nearly two years, Uganda's school classrooms were empty, dead silent and gathering dust before reopening in January 2022. During this dormant period, children were left unoccupied at home, causing many to fall victim to child exploitation.

Achilles, Destiny Rescue General Manager in Uganda, says the reopening of schools in the country will shield children from online sexual abuse as many had fallen prey to this type of abuse during the lengthy school closure.

#### *The Unexpected Consequences*

Uganda acted immediately when the first cases of Covid-19 were recorded in March 2020. It enforced measures like social distancing, travel restrictions and closing schools for 83 weeks until January 2022 - the world's longest education lockdown, impacting 15 million children.

While these efforts choked the spread of the virus around the country, the school closures had a few unintended side effects. During the school closure, Achilles said some children were sexually abused online because they had free time to browse the internet, given they didn't have class, homework or exams.

*"They are given phones or gadgets to access the internet without any restrictions."* Achilles said.

This is unlike in schools where computers are limited to academic research and smartphones aren't allowed, except in international schools.



Achilles isn't the only one sharing this sentiment. School lockdowns provide seasoned predators with "more opportunities" to meet children online, according to the Global Threat Assessment report by WeProtect Global Alliance<sup>32</sup> - a global network against online child sex abuse.

#### *Dangers in the Real World*

The consequences of the school closure went beyond crimes on the internet. Achilles said "many girls" - whether from high school or college - suffered from "rape, forced marriage and early marriages" during the closure.

<sup>32</sup> Global Threat Assessment 2021, <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/>

According to the Ministry of Health, 25% percent of Ugandan teenagers become pregnant by the age of 19.<sup>33</sup> This is evident by 69 of our survivors in Uganda last year having a baby.

Teen pregnancies don't always fall under the safe category, either. According to the World Health Organization, developing countries bear the burden of 97% of all unsafe abortions. In Africa, the majority (approximately 3 out of 4) of all abortions are unsafe.<sup>34</sup>

What's more, Achilles said, some girls – typically impoverished and from the slums – began selling themselves for sexual exploitation. In 2021, our team found and rescued 429 girls enduring this in exchange for survival requirements, like food, shelter and clothes.

According to the report by WeProtect Global Alliance, 60% of people surveyed in Uganda had noticed a spike in child sex abuse since the start of the country's lockdown.

### *Permanent Damage*

While swinging open school doors again is a step in the right direction, the consequences might be irreversible. Achilles said some girls and survivors lost sight of their academic goals during the closure. *"Many dropped out of school,"* he added.

*"Some of the schoolgirls lost interest and morale towards academics."*

According to an article by the United Kingdom-based London School of Economics,<sup>35</sup> up to 30% of school-aged children in Uganda – roughly five million – will not return to school.

Achilles said the school reopenings should restore interest in education for children across Uganda. *"[They will] live more purposeful and focussed lives because of schools reopening."*

Education plays a vital role in our efforts to help survivors stay free from exploitation. Vocational training or traditional school are important aspects of each child's freedom plan.

### *Where Does Child Sex Trafficking Stand Today?*

Child sexual exploitation and trafficking, in general,

is far more complicated than most people think. While stereotypes of perpetrators may look like the quintessential movie villain, the real villains here are more nebulous: poverty, desperation and the human capability for selfish cruelty. Global catastrophes only make these issues more acute.

Amorphous problems require creative, flexible solutions. Certainly, law enforcement agencies must do their part to prosecute those who drive the "demand." But, even if every child sex buyer were behind bars, the situations that drive many women and girls into trafficking situations would still exist.

Tenacious organisations have begun to address the "supply" half of the problem by rescuing children. However, rescuing a teenage girl from debt slavery isn't enough if she returns to the same hut with an alcoholic single parent and five hungry siblings with no clear path to her next meal.

NGO's from different backgrounds are joining together to create a network that begins with rescuing girls, progresses through intensive trauma counselling and concludes with vocational training to help empower survivors to take control of their destinies.

Organisations in East Africa are canvassing slums for exploited children selling themselves to survive. Once found, agents offer freedom, meet the children's practical needs and enrol them in trauma counselling. Children are then given economic and vocational training to combat the desperation that drove them onto the streets to begin with.

In Latin America, teams of agents partner with law enforcement agencies to build cases against organised trafficking rings, going undercover to gather evidence. Once the police arrest the pimps and free the victims, these organisations connect the survivors to counselling and rehabilitation services in the area.

Efforts in Southeast Asia utilise a hybrid approach, with agents finding children and offering freedom through empowerment programs as well as collaborating with law enforcement teams on large-scale operations.

Such organisations have endeavoured to keep pace with the changing landscape of sex trafficking, developing innovative ways to rescue children and keep them free.

<sup>30/34</sup> World Health Organization, Abortion <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abortion>

<sup>35</sup> [Consequences of a two year lockdown on schools in Uganda LSE](#)

## d) Related matters: sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism

### Terms of Reference

#### d). Any related matters.

### Definitional and Data Issues

The sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism is the exploitation of children for sexual purposes by people who travel locally or internationally to engage in sexual activities with children. “This often involves the use of travel agencies, transport, accommodation and other tourism-related services that facilitate contact with children”.<sup>36</sup>

Destiny Rescue notes that the term “child sex tourism” is broadly used in many quarters and in the literature of earlier periods. However, it is now recommended by international child protection professionals that this term be avoided.<sup>37</sup> One reason is that the term may appear to link the crimes with the entire travel and tourism industry. Another reason is that the term excludes many categories of travelling offenders (e.g., business travellers and military personnel who are not tourists).

The sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism has been an under-reported issue for many years:

*“(the sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism) ... deserves significantly more attention than it has been receiving as a stand-alone concern.”<sup>38</sup>*

However, there are significant difficulties in obtaining accurate data about the extent of the issue in different regions of the world.<sup>39</sup> As a result, it has been challenging to locate accurate contemporary data regarding the extent of the issue in the Asia Pacific region (the region). Some of the best available regional data relates to 1995-2006.<sup>40</sup>

The US Department of State is now taking the creation of demand for the sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism into account as a factor in determining tier placement of countries in its annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report.<sup>41</sup>



<sup>36</sup> UN Special Rapporteur M’jid Report, December 2012, para 12, pg 5.

<sup>37</sup> Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (the Luxembourg Guidelines, 2016), pg. 56.

<sup>38</sup> The Protection Project, January 2007, Foreword.

<sup>39</sup> UN Special Rapporteur M’jid Report, December 2012, para 13, pg. 5.

<sup>40</sup> International Child Sex Tourism, Scope of the Problem and Comparative Case Studies, The Protection Project, The Johns Hopkins University, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, January 2007 (The Protection Project, January 2007).

<sup>41</sup> US Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, The Protection Project, January 2007, Foreword.

### An Issue for Border Protection Agencies

There has been a significant resumption of international air travel by departing Australians into the region. Australia has a positive role to play as a hub to support tourism in the Asia Pacific region.

However:

*“The tourism industry (in the region) impacts children’s lives. Due to economic pull factors of the tourism sector, there is a correlation between child sexual exploitation and tourism.”<sup>42</sup>*

The role of Australian travellers in the exploitation of trafficked children in the sex industry in several ASEAN countries, particularly Thailand and the Philippines, warrants immediate action. This has been the subject of Australian media commentary in the past:



Destiny Rescue notes the submission from the US Parliamentary Task Force on Trafficking calling for Australia to take action to deal with the ‘demand side of voluntourism’.<sup>43</sup>

### Proposed Action

In light of the concerning ASEAN statistics cited earlier and the specific recommendations from the then UN Special Rapporteur, the UNODC and the US Parliamentary Task Force, Destiny Rescue believes that Australia has an obligation to continue to conduct awareness-raising campaigns directed at departing travellers bound for ASEAN countries. The focus of these campaigns should be to counter the sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism.

This is one very practical way that Australia can support responsible travel and tourism.

Destiny Rescue’s **Pre-Budget Submission 2023-24** recommended funding for a ‘Safe Children, Safe Traveller’ campaign directed at departing Australians travelling to Thailand and other ASEAN countries.

Destiny Rescue wishes to collaborate with Australian law enforcement agencies in relation to the implementation of any such awareness raising campaign.



### Conclusion

One positive thing to come out of the last few years is our capacity to talk about complex problems. Socio-economic divisions and political disagreements take a back seat when we talk about the ending of sexual exploitation and the freedom of children. Raising awareness about this issue is a starting point.

Stigmatising any form of exploitation helps drive perpetrators back into the shadows. Celebrating the stories of [survivors](#) empowers them to transition from victim to conqueror.

<sup>42</sup> World Vision - <https://www.wvi.org/asiapacific/childsafetourism>

<sup>43</sup> Submission 15, US Parliamentary Taskforce on Human Trafficking ([https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign\\_Affairs\\_Defence\\_and\\_Trade/Womenandchildren/Submissions](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Womenandchildren/Submissions))

# Appendix



## Appendix 1: Destiny Rescue Background

### Overview

Destiny Rescue is an international non-profit organisation whose mission is to rescue children from sexual exploitation and human trafficking and help them stay free. Founded in 2001 and operating for over 20 years, Destiny Rescue International has rescued increasing numbers of victims each year since 2011 – and recently celebrated our 13,000<sup>th</sup> rescue. We are driven by our strategic goal to rescue 100,000 children by 2032.

### Objectives

Our vision is to play a leading role in ending the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children in our lifetime.

### Aims

We aim to continue to expand our work:

- Rescuing individuals enslaved around the world;
- Keeping others from entering the sex trade through border intervention and trafficking awareness counselling;
- Ensuring justice for those who have been wronged; and
- Raising awareness globally.

### Who we Are

With more than 200 staff worldwide, Destiny Rescue operates in Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Nepal, Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, the Dominican Republic and four undisclosed countries in Asia, Central and Latin America.

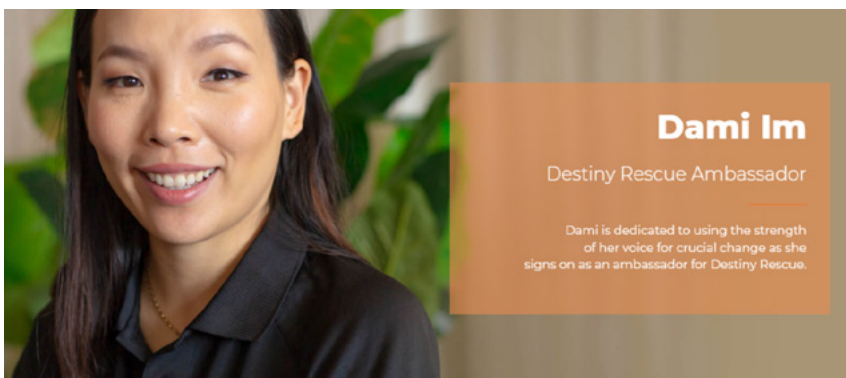


In each nation, we partner with a network of international border forces, local law enforcement, government agencies, NGOs, and other like-minded organisations who add their on-the-ground expertise in local communities and culture.

Focusing solely on the child sex trafficking aspect of modern slavery, we are one of the few organisations internationally to conduct direct rescues via a network of trained rescue agents to support the fight against child sexual exploitation. In addition, we collaborate with prominent NGOs and local law enforcement agencies on large-scale raids.

Destiny Rescue empowers rescued girls to develop agency and remain free through its Aftercare Programs and on-the-ground partners. Survivors are supported to become community leaders, journeying with the next generation of girls to ensure they are never again sold or kidnapped to be sexually exploited (including in the context of travel and tourism).

A summary of our international activities in 2022 can be found in *Appendix 2: Impact Report for 2022*.



## Our Structure

The international scope of our work and worldwide partnerships requires that Destiny Rescue has a multinational organisational structure that gives us the ability to operate more effectively around the world.

Destiny Rescue International<sup>44</sup> is the central operating arm, providing support and logistics for rescues, program management, new pilots, and learning and evaluation.

Destiny Rescue Limited (Australia)<sup>45</sup>, Destiny Rescue USA<sup>46</sup> and Child Rescue New Zealand<sup>47</sup> each provide essential strategic support for different regions of the world, and also assist with fundraising, strategic partnerships, and marketing and communications in their respective nations.

## Destiny Rescue Australia

Destiny Rescue Limited (referred to as Destiny Rescue Australia) is made up of a team of 30 Australian-based staff. Destiny Rescue Limited is a registered charity in Australia.<sup>48</sup> The Australian Board is composed of six dedicated professionals with international leadership expertise in the NGO and corporate sectors, finance, business development and human resources.<sup>49</sup>

Destiny Rescue Australia is a member of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and adheres to the ACFID Code of Conduct, which defines minimum standards of governance, management and accountability of development for non-government organisations (NGOs).

Destiny Rescue Australia acknowledges the Australian Government's *Guidelines for NGOs: Working with trafficked people* (Third Edition, 2015).<sup>50</sup>

For further information, see the Destiny Rescue Australia *Annual Report for 2022 (Appendix 3)*.

## International Partnerships

We have strong on-the-ground partnerships with local governments and like-minded NGOs across our countries of operation. For example, across our ASEAN countries:

- **Thailand:** Destiny Rescue collaborates with over 45 organisations (Government, non-government and like-minded sectors);
- **Cambodia:** Our work is registered and conducted in partnership with government authorities. Maintaining a positive relationship is key to our success and continued work, in line with Cambodia's main anti-trafficking law (*Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation*); and
- **The Philippines:** Our relationship with the anti-trafficking authorities in the Philippines is strong and includes the Philippines National Police (PNP), the Philippines National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the National Government Agency, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE).

<sup>44</sup> Destiny Rescue International, PO Box 25684 Fort Wayne, IN 46825 | Tax-Exempt since May 2015; EIN: 47-2864435; [www.destinyrescue.org](http://www.destinyrescue.org)

<sup>45</sup> Destiny Rescue Limited is a company limited by guarantee incorporated under the *Corporations Act*.

<sup>46</sup> [destinyrescue.org](http://destinyrescue.org); Non-profit organization in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Address: 10339 Dawsons Creek Blvd suite c, Fort Wayne, IN 46825, United States.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.childrescue.org.nz> Child Rescue Charitable Trust registration number: CC 50592; Child Rescue Charitable Aid Trust registration number: CC 50751

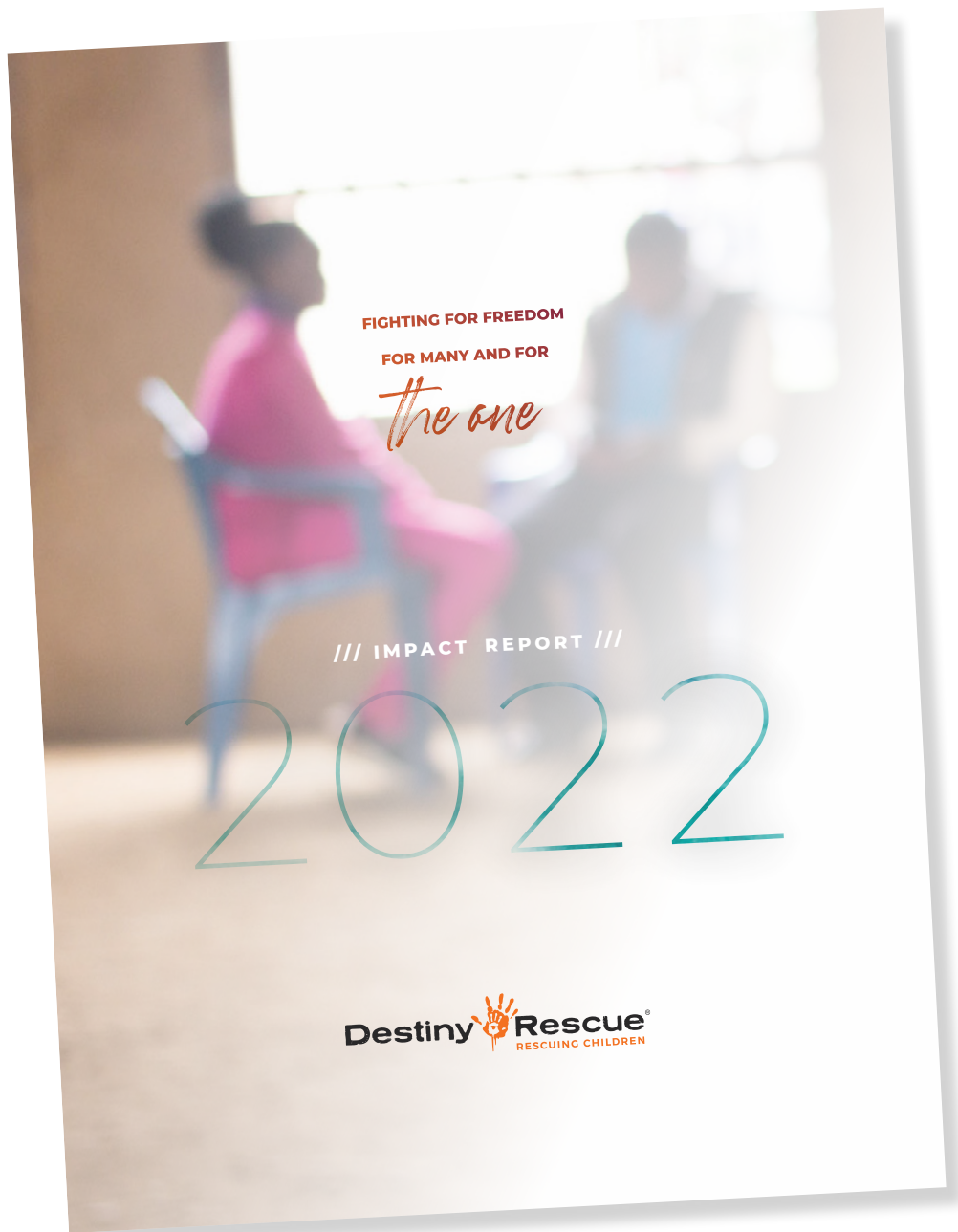
<sup>48</sup> Registered charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) – ABN: 16 394 284 169

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.destinyrescue.org.au/board-and-team/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/...ing-with-traffickedpeople.pdf>

## Appendix 2: 2022 Impact Report

[https://www.destinyrescue.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/08/Impact\\_Report\\_2022\\_edited\\_AUS.pdf](https://www.destinyrescue.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/08/Impact_Report_2022_edited_AUS.pdf)





### Appendix 3:

## 2022 Annual Report - Destiny Rescue Australia

[https://www.destinyrescue.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/06/Annual-Report-2022\\_web.pdf](https://www.destinyrescue.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/06/Annual-Report-2022_web.pdf)





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