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

Host – introduction
The Australian Federal Police is Australia's national policing agency. It's aim? To defend and protect Australia and Australia's future from domestic and global security threats. The AFP works with Australian, regional and global partners to keep Australia and our region safe. In Australia, the AFP leads the fight against human trafficking and modern slavery. In 2024-25 the AFP received 420 reports of human trafficking related offences – 42 of these reports related to forced labour, 22 related to domestic servitude and 12 related to slavery. These are the real stories of the AFP. Everyday people doing legendary work.

Please be advised that this episode contains details listeners may find distressing, listener discretion is advised.

Host
When a severely ill woman was rushed to a Melbourne hospital, hours from death, the medical staff were more concerned with saving her than finding out who she was. Weeks later, a worried family in India reported their mother missing. Their plea for help reached a police officer in Melbourne who did a routine welfare check at the home of the couple the woman was working for. She wasn't there and he felt from the start, something wasn't quite right. Then, as detectives began connecting the threads through an investigation known as Operation Cupola, a shocking truth emerged: this woman had been held in domestic slavery for more than eight years.

On the 30th of July 2015, a woman in the Melbourne suburb of Mt Waverley, called for an ambulance. She told the emergency service operator that there was a sick woman at her house, but she was vague about the patient's name and her origin story. When the ambulance arrived at the address, they found a woman in her early 60s who was emaciated, barely conscious, and in need of life-saving medical treatment. For weeks, the hospital battled to get the patient's untreated diabetes under control, and to manage the shocking infections that had occurred as a result of this. The woman spoke no English and had no papers or a Medicare card.

At that time, Rachel Grosdanis was a team leader investigating trafficking and sexual servitude within the Australian Border Force

Rachel Grosdanis
The victim was in hospital and presenting with some serious physical-appearances, completely malnourished, gangrene. They were very concerned about her. She had limited understanding of her situation, her visa status.

Host
For weeks, the woman's medical condition was so dire, the medical team at the hospital worked hard to stabilise her. At first, no connection was made when a family from India reached out about their mother-in-law who they'd lost contact with.

Rachel Grosdanis
The Australian High Commission in New Delhi received community information from family members concerned about the mother-in-law. A friend of a friend had requested that she travel to Australia to assist in the birth of a friend's child, and the visas had been arranged, and she would just essentially assist with helping the mother and domestic duties. They had not had contact from the mother-in-law for quite some time, and so they approached the New Delhi High Commission and requested assistance.

Host
Once the request was passed on, it came under the responsibility of Victoria Police. On the 24th of August 2015, the job landed on the desk of Detective Sergeant Carl Keenan.

Carl Keenan
I was working as a sergeant at the Glen Waverley Police Station in charge of a tasking team, and one day, the station commander came up to me with a a four-page fax document. He said, 'Carl, have a read of this and see what you can do.' It was from the Indian Consulate, and it was from the daughter suggesting that Mum had went to Australia back in 2007 to do some carer responsibilities for some children. And gradually over time, they lost contact with Mum. Mum had stopped contacting them, so they were concerned for her safety. They mentioned she might've been kept as a slave. I had to read it a few times because I'd never come across anything like that before.

Host
The first step for Carl was to confirm the identity and the address of the husband and wife that the woman had come to Australia to work for.

Carl Keenan
I started doing some checks to verify the husband and wife's identity to confirm they did-live at the address provided. That's me doing checks on our systems and VicRoads database, and I was able to identify that they did live at that address. The next step was to make some inquiries with Immigration in relation to the victim to see whether she is in Australia. We need to know whether she's here. We could be looking for somebody that could be in another country already.

Host

Rachel at the Australian Border Force says it is easy for law enforcement to check the visa status of anyone who has come to Australia.

Rachel Grosdanis
The department has a section where we have Victoria Police, AFP, any enforcement agency can contact its 24-hour service to conduct an immigration status check on those non-citizens. And that's where Carl had contacted ISS for a status check on her, and it was then identified that she had been unlawful in the community for eight years.

Host
Once Carl confirmed that the Indian woman was still in the country, the next step was to go around to the address in question where she had been living with a couple and their children to see if he could locate her. When he knocked on the door, the wife answered, and Carl asked her about the woman. She told him she was no longer living at the house.

Carl Keenan
I explained to her that we need to know where she's and make sure she's safe and well. The husband was there as well, and they started giving me a version of events as to where they suspect she might be.

Host
The couple told Carl about how the woman had come to live with them eight years earlier.

Carl Keenan
They paid for the victim's airfare from India to Australia back in 2007. As part of the visa condition, she had to have a return ticket back in 2007, and they were her sponsor for six months. So in my mind I'm starting to think, well, they've got obligations as a sponsor to make sure she's safe, she's well, they know her whereabouts. So that's what's going through my mind at that point in time. They should know a lot more.

Host
The husband and wife were vague about the current whereabouts of the woman. Here's what they told Carl.

Carl Keenan
She lived with them for about six months at the address. And during that six months, they all went to a family wedding in Sydney. And whilst they're up there, they said the victim met another family at the wedding. And soon after they all returned to Melbourne, she left and went with that family, and they collected her from the address. So in my mind, I'm thinking: well, they should know who that family is. If they're her sponsor and they're looking after her and they got responsibility for her. So I asked that question and they couldn't provide any names. No names, no surnames, no first names, which I thought was very unusual. And then they went on to say that their family may have actually lived in Darwin.

Host
Law enforcement officers get a feel for the people they're talking to, and several components of the visit to the couple didn't feel right to Carl.

Carl Keenan
One thing I picked up on, is the responses are very vague. I had the gut feeling they know more, but they're not telling me. So I was starting to plan in my mind what the next steps would be. And while I was doing that, there was another lady sort of walking through the house, an elderly lady. And on first glance it looked at like a possibility. But she was a lot older; she looked like she may have been in her eighties. And this person at the time I think was early sixties. So I asked the wife who that was, and she said it's her elderly mother, that she lived at another address. She was just visiting. And of course being the investigator I am: 'Does she have any identification on her? Can I just confirm who she is?' But she had no identification on her apparently, which I had to make a judgment call the day and decide, and it was probably, it was a decision that I couldn't take lightly but I made the call – even though I had doubts about what they were telling me about the victim, I made the call based on the photograph of the victim and the age that I could see by looking at the person – sixties and eighties and made the call that I was pretty satisfied that that's not the victim. The husband was walking around the house and I thought it's a bit weird why he's not coming over and engaging in the conversation. I actually asked for him to come over and join in the conversation to ask him a few questions because I thought the wife was sort of dominating the conversation and maybe had told him to go away. Once again, another factor that made me think there's just something not right here. They know more. Let's give it time. So I said to both of them, ~~I~~ 'I'll leave my business card. Have a think about what we've discussed today. Something might trigger your memory tomorrow or the next day that might be able to assist me to find this person. And no matter how small or large you think the piece of information might be, please tell me. And yeah, it'll help us.' And that's where that conversation ended. It didn't feel right. They knew more. They knew more.

Host
Over the next few days, Carl tried to find the missing woman through other means, but without a phone, bank account or car licence she was difficult to locate. Four days later, on the 28th of August, Carl returned to talk to the couple again. This time, it was the husband he spoke to first.

Carl Keenan
I spoke to the husband and confirmed that he was the sponsor back in 2007. And the victim came to their house, at the address. They provided her with accommodation and initially she came to look after their children as they were young; I suppose like a carer sort of arrangement. They were from Sri Lanka. And the victim was from India. He met the nephew whilst he was studying in India, and that's how he met the victim through that person. So I thought to myself, well, this is good. We're starting to open the conversation now. He went on to say that he paid for the airfare back in 2007. He collected her from the airport, brought her to the address, and

she lived in the first bedroom. He said, 'It's the first bedroom on the right-hand side of the hallway.' Showed me the bedroom. So I went down there, had a look around. I saw that as an opportunity to see if anything stuck out to me to suggest she's currently still here. She had been here. I couldn't notice anything out of the ordinary. It was just a normal bedroom and everything looked quite normal and clean and neat to me. He went on to say that she was caring for their children. She was cooking. She was cleaning. He said that they were not charging her any rent. They treated her like a mother, and she ate food that they prepared and that she prepared, and that she stayed with them for about four or five months. And he said that she used to receive phone calls at the house while she was there. And he said that she told them that they were relatives that she was speaking to on the phone, but he'd never met them before. He didn't know who they were, but he just going on what she said their relatives. and he said that someone called her; he thinks it might have been one of the relatives and that she'd like to go with them.

Host
While the couple were more expansive on this visit, Carl was still no closer to locating the missing woman. He left his card again and told them to call if they remembered anything else. On the 11th of September, he got a call, but it wasn't from the couple.

Carl Keenan
I received a phone call from a solicitor. He's acting on the behalf of the husband and wife, and said they wanted to apologise to me for not being truthful about the information they provided to the police in relation to the victim. And that the victim was admitted to the Box Hill Hospital on the 30th of July 2015 with a kidney infection and diabetes, and that the husband and wife are happy to assist police.

Host
The call was a surprise, but it did confirm what Carl had suspected all along – that the couple did know where the missing woman was. But just when he thought he had at last located her, when Carl called the Box Hill hospital, they had no record of her being admitted. Neither did any other hospital in the eastern region. Carl rang the couple who said that the paramedics who picked her up must've got her name wrong and that she was in fact at the Box Hill hospital.

Carl Keenan
Spoke to the hospital staff, provided them the first name she gave me and the other surname she gave me, and they didn't have any admissions under that name. So then I said, 'Let's reverse the names. Let's try them all different orders, because sometimes this might happen. . And tried it in a reverse order. Then we got a successful hit. Victim admitted under this name from that address in hospital, Box Hill Hospital.

Host
Once Carl had established that the woman was in the Box Hill hospital, it was time to call Immigration to speak to Rachel.

Rachel Grosdanis
In this case, she came to our attention because Carl had initiated that status check, and he provided her personal details, and we conducted a status check where it was identified that she was an unlawful non-citizen. And we information-shared from that point. So it was information received from the Australian High Commission in New Delhi, Victoria Police status checks, just putting it all together and identifying that actually, we have this individual at Box Hill Hospital. We need to do something about it.

Host
Because of the concern from the woman's family back in India that she might have been treated as a slave by the couple, it was time to call in the AFP. Rachel spoke to Detective Inspector David MacGregor.

Rachel Grosdanis
The relationship with the AFP and Department of Immigration was extremely solid; we had built excellent working relationships. So, essentially Dave received a phone call from me to give him a heads-up and just some background as to what was coming through, so he was prepared.

Host
For David MacGregor at the AFP's Human Trafficking Team, this case would eventually become the first slavery case they would prosecute.

David MacGregor
We first got a call from our counterparts in the Australian Border Force – I think formally at the time, I think they might have been Department of Immigration – and they were investigating a report from the hospital where a lady had been admitted. The woman had been admitted maybe a month before that. So, the Immigration Department were called to go and make this assessment of this person's migration status. And they were quite concerned about a number of the antecedents leading up to that, that made them think that perhaps there'd been some type of abuse or maybe some type of human trafficking type arrangement there. Their team leader, Rachel, phoned me and if she had any concerns or suspicions, there might have been human trafficking, as the Human Trafficking Team in Melbourne, we would then take on the investigation and make the initial inquiries to established some of those issues. So that was the first time I heard about it.

Host
Once the woman's identity was established, the first thing David needed to do was to send two members of his team to go to the hospital to speak with her. To protect the victim's identity, we will refer to her as *Ammachi*, which means grandmother in Tamil.

David MacGregor
We happened to be the Human Trafficking team on afternoon shift, so it was just perfect. They obviously had a chat to Rachel and her team, Luke and Charlotte went down there, tried to have

a conversation with this woman who, again, was convalescing in hospital, couldn't speak any English, appeared to be in still a fairly sort of fragile state and didn't really want to engage with police at all, which is obviously her right. But there just seemed to be a bit of a resistance and she kept making references to, if you want to talk to somebody about why I'm here, you need to talk to this family who I've been staying with. They're the people who you have to talk to. And she'd say things like, I'm not allowed to talk to police, which straightaway is a red flag.

Host
Back in 2015, Charlotte Curnow was a junior member of the AFP and new to the Human Trafficking team. She was on afternoon shift that day.

Charlotte Curnow
Being a junior member at the time, everything was daunting – because you were meeting people who something horrible had happened to them; they were telling you a story about probably the worst day of their life or the worst segment of their life, and they shared it with you. And on top of already feeling responsible as a police officer to investigate things, you felt more responsible because here was a person in front of you that, that you were there to assist through a prosecution process or whatever process it was going to end up being.

Host
By this time, Ammachi had been in hospital for nearly six weeks. When she had arrived by ambulance on the 30th of July, she had extreme hypothermia with a temperature of 28.5°C. She was emaciated and weighed about forty kilograms. Charlotte will never forget walking into Ammachi's hospital room.

Charlotte Curnow
She was sitting in the hospital bed, just sort of tucked up with blankets over her. And she looked very frail, quite unwell. She looked ten years older than the age that we thought we were meeting with, and her feet were sticking up, propped up on the end of the bed, and they were swollen and infected, and I can still remember thinking, *oh, she does not look well*. I don't know what's happened here, but she looked really vulnerable.

Host
Approaching Ammachi in hospital had to be done gently. She was still very ill. At that first interview, Charlotte communicated with her through an interpreter.

Charlotte Curnow
Working in that Human Trafficking team, we made a real effort to present as affable, friendly, as approachable as possible. So we weren't in uniform. We were in casual clothes, looked like a visitor to a hospital. We obviously explained to her we were from police and we would really like to talk to her, but we were trying to put her in a position where she felt as comfortable as possible, not knowing what her prior experiences with police officers may have been. Having come from another country where practices may have been different; I don't know if people would be approached in hospital, so we weren't sure how she would take talking to us, and

whether she'd want to talk to us, full stop. She was really happy to talk to us, but she said, 'I just can't talk about some things without [the wife] present.' And as we chatted a bit more, there was more and more things that she would say, 'Oh, I can't talk about that without the wife present. And that started to become a little bit of an alarm bell for me and my colleague.

Host
In 2007, Ammachi had arrived in Australia on a six-month visa. Even though it was now obvious to the investigators that she had been in the country for eight years, she repeated the six-month story – just like the husband and wife had told Carl when he first visited.

Charlotte Curnow
She spoke really generally to us, and she told us she'd only been in Australia for six months and it was a really generalised: 'I'm just helping with the family,' and that was the extent of it. And then beyond that it was, 'I can't answer this without [the wife] present.' So we are like, 'Why can't you talk about your day to day? What's the problem with telling us about that?' In that she was very comfortable with chatting to us about just general things.

Host
In cases like this, the AFP's first consideration is the safety of Ammachi. With the evasiveness of her responses, Charlotte and her partner were concerned about the husband and wife and their ongoing influence over Ammachi.

Charlotte Curnow
The first visit is the priority is to make sure they're safe. So we have her there in the hospital being cared for and looked after. So we think she's safe. But then she's mentioning that this wife has been coming into the hospital. So we leave with a bit of a concern about this person who she won't talk to us without, is still talking to her in the hospital. And obviously still has potentially an influence of control over her, even while she's in hospital. So that's our main concern as we leave. And then the other priority from that first visit is that she's happy to meet us again and we can try and work out what's going on. Also knowing that she's unwell, we don't want to stay there for hours and hours to try and work out exactly what's happened. We just want to get a snapshot and work out what we need to do next to make sure she's comfortable and safe.

Host
Charlotte called David from the hospital to fill him in on what they'd learnt.

David MacGregor
I said to the guys, 'Look, give her a break. Come back. We'll have a bit of a chat.' I had another chat to Rachel. And by this stage, everyone's sort of going, this is: *there's something not right here*. The doctors in the hospital were saying that the condition that she was admitted in was really quite horrendous, and not something you would normally see in Australia. I suggested that perhaps they go back again and have another chat to her the day after. So everyone went home, had a bit of a sleep on it. We made a few more inquiries. And I sent Luke and Charlotte

back the day after. Rachel as well, agreed that they should go back because they obviously have a process they need to work out. So Rachel agreed to send someone back and one of her team members could speak Tamil. So she went as well. And we thought that might be a good way of breaking down the barriers a little bit. They had a bit of a chat and explained that she was to totally entitled to speak on her own behalf; that we had some questions to ask about why she was there, how she got to the state she was in, and if she wanted to explain anything about the nature of her being in Australia and the types of things she'd been doing – because we couldn't work out anything really up until that point. And then she started to disclose a few things, and through that sort of common language and building that rapport, she started to share a few of the experiences she'd had, which led us very quickly to sort of go, yeah, we do think we are in a situation now where this woman was trafficked and we suspect that she may also have been enslaved. At that point, we only have to develop a level of suspicion, and that allows us then to refer her onto this program of traffic people support the STPP, that's run by Red Cross. And then Red Cross then have money from the government to arrange for a whole bunch of services for the victims. She gets accommodation, support, all that sort of stuff. So that, that sort of kicks in quite early. You don't have to prove anything at that point. You just have to suspect. And that's where we got to at that point.

Host
After speaking with Dave and Immigration, Charlotte and Luke went back to the hospital the following day.

Charlotte Curnow
The following day we came back with two women from immigration who were able to speak some of the language. and she had a conversation with them. And then after that conversation said she was happy for us now to help her and she would tell us what had happened. So when we then came back into the room and the two women from immigration were still in the room, and they said that she'd told them that she'd come out here to work for the wife, and she was supposed to be paid but she had not received any money. And then from then she agreed to have a recorded conversation with us, which we hadn't previously pushed because we didn't want her to feel uncomfortable. And from there, she told us a bit more about the circumstances and how things hadn't turned out how she thought it was going to be. In that recorded conversation, it became very apparent that there was going to be a trafficking offence that needed to be investigated. The specifics, we weren't picking through at the time; we were just getting a general overview of what had happened and it was basically that she'd been here for that eight years and been working and not being paid. And she had obviously been limited in her ability to leave the house, and she didn't have a passport. So all those things fitted the red flags for a trafficking offence.

Host
Members of the Human Trafficking team and officers from the Australian Border Force know that a reluctance to talk might be because victims have been threatened with prison or deportation from those who have held them captive. Rachel says this reluctance to engage with

law enforcement is common, so offering people access to support services can make a huge difference.

Rachel Grosdanis
I think the fact that because she had been unlawful for eight years, it's something that they potentially used against her to make her feel that she would end up in detention prison, worse. We are talking about non-English speaking background; clients who come here and who don't really understand the visa framework. She had no idea what visa she was on. She had no idea how long the visa was valid for, and I believe that in this case, she had an understanding that she was unlawful. And so potentially in her case, she was being threatened with the fact that if you do talk, you could end up in prison – or worse. Often we don't know what threats are being made, but the fact that she was extremely reluctant, and refused to really, really engage for a couple of hours, shows you how serious the threats were and how seriously she took them. She was extremely, extremely fearful of any consequences of participating in any conversations with law enforcement, providing any information on how she'd been living, how she had ended up in hospital, the background to what she was forced to undertake in that home, And what she was made to feel. And what would be the consequences if she was to provide information to anybody.

Host
To alleviate the fears made to anyone under these circumstances, the Australian government has protocols that put the safety and welfare of people first.

Rachel Grosdanis
If you have travelled to Australia and you are an unlawful non-citizen and you have been subjected to sexual servitude, slavery, and you're in a trafficking situation and your visa has expired, then you're not in trouble. We have visa frameworks in place where we can grant you a temporary visa for up to 45 days initially, that potentially can get extended a little bit further. Where it gives the department and the AFP an opportunity to actually have just a chat to you. You do need to be willing to participate in that though. You don't have to; it's voluntary. You can say no. And if you do say no, then there are still other visa options that we can assist you with temporarily to regulate your visa status. But if you do agree to participate, then you will be supported on a Bridging Visa F which is initially up to 45 days, and you'll have lots of assistance from the AFP, Red Cross, other agencies that all assist you during that process. And we just want to regularise your status, so the visa part in your mind is switched off, and you essentially know that you are lawfully in Australia and that the fear of being detained, the fear of being in trouble has been eliminated and we really just do want to help you.

Host
Charlotte saw that once Ammachi felt safe, she started to open up. As part of the process of documenting what she had been subjected to, forensic photographs needed to be taken.

Charlotte Curnow
I'd returned back from that first visit and spoken to Dave about how her feet looked and how she looked. And she'd already been in hospital for a month, so I thought, let's see if we can do a Part 1D forensic procedure just to capture the effects on her body of the medical condition and how she looked. And she was more than willing to go ahead and, do the Part 1D voluntary forensic procedure, which meant I went out to the hospital on that occasion with the forensics officer who was great, and we had the social worker and we signed all the consent forms. And I think she was really enjoying seeing people again and having a chat and another opportunity to tell us about what was happening. And she was really wanting to tell us about all the different things that was happening to her in hospital. So she was like showing me the gown and lifting up and showing me she had a bag and it was really bothering her. So she kept wanting me to look at that and pointing at that while we were doing the procedure. Yeah, I think she just wanted the interaction to show what had happened to her

Host
Ammachi was emaciated when she got to hospital, weighing around 40 kilograms. What Charlotte and the team were seeing mid-September would have been an improvement from her condition on the 30th of July when she was brought in by ambulance.

Charlotte Curnow
The photographs were just her overall, her weight and her feet and her swollen legs and hands, but nothing more specific than that at the time. And then afterwards I also spoke to the hospital who had photographs from when she was first admitted as well. So she obviously would've weighed even less back then. So I think the hospital were able to provide those photographs too.

Host
Piecing together the story of how Ammachi had come to be in hospital, gave the investigators a hint of the brutality she had been subjected to.

David MacGregor
This is obviously I think six weeks before we got involved. She was admitted to hospital, and the evidence shows – this is from the victim's statement, but also corroborated through the Triple O call and the attending ambulances, and then the admitting doctors – she got to a point of such ill health, that one morning she collapsed and became unconscious. And the wife was taking one of her kids to some type of activity, and saw her on the floor, and left the house. Didn't do anything. And then came back several hours later and she was still on the floor and unconscious and very cold. And I can only assume that the wife panicked at that point and made a Triple O call and said, 'You need to send an ambulance here, because I've got a lady in my house who's not responsive. So the ambulance arrived and she had become hypothermic, and some of her organs started to shut down. She might have had some type of septicemia. She was extremely, extremely underweight. She looked from the photos I've seen, skeletal, really quite severely mistreated. A lot of this is evidence to show the state of mind and the awareness of the husband and wife. The call to the ambulance is that there's a woman in the house. We

know her as… it was a false name; it was similar to her name, but it was a false name. She's only been here for a few weeks. She's a friend of a friend of a friend of the family. And we decided to look after her. . Even the ambulance service were like: *well, this doesn't sound right, but okay, we are gonna look after this woman*. And the same, when they admitted to the hospital. It was all admitted under a false name, which is why the hospital was doing all the checks. But yeah, she was in a terrible state. And my understanding is that she was probably less than a day away from dying if she hadn't got that care.

Host
Since the wife was still visiting the hospital, as the story emerged of the couple's treatment of Ammachi, it was important to apply for an intervention order to stop them contacting her.

Charlotte Curnow
The risk for us that we would've had was she's in this really unwell condition. These people had been essentially looking after her and she's here and not well and won't talk to us. And, there's some sort of control thing happening. So it was a risk; we were seeing her health and her ability to talk to us about what was happening, and wanting to prevent any further harm to her. Essentially what we contacted VicPol for, because they're the ones who can apply for it, is an intervention order. Dave would've contacted VicPol, which is great how we can work together, and he would've asked them, we don't want the husband and wife coming to the hospital to visit this woman who's really unwell, and they've let her basically get unwell in their home and we don't want them interacting. So the intervention order prevents contact phone, in person. And at the time, I guess the gravity of the concern was, she was in hospital and she was deferring to the wife for probably medical treatment or asking questions about what was going on. And given we had concerns that the wife wasn't making decisions in her best interest, we needed to stop that communication.

Host
Because these kinds of orders are under the auspices of state police, once again, Detective Senior Sergeant Carl Keenan went around to the house. By this stage, he knew that Ammachi's case was shaping up to be one of human slavery.

Carl Keenan
About two weeks later, we assisted the AFP attending the address and we issued the Personal Safety Intervention orders protecting the victim from no further contact from the husband and wife. We found out about that, the slavery investigation at the time, which was something that I'd never experienced before. When you think of a welfare check, you're thinking from a, I suppose more of a state offence perspective, a murder, manslaughter, accidental death, or even protecting the person from having to return back home because they don't want to go back home; could be as simple as that. So that were the things that were crossing my mind and to hear that there was a slavery investigation underway, it was like a real eye opener, because it's not something that you, from a state police perspective, you have much experience with.

Host

While the police were there serving the protection orders, they also had a search warrant. Ammachi had asked if the police could gather up her belongings. David was happy to oblige.

David MacGregor
She asked the investigators, 'Could you please bring me my things?' Because she said her things are still at the house. So I said, 'Yeah, of course. We'll get those things for you.' So there was a couple bags of clothes. And she said, 'Can you get my teeth for me please?' And I was like, 'What does that mean?' She goes, well all of her teeth had fallen out and she wanted them. And so when we did the search warrant, we looked for the teeth. We never found them. And I asked the wife, 'Where are her teeth?' And she said, 'Oh, they fell out.' She just made this comment: 'Oh, they fell out.' And I'm like, 'Okay, so did you take her to the dentist?' 'Oh, no, we didn't take her to the dentist. She just ate mush after that. It was fine.' That was her attitude. Like there was just absolutely no care. I mean, if I had someone in my house and their teeth fell out, I'd take them to the dentist. You know, I mean, I think most people would take them to the dentist and she just didn't care. She didn't care. And she said it so flippantly that, even then, I don't think she reflected and thought, *oh, maybe I should have taken her to the dentist.* You know, it just never occurred to her.

Host
When the investigators looked into the origin of Ammachi family's concern from India, it came after a particularly troubling phone call with the husband and wife.

David MacGregor
And I think that's really why the letter was sent from India, from her family back through the official channel was asking us to look at her welfare, because the last contact she had with her family, my understanding is she was allowed to make a phone call home every three, four weeks. It was a heavily monitored phone call by either the husband or the wife, where she would just say, 'Yeah, everything's fine. I'm working. This is happening in the family. That last phone call before this, she went into a health crisis, she wasn't making any sense on the phone to the point where her daughter said, 'Are you okay?' And the phone was snatched off her. The wife had said, 'Your mum's not well. You need to send us money so that we can send her home.' And that was effectively the start of that kind of the end story. That's what the family back in India, I think it was the son-in-law who sent the letter. He alleged that she had said, 'You need us to send some money. Your mum's sick or dying and by the way, would you like us sent home in a box or a bag? That's your choice. And then hung up the phone. And then obviously the family's panicked and they've gone to a computer terminal, sent an email, and her response back was pretty brutal. Hence the family being quite panicked in sending the letter.

Host

Once Ammachi was safe with a visa and intervention orders in place, the floodgates opened. She really wanted to tell the AFP officers what she had been through. It was the first spark of a strong fighting spirit that Charlotte saw in her.

Charlotte Curnow
She was really willing to talk. As soon as she'd agreed for that assistance, she then really wanted to talk to everyone about everything that had happened. So my colleagues started the evidence in chief with her, and it had to be done in hospital at the time because she was just too unwell, and we weren't sure how well her recovery was going to go. She just did not look well, and knowing that she'd been even worse upon admittance, it was sort of hard to imagine that she could have been much thinner at the time.

Host
With the intervention orders now in place, the police could begin to get a fuller picture of Ammachi's eight years with the family. Charlotte listened to her story, and Ammachi's long statement was slowly compiled in the hospital. While it's not David's job to hear all of the details of every case at his office, some of the more disturbing elements filtered through to him.

David MacGregor
Invariably, the things like getting hit by a frozen chicken, scalded with boiling water, her teeth falling out; those things do end up getting relayed back and it's quite impactful. And you never forget that sort of stuff when you hear it.

Host
Once Ammachi agreed to accepting help, Charlotte was able to connect her to the Red Cross Support for Trafficked Persons Program.

Charlotte Curnow
I was very junior on the team at the time, so I had come along and done the meeting and we'd done a referral. A big part of that initial meeting is a referral to Red Cross, so it's Red Cross Support for Traffic Persons Program and Red Cross would've then been able to assist with the interpreting and any assistance she required in hospital with administrative side of things. If she needed help filling in forms or that kind of thing. When we met her, we got her agreement for us to pass on her information for then Red Cross to reach out and help her in that way.

Host
Lina Garcia is the senior manager for the anti-trafficking response at the Australian Red Cross.

Lina Garcia
The first thing that we usually do is we try to understand the context of the actual situation of the person. We usually have a discussion with the referrer in this case, for example, AFP, that will help us understand the safety concerns, the immediate needs, and how best to approach that initial conversation with the person that has just been referred, because we do strongly

believe that trust and rapport starts from the first engagement. So we do everything that is in our hands to ensure that the person feels safe, feels welcome, and feels heard.

Host
The Red Cross can provide immediate needs, such as clothing, toiletries, a phone, food, cash, short-term accommodation, or medical care, and prioritise meeting those needs. Once the person is more settled, they assess longer-term needs through individualised case management, tailoring support to whatever the person requires. The beauty of the program is that while some of the referrals come through the AFP, they can also come through other organisations like the Salvation Army so people who need it do not have to engage with law enforcement if they don't want to.

Lina Garcia
Last financial year, for example, we got 152 referrals in total, and a little bit more than half were referrals made by the additional referral pathway. And the other almost half was by the Australian Federal Police. So we have seen an increase in identification and also an increase willingness of people to seek support, and get assistance even if later down the track, they made the decision not to engage in a criminal investigation.

Host
Some people choose just to return home after being caught up in human trafficking.

David MacGregor
We've had other calls where we've gone into houses, people have left; there's evidence of them having been there. They might have escaped, and as they were leaving through Melbourne Airport, they've put their hand up and said, 'Look, I don't want anything to be done about this, but I want to let you know, I was held in that house the last six months. I'm out of here, but I'm just letting you know.'

Host
The success of victim-based crime prosecutions often lies in the strength of the victim's statement and evidence. It is possible to proceed without it, but it is often much harder. If victims choose to stay – like Ammachi, in Operation Cupola – they are supported through the often-lengthy legal process which in Ammachi's case, spanned nearly a decade from start to finish.

While Ammachi's case was the first conviction in Australia for modern slavery, at the Red Cross, Lina has seen the crime type growing over recent years, and the umbrella has broadened.

Lina Garcia
When we talk about modern slavery, we are talking about an umbrella term that includes different types of exploitation that altogether accounts to modern slavery. But we do see a lot of referrals coming of people that have experienced exit trafficking or deceptive recruitment, and domestic servitude like those three, have been steadily increasing in the last couple of

years. Domestic servitude increased significantly in the last financial year. And that could also be because of the start of the additional referral pathway. But when it comes to referrals received by the Australian Federal Police, exit trafficking is one of the ones that have increased.

Host
Exit trafficking is a specific form of human trafficking in which a person is coerced, deceived, or forced to leave the country, usually so the perpetrator can isolate, control, or further exploit them. It is recognised in Australian law as a trafficking offence. Perpetrators may confiscate passports, lie about travel plans, or abandon the victim overseas, sometimes while attempting to cancel their visa to prevent their return.

To hear Lina describe domestic servitude, most of the components happened to Ammachi while she was living with the husband and wife. But Ammachi's case had one major difference which put it in the category of slavery.

Lina Garcia
When we talk about domestic servitude, we are talking about using coercion or threats or force, such as manipulation, control, or violence. So that a person feels they cannot stop working or cannot leave their place of work, the family that they are residing with. So it really involves denying all the personal freedoms as well. So a typical domestic servitude situation would present as a person that is living in a family home that is completely controlled. Sometimes there is use of physical violence. Other times, there is no use of physical violence, but there is use of verbal violence or threats. So the person lives in very detrimental conditions, do not have the freedom to leave the family home. Do not have the freedom to say no, or to reject a specific type of duty or task. They are forced to do things even when they do not want to do it. And we have had situations, for example, where people have experienced domestic servitude that have been confined to a specific family home, to the point that they don't even know where they are. They have never been out of the home by themselves. They don't have a phone. They don't have their own money. They are fully dependent on the people that they live with. They depend on them for accommodation, for food, for transport. Their medical needs are usually not met. They don't have communication with their family members, or the communication is very controlled. If they go out, they are escorted. So that is the type of domestic servitude that we see. And it's the type of domestic servitude that the majority of people think that does not happen in Australia.

Host
The difference between domestic servitude and slavery is about ownership; in slavery, the person is treated like property and coercion is replaced by total control.

For Ammachi at the centre of Operation Cupola, Charlotte says the Red Cross was an invaluable support.

Charlotte Curnow

Red Cross come in and they support the person to feel safe with whatever the circumstances are that were making that particular person feel safe. So obviously here this is a loss of home. She didn't have her identity documents. She didn't know how to ask for help even. She didn't have the language to ask for help. She wouldn't have known where to go, let alone if she could get out the door at the time; everything was expired. So Red Cross come in and would've supported her through basically talking to Immigration, being here legally, being able to access services. She was in hospital at the time, so it would've been talking, helping her support with what she needed for her medical condition. It's really amazing what they can support that particular person. Red Cross do a great job because each victim needs to feel safe enough to then talk to police and go through what can be a really long prosecution process, as you've seen with this one. She had to be here in Australia, provide her statement, and then she had to be well enough to come to court for the committal and review her statement before that. And then she had to be well enough to come to court again for the trial. Even just going to court and going through and answering about these things that have happened to her, would've been really big, really taxing.

Host
But Ammachi was determined to have her case heard. Once she was safe and her medical conditions were addressed, she gained strength and became fuelled by a desire to expose what she had been subjected to.

Charlotte Curnow
As soon as she had a chance to talk and she realised she was not happy with what had happened, especially not being paid and her things that were precious to her. All that made her really feel like she didn't want it to happen to somebody else, and it wasn't right. And we were presenting her with an opportunity to say that.

Host
One sad aspect of Ammachi's story – considering how badly it ended – was that in the initial period, she had been welcomed into the family and had taken on a grandmotherly role with the couple's three children.

David MacGregor
From what we could gather and from what she said, I think that the initial period was uncontroversial. Yeah. And she took a role as the grandmother. They called her *Ammachi*, which I think is the Tamil informal term for grandmother, and she was known in the family as *Ammachi*. I think she loved that role; she loved the kids at least. I'm not sure if she ever really loved being a servant to the family, but she certainly loved the children.

Host
From what the AFP investigators could gather, things turned bad when Ammachi became ill with diabetes and found it difficult to perform the tasks required of her. When it came to preparing the case for court, she wasn't required to give the times and dates the abuse began, because it's not a part of the slavery charge.

David MacGregor
We were never required in court to particularise the point at which those abuses started to occur. It's very difficult from the victim's perspective to particularise a lot of the times and dates because she was there for such a long time. And we are we're talking about an eight-year period where she really wasn't allowed out of the house by herself. The evidence that she gave and what we what we were able to corroborate talking to the neighbours and every other bit of evidence we could find said that the furthest she was allowed out of the house by herself was the end of the street where there was a small park, and that was only to supervise the children when they wanted to go and play outside. Other than that, she was with a member of the family the whole time. So while they didn't lock her in the house *per se* in terms of she wasn't chained to the house, she wasn't able to leave because she had no money. She had no one to talk to. She had no set source of communication. She couldn't speak English. She didn't know any of the ways of how Australia operated, because we're talking about a woman who grew up in a very humble part of India. So the access she has to the way that we live our lives just totally an anathema to her. So really that's what we're talking about. So if you can imagine being in that situation – I can't imagine it – being in a house for eight years, how do you know that it was December, four years ago, that this particular event where something happened to me. And we weren't required to prove any of those individual acts of physical violence or abuse assault; if there was a charge of assault we would have to provide that evidence, but we didn't do that to prove as slavery case.

Host
The case progressed to a committal hearing. At the end of the hearing the husband and wife were committed to stand trial on the charge of intentionally possessing a slave between 5 July 2007 and 30 July 2015; and on the charge of intentionally exercising over a slave any of the powers attaching to the right of ownership, namely use.

Ammachi was pleased that the couple would go to trial.

Charlotte Curnow
I think the term she, I think she might have even said we're going from lower court to higher court. I mean, it's pretty complicated, the judicial process and we're trying to explain it through an interpreter. And a committal, you've been questioned in a committal, and it feels all like a trial, but basically saying, 'We're going through this all again.' So to what extent she understood it as now we're going to a higher court, and I think she was just you know yes we're proceeding. And I think that's when we arranged for her to talk to her family. So she was a lot more excited about talking to her family about she'd got through this and this is what happened. And I think she hadn't spoken to them for a long time. So there's a lot of chat about the teeth. The teeth was a big thing – all my teeth have gone. And sort of the forefront of the medical things that were bothering like an ongoing bother to her in day-to-day life, which was her teeth and the catheter.

Host

The reason why the call home took place later was that Ammachi didn't want her extended family to talk her out of the legal process. In her quest for justice, she needed to stay in Australia to see it through.

David MacGregor
Because she'd been a bit concerned about talking to them. She didn't want to be dissuaded in any way. She really wanted to go and see this process through. I think she was worried that they might say, 'Oh look, just come home,' or whatever. She phoned them and I was there when she phoned them. And it was the first time she spoke to extended members of the family for a really long period of time. Like she had that semi-regular conversation with her daughter and her son-in-law. But again, that was under very much surveillance sort of situation. I was there when she had her first conversation with a granddaughter who I think was six, seven years old at that point. And just crying, just tears and people coming on the phone talking to her for the first time in six, seven, eight years. And it's just that loss of life like that, everything that you cherish as a human being, all those little bits of just joy that is just taken from her, you know? That's what the offence is. And I think that's what needs to be maintained to really understand the offence of slavery. Yes, you can quantify the amount of money she should have been paid, and you can come up with a nominal justice system offence. But until you really start to look at all those other things, you are always kind of going back to this commodification aspect. And it's more than just that.

Host
The case went to trial and the husband and wife were both found guilty of slavery charges. Detective Sergeant Daisie Beckensall is the team leader of the Human Trafficking team in Melbourne. When it came to sentencing, the husband and wife received significant penalties.

Daisie Beckensall
The wife got four years imprisonment for possessing a slave and eight years imprisonment for using a slave; and those sentences served concurrently. And the husband received three years imprisonment for possessing a slave and six years imprisonment for using a slave. And again his sentences to be served concurrently.

Host
While justice for Ammachi came with the sentencing of the couple, the fact remained, during her eight years in slavery, she had worked for them for little compensation. In 2016, a Criminal Assets Confiscation Team investigation began.

David MacGregor
There's a part of the AFP which looks at criminal assets and it's often used in big drug jobs or big fraud jobs. I sort of thought at the time, why can't we use it for a slavery matter? Because the family had a comfortable middle-class home in a comfortable middle class Melbourne suburb, which as we all know is worth a bit of money. And my view is they couldn't have kept her as a slave without keeping her in that house. Even if she wasn't physically locked in a room, she was still effectively contained within that house. And that's where her entire confinement

as a slave was there. So, in my view, that is an instrument of the offence. So I applied to our Criminal Assets Confiscation Team.

Host
The Criminal Assets Confiscation Team hadn't had much of an opportunity to seek to confiscate assets following victim-based crime, as much of their work had been undertaken following fraud or drug offences. At the end of the day, the offenders in Operation Cupola had benefitted greatly from their crime, as Ammachi had been required to work without pay for 24 hours a day for eight years.

So what was the eight years worth? In 2023, the Attorney General authorised the payment of $485,000 to Ammachi in compensation for unpaid wages. This Ministerial direction was the first of its kind, with the payment coming from the forfeited proceeds of sale of the husband and wife's restrained property.

David MacGregor
So that's a relatively conservative estimate. That's why they did it, right. They got someone to do all of their washing and cooking and look after their kids for free for eight years. So that's the cost. And they were obviously garnished that amount of money. That's a big disincentive, I think for people to do that if they know they're going to lose that alleged gain. Again, I do struggle talking about it in terms of monetary value because as we've just described, it's so much more than that. But that is the nuts and bolts of it. So if you think you're going to bring someone in and get a free service, you'll lose your house and you'll go to jail. That's what will happen to you.

Host
Two years later, the couple agreed to pay Ammachi pecuniary penalties of $140,000 for the benefits they derived from her enslavement.

David MacGregor
This case has set quite a few precedents legally. Not many properties are taken through assets confiscation for a victim-based crime. In this particular case, we always advocated for any money that we were able to secure as a result of the assets confiscation process should go to the victim so that she has something. Because at the end of the day, you've got someone who's been here for eight years, had all this horrible stuff happen to her. She's still got the rest of her life to live. I mean, she's maybe late 60s, early 70s. She's still hopefully got another ten, twenty years. She's got to be able to sustain herself. So we were very keen to make sure that she got something for this experience. And the whole way that assets confiscation team agreed. And there was, from my understanding, there was never any pushback, but I think what they had to do was apply through our process to allow the money to be diverted to the victim. Normally it just goes to the Commonwealth kind of consolidated revenue, but because of this case and the extreme circumstances, it was agreed that it would go to her.

Host

Operation Cupola showed all the law enforcement personnel who worked it, what slavery was in real terms.

David MacGregor
It's the ownership of a human being. It's the complete commodification of another human where they have really no ability, they have no agency. You've taken all of their agency away. So if you say jump, they say how high. It's irrelevant whether they're paid or not paid. It's about the absolute control of that person to the extent that they have no personal freedoms. That would be the best way I could explain it.

Host
The AFP is keen for people to understand the scope of human trafficking in Australia so that if they see the signs, they can take action. Daisie explains that human trafficking incorporates a wide range of offences.

Daisie Beckensall
Human trafficking is sometimes also called modern slavery, and it's basically an umbrella term that refers to all the human trafficking and slavery, and slavery-like offences. So what I mean by that is that some of the crime types and offences that we're talking about that come under human trafficking can include forced labour, forced marriage, debt bondage, servitude, like domestic servitude or sexual servitude, and deceptive recruiting.

Host
And while Operation Cupola was the first prosecution of a case of slavery in Australia, other crimes under the human trafficking umbrella are more common.

Daisie Beckensall
In the last financial year, 24-25, the AFP received 420 reports in relation to human trafficking with 118 of those being forced marriage and 84 reports of sexual servitude and 75 reports of exit trafficking. So, it is quite prevalent in Australia.

Host
And that's not the worst of it.

Daisie Beckensall
The Australian Institute of Criminology did a study in 2019 and they estimated that for every one victim that's been detected, there's actually four victims that are undetected. So, we know that there's a lot more victims out there in the community that law enforcement don't know about or who haven't come to the attention of law enforcement. And there's lots of reasons why a victim may not want to or they may not know how to report. Some of the victims are from foreign countries. They're not familiar with the laws in Australia. Some of them may be fearful of reporting as well.

Host

And of course, some – like Ammachi in Operation Cupola – are simply not able to report what was happening to them.

Daisie Beckensall
Slavery is actually one of the highest levels of deprivation of human life. And from this case, this is why the husband and wife were charged with slavery like offences, meaning that they exercised full control and power over this particular victim. And so from the testimony of the victim and the things that she was saying about the conditions and the life that she was subjected to by the husband and wife, it met the slavery conditions of having that full total control of all her movements and her life. So this is why the Human Trafficking team charged the husband and wife with those slavery offences

Host
Ammachi's life journey had started in southern India. She had virtually no formal education. By the age of twelve, she was already working, tending to farm animals in the fields and helping with menial tasks on construction sites. She couldn't read or write, and years of low-level employment offered little security. She married young and had four children, but tragedy struck when her husband died early, leaving her to raise the children alone. Financial struggles defined her existence. At one point, she took out a loan to pay for her daughter's wedding, but when she was unable to repay it, she lost the little she had. Ammachi's years in India were dominated by deprivation and relentless struggles. Yet, despite these challenges, she sought opportunity beyond her homeland. She travelled to Australia, determined to earn an income to support herself and her family. So when she was held as a slave and receive very little payment for her labours, it is impossible to calculate what she lost.

Daisie Beckensall
She's missed out on family milestones and experiencing important aspects from her family's life back at home. And we operate on a victim centric, victim-based approach and the level and amount of trauma that the victim has endured and may continue to endure for the rest of her life as a result of the treatment from the husband and wife. Yeah, that's really hard as well.

Host
But Ammachi plucky, joy-filled nature began to return, and Charlotte was lucky to see this side of her.

Charlotte Curnow
Just from meeting her, you know that she was someone that cared about other people, and clearly the amount of time that she'd been there with that family, she developed a relationship with those kids and supported them, and she genuinely cared for them. And she was, she was very that sort of grandmother role. And I heard her when she spoke to her own family; they called her *Ammachi*. And even visiting her after the committal hearing, I remember visiting her in the nursing home and I was heavily pregnant at the time, and she was just so excited. You know it's really nice. It's just yeah, it's very giving for someone to be so happy for you.

Host
In a later trial, the wife received an extra year onto her sentence on a charge of perverting the course of justice. This was because in the lead-up to the trial for slavery offences, she had called Ammachi and spent an hour on the phone attempting to persuade her not to give evidence in court.

It was perhaps fitting that the woman who had shown no remorse for holding another woman captive as a slave for eight years was sentenced to a jail term of the same length. In sentencing, the judge described what the couple had done as having 'a fairly remarkable absence of humanity'.

If you or someone you know is being exploited, help is available. You can call 131 AFP 237 or use the AFP's online form to report information regarding human trafficking.

For information and confidential support, please contact the Australian Red Cross. Call 1800 113 015 or visit redcross.org.au/stpp

Outro
Host
The AFP offers a lifetime of opportunities with more than 200 diverse roles across Australia and the world.

Interested in learning more about how the AFP works to protect Australians against human trafficking and modern slavery and how Charlotte, David, and Daisie, investigated this case? Visit a-f-p-dot-gov-dot-a-u to discover more.

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