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EXCLUSIVE The truth behind your favourite influencer's Dubai holiday: I've tracked down some of the UAE's most depraved sex trafficking rings - here's what these girls aren't telling you

By **CARINA STATHIS, SENIOR FEATURES WRITER, AUSTRALIA**
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Behind Dubai's glamorous and sparkling skyline hides a dark, dangerous secret.

Each year thousands of women are lured to the United Arab Emirates with offers of luxurious holidays, high-paying jobs and A-list yacht parties.

But soon after arriving they find themselves stuck in a web of exploitation.

In some cases, aspiring influencers are duped by fake modelling agencies and then forced into offshore sex parties.

Earlier this year, 20-year-old OnlyFans model Maria Kovalchuk was found seriously injured at the roadside in Dubai. She later claimed she was abused by wealthy Russians after a wild party in a hotel. Her ordeal has sparked public debate on sexual slavery in the UAE.

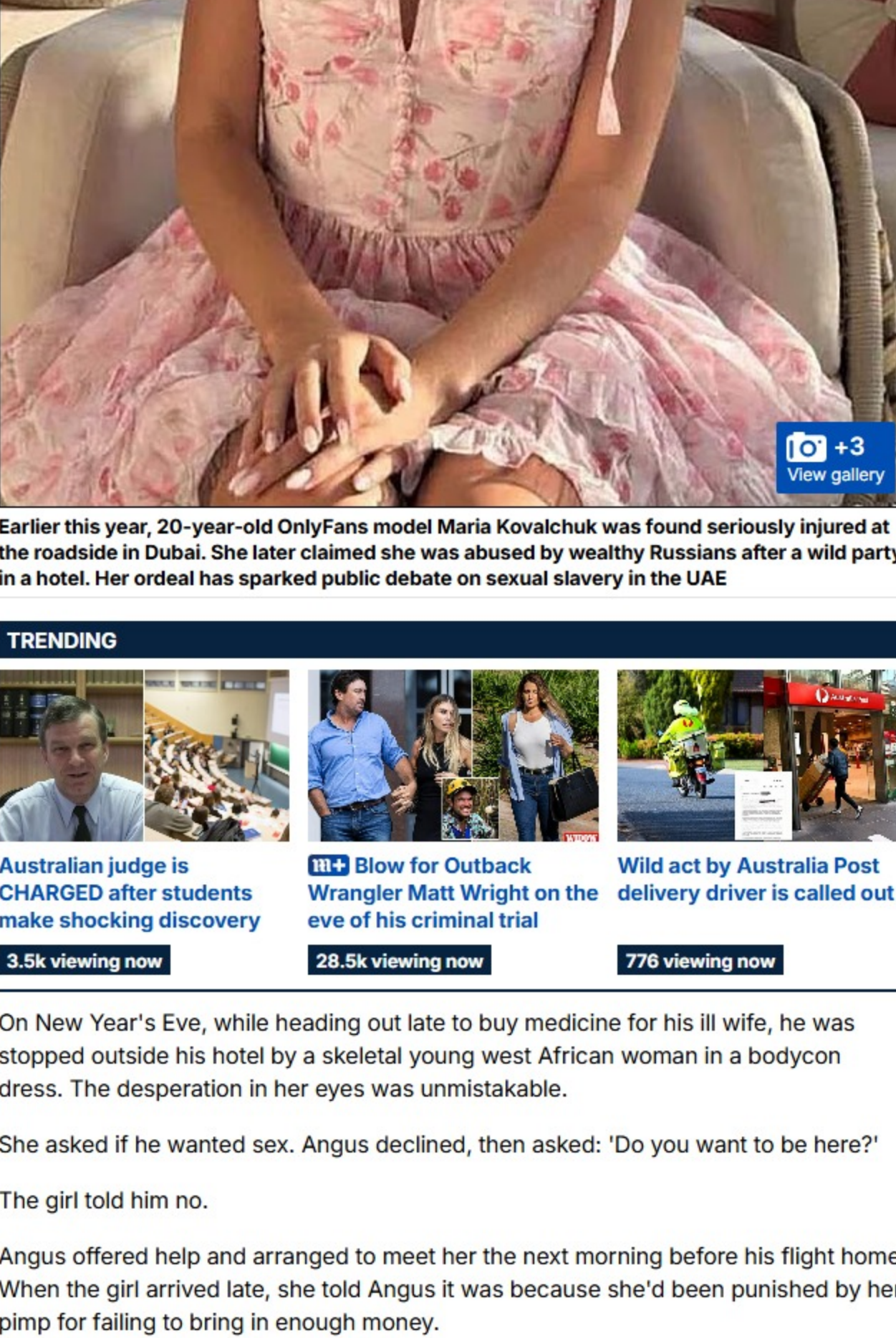
In other cases, poor girls from the developing world are promised jobs that will allow them to provide for their families - only to discover too late that they've been sold into sexual slavery.

All victims share one thing: hope for a better life, new opportunities or even love.

British anti-trafficking campaigner Angus Thomas, founder of the **Hope Education Project**, has rescued up to 20 Nigerian women and girls from Dubai's shadowy recruiters.

He says gullible Western influencers are falling into the same traps as vulnerable African women.

Angus began his anti-trafficking work by chance, during a 48-hour layover in Dubai in 2019.



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On New Year's Eve, while heading out late to buy medicine for his ill wife, he was stopped outside his hotel by a skeletal young west African woman in a bodycon dress. The desperation in her eyes was unmistakable.

She asked if he wanted sex. Angus declined, then asked: 'Do you want to be here?'

The girl told him no.

Angus offered help and arranged to meet her the next morning before his flight home. When the girl arrived late, she told Angus it was because she'd been punished by her pimp for failing to bring in enough money.

'I'd never heard of human trafficking before, or what was really happening in Dubai,' Angus tells the Daily Mail.

Over coffee, he photographed the girl's passport and her scars, gathering evidence for her rescue.

'When I got on the plane and had to leave her behind, I thought to myself, 'I'm the only person on the planet who knows what's going on. I need to take responsibility for this,' Angus says.

For the next year, Angus fought to free the woman from sexual slavery. In the process, he uncovered four more sex trafficking rings.



Behind Dubai's ultra-modern facade lies a web of sexual exploitation

Here, Angus recounts cases of women he has helped escape Dubai's trafficking networks, exposing the cunning methods recruiters use to target the vulnerable.

'FALLING IN LOVE' ONLINE

Grace', from Kenya, was struggling to make ends meet selling cheap footwear at a market in Nairobi when she met a Nigerian man on Facebook.

Lured by his promises of a better life, she accepted a one-way ticket to Dubai, hoping for a fresh start.

According to Angus, 'When she arrived, they enjoyed an unbelievable social life for two weeks. Then he took her to dinner in Fujairah and told her, 'I'm afraid you have to stay here. You're going to work here now.'

Grace's new 'boyfriend' had sold her to the bar owner.

The woman was locked in a tiny room above the restaurant and forced into prostitution for two and a half years. The complex housed a dozen rooms filled with women like her and they were never allowed to leave.

She was forced to see several clients a day and, over time, her ordeal escalated. In her last six months of captivity, she suffered disturbing abuse at the hands of wealthy men.

Fortunately, Grace managed to escape after a client took pity on her. He helped her get her mobile phone back and gave her some money.

She escaped by offering to take out the rubbish one night when the owner was away, then fled and lived under a Dubai bridge.

'Grace was connected with me through a safe house that I'd set up with a Nigerian good Samaritan,' Angus explains.

'When she turned on her phone she was flooded with messages from family asking where she was.

'Eventually when she got home in 2023, of course, she was faced with a gargantuan load of shame. She still has not told her family what happened.'

FALSE PROMISES OF WORK

Chloe', from Lagos, was lured to Dubai with the promise of a job as a chef.

As soon as she landed, her passport was seized and she was taken to Al Ain, a city deep in the desert, on the eastern border with Oman.

'She cooked for about a week then was told that to earn her stay, she would have to sleep with men,' Angus says.

Chloe endured degrading sex work for four years, suffering relentless abuse every day.

Like Grace, she finally managed to escape, and was given Angus's phone number.

'I received WhatsApp calls from this woman for three weeks. She was pleading with me to help her. I told my wife, 'Something feels different about this call,' Angus says.

Angus managed to help Chloe get home safely, and remains in contact with her to this day.

THE CASE OF CHRISTY GOLD

Angus recalls the notorious case of Christy Gold, whose real name is Christiana Jacob Uadiaale.

Gold was a senior figure in an organised trafficking syndicate infamous for luring underage Nigerian girls to Dubai and forcing them into prostitution.

For five years, Gold evaded capture, topping Nigeria's most-wanted list for human trafficking.

In March 2024, she was convicted *in absentia* by a federal high court, although sentencing was postponed until her arrest.

That finally happened in December last year, when she was apprehended at Abuja airport after jetting in from Dubai's permanent for luring vulnerable women while hiding the brutality behind her 'success'.

In reality, victims claim Gold seized their passports and crammed them into a tiny Dubai apartment. In court, three young women testified against her.

But when Gold was sentenced, she was given a choice: five years in prison or an 11million Naira (AU\$11,100 or £5,400) fine. She paid the fine and walked free.

'The message this decision sends to traffickers, to survivors and to the world is devastating,' Angus told the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

'Even after showing contempt for the justice system and her victims, she has now been allowed to walk free, to once again enjoy the proceeds of her crimes.

'This outcome makes a mockery of Nigeria's robust anti-trafficking laws and tarnishes the nation's global standing.'

SEX PARTIES

Angus calls the notorious sex parties a 'horrendous and extreme' example of what happens behind closed doors in Dubai.

'It does happen,' he says. 'The term 'party' is grossly misleading. It's total and utter abuse of a human being by depraved men. There's no party element to it at all.'

However, Angus is sceptical of how common these events are, suggesting that social media exaggerates their prevalence for shock value.

In the last year, there has been a spike in reports of these orgies where women are made to perform vile acts.

Radha Stirling, the founder of Detained in Dubai, previously told the Daily Mail these parties are 'nothing new'.

HOPE FOR CHANGE

Angus says Western influencers are 'being swayed by the same persuasive narrative' as trafficked women in Nigeria.

The main difference, he says, is Western women tend to be seeking fame or a career, rather than simply money.

Angus has created a comprehensive **anti-trafficking education program** to teach primary school children about the dangers.

He teaches social media safety, how to identify red flags in online interactions, and emphasises the importance of having 'three trusted adults' in your life.

'Trust no one - take a step back from every decision because if you get stuck in Dubai, no one is coming to save you,' Angus warns.

British former detective Phil Brewer has also tracked down perpetrators of sex trafficking during his 30-year career.

He says that in the UAE, reporting yourself to local police as a victim of sex trafficking is a risky move - one that can lead to charges for so-called 'moral crimes' such as extramarital sex or prostitution.

Like Angus, Brewer recommends trusting your intuition, advises against travelling alone, and says to remember that if something seems too good to be true, it likely is.

Brewer notes that, as a deeply religious society, Dubai often ignores or denies the extent of its human trafficking problem.

Still, he has been encouraged by the growing awareness of sex slavery in the region and the steps the UAE government is taking to address it.

* Names have been changed

For more information on The Hope Project, [click here](#).

FORMER DETECTIVE REVEALS HOW VICTIMS ARE RECRUITED:

Ex-police officer Phil Brewer details his experience tracking down perpetrators and working with victims of human trafficking.

The 57-year-old now works with the Human Trafficking Foundation.

How are victims typically recruited?

Anyone that ends up in an exploitative situation, it's because there's something vulnerable about them. Exploiters are very good at changing their approach and adapting.

Perpetrators will look for something about you that can be a lever to exploit you. It could be as simple as you're an influencer trying to make a name for yourself.

Is there a specific type of person being targeted for human trafficking?

No, anyone can become a victim of human trafficking.

But it does depend on the type of trafficking and the motive - such as prostitution, slavery, sex slavery, etc.

Is human trafficking as a problem getting better or worse?

I get asked this question a lot. Public awareness has improved and our understanding of what we consider human trafficking has evolved.

Twelve years ago, my teams were dealing with predominantly commercial sex exploitation. Now false labour and criminal exploitation controlled by gangs is number one.

How can women keep themselves safe?

Make sure that people know where you're going to be, arrange specific times to call family/friends, use AirTags, know where the embassies are and never travel alone.

Be cautious of job offers that seem 'too good to be true'.

Be wary of promises that involve 'if you love me' manipulation.

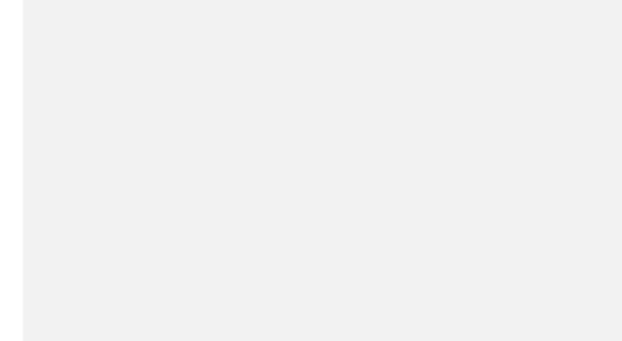
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