

Yamini N. Atmavilas  
Independent

## **Sex Trafficking: International Context and Response**

**Marie Segrave, Sanja Milivojevic, Sharon Pickering; Crime and Crime Prevention; Devon, UK: Willan Publishing; June 2009; 248; GBP£ 55.00; ISBN 978-1-84392-510-1**

Sex trafficking is among the most polarized concerns around the world today, standing as it does, at the nexus of prostitution and immigration, issues that evoke the strongest of moral and protectionist responses in policy makers, civil society and women's movements alike. Dominant approaches have been fragmented and problematic in a number of respects, including slippages between trafficking and prostitution, violence against women (VAW) as the overarching conceptual lens used to look at trafficking, and law enforcement as the predominant programmatic approach. Emphases on the 3Rs (Rescue, Repatriation, Rehabilitation), the authors of this bold new work argue, are seldom grounded in the realities of the trafficked women's lives, and indeed, may run counter to their interests and needs.

Segrave, Milivojevic and Pickering bravely take on the task of centering the experiences of women who are at the receiving end of anti-trafficking efforts while critically reviewing the dominant policy and programmatic approaches in three specific contexts: Australia, a major destination site, and two major source, transit and destination countries, Thailand and Serbia. Their primary argument is that there is a fundamental mismatch between the design of anti-trafficking policy and programmatic interventions in all three contexts, and indeed, across the globe, and the realities of aspirations, journeys and experiences of the women they seek to address and rescue. To seek answers, the authors interviewed state and non-state actors including policy makers, law enforcement officials, representatives of NGOs, as well as women who were trafficked to examine policy design and implementation and the level of involvement of various stakeholders.

They find that firstly, trafficking victims tend to come under state purview only after the act of trafficking. Secondly, state interventions, in most cases, typically follow a linear path from search and rescue operations to the criminal investigation, prosecution, short-term support for the victims, and repatriation, using traditional methods of raids of brothels, and placing women in short-stay rescue homes. Indeed the structure of the book, in tracing these traditional methods, makes it convenient for readers to keep track of different components, and to follow women's experiences as they go through (or are put through, as the case often is) each of these channels for redressal. Thirdly, despite the vast amounts of funding and templates for redressal, the implementation of anti-trafficking interventions was largely ad hoc, arbitrary and subjective; more importantly, the authors find that the criminal justice response and victim support draw on identical gendered and racialized understandings of victimization that ultimately delimit women's options for a secure livelihood and future. What this implies for the women is that the type of treatment they receive at the hands of officials and NGOs depends on how much they embody official understandings of a victim of trafficking. Oftentimes, even services like short-stay shelters in the destination country amount to more of a strategy to facilitate prosecution than anything else.

The research reveals that women who did not fit this mould were treated as criminals. There is also a great deal of mistrust of the police and law enforcement officials among the women, as well as a sense of insecurity at the prospect of incarceration and deportation. Within this framework, some women interviewed by the authors tried to exercise their agency in obtaining more information, or expressing their preferences to officials and NGOs. Some even, to the discomfort of many women's movements, even articulated that being involved in sex work was their choice, or that they consented to the undocumented (or otherwise) movement that brought them to the destination country. Even those who fit the bill of the trafficked victim, and had indeed undergone many difficult and distressing experiences at the hands of trafficker, had found ways to accommodate their condition of exploitation as a means to a better income in the short-term, and were dismayed at the prospect of deportation. Certainly, these findings trouble our ideas of trafficked victims and how we expect them to behave, think about themselves and about their experiences. The authors tell us that despite policy efforts to envision trafficking as a neat process with a beginning, middle, and end, and of the trafficked victims as pure "victims" grateful to be rescued and sent back home, reality is far more murky and complex.

Although current approaches emphasise a “victim-centric” strategy, few countries have provisions that allow trafficked women to remain in destination countries. Interventions aimed at providing them support were often created to support the interests of the state. Many women found that the intertwining of cooperation with criminal investigation and access to shelter and welfare services gave them few real options. Even in Australia, where such a provision exists, the authors found that no woman had been granted permanent residency, and only a handful had received temporary visas. Indeed, women came up against powerful ideologies of women’s “proper place”, “home” and “belonging” that underline policy and practice. The traditional 3R strategy may well help some women; but in the bigger picture, they hardly ever take the women’s own needs and aspirations for livelihoods, security, and mobility into account. Indeed, women today constitute more than half the mobile population within and across international borders. Rather than ensuring women’s safety in their journeys, anti-trafficking efforts such as border controls and a criminal-centered framework may increase women’s vulnerability to insecure transit through trafficking or smuggling. The book poses a veritable challenge to the dominant anti-trafficking framework to take cognizance of this fact. By paying close attention to what the women say about anti-trafficking efforts, the authors posit women’s voices at the heart of the debate as a challenge to policymakers to make anti-trafficking efforts truly centered around women’s experiences, desires and motivations.

The authors provide a solid review of international literature on the issue, including discussions of different UN Covenants and international Protocols on Trafficking, various regional and national policies, as well as country-specific programmes. The book will be valuable to Women’s Studies, Development Studies and International Law classes as well as to individual researchers interested in international law and policy on trafficking and migration in general.