

# THE RUMOUR OF TRAFFICKING

*A poorly addressed women's issue in the early 1980s, 'human trafficking' is now high on the political agenda. Couched in the language of human and migrant rights and the depredations of transnational organised crime, anti-trafficking discourse describes the trafficker as the source and means of migrant exploitation in the global migration economy. Human trafficking, in the words of a G8 ministerial communiqué, is the 'dark side of globalisation'.*

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The number of contemporary victims, however, is unclear. In a 7 March 2003 press release, the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) Deputy Director stated that 'two million women and children were trafficked across borders in 2001'. Patrick Twomey (2000), basing his figures on IOM estimates, counted four million people trafficked and as many as 200 million held in various forms of slavery worldwide. The IOM website currently claims that '700,000 women and children [are] trafficked yearly'.

These fluctuating numbers are a product of the field's loose semantics. Slavery, obviously, is a related problem. Someone 'trafficked', however, is defined not so much by the unlawful use of force (deception, as in the official UN definition, would be more accurate) as by the illicit crossing of borders. Unlawful trespass of national boundaries lies at the heart of any form of trafficking including that of people, which implies a closer link to smuggling than to slavery. Prostitution, too, is frequently associated with trafficking, underscored by constant reference to 'women and children' as victims of trafficking.

## White slavery?

The semantic flexibility of the anti-trafficking discourse merits attention. A telling precursor is the 'white slavery scare' that raged in Britain and America, peaking between 1910 and 1913 and vanishing by 1917 (Doezema 2000). White slavery discourse focussed on prostitution. As abolitionists gained the upper hand over regulationists, white slave traffic took centre-stage, brushing aside the white slave victim on the legislative agenda and in media representation. The campaign's success was extraordinary. The theme of innocent victim/evil trafficker was played out in novels, plays and silent movies, and received extensive coverage in the world press. With public opinion galvanised and organisations devoted to its cause, the campaign culminated in the 1910 Mann Act in America, the 1921 Criminal Law Amendment Bill in Britain and a series of international agreements.

Despite the campaign's fury, contemporary research has since debunked its material foundation. Historical evi-

dence shows that 'the actual number of cases of white slavery... are very few' (Doezema 2000). The scare arose at a time of new transatlantic migrations, which included larger numbers of women from eastern and southern European countries, then faded away after the wave of migration was abruptly terminated by the outbreak of the first world war.

## Knocking on western doors

Parallels to the circumstances surrounding present anti-trafficking discourse are illuminating. In the early 1980s, a renewed discourse on anti-trafficking emerged in Europe, this time centring on Southeast Asian women migrants (in particular from Thailand and the Philippines), foreign sex workers, and trafficked victims in the metropolises and towns of the West. It was generated by Asian feminist activists in both Europe and Asia, whose voices remained faint and marginal in the general public discourse on immigration. At the end of the 1980s, however, a new stream of women migrants, including sex workers, arrived from closer to home: the disintegrating Soviet Union. Women from eastern European countries were soon found in the American and European sex industries. A new anti-trafficking discourse emerged, spurred by vigorous American involvement and a conservative abolitionist agenda.

The trajectory – and power – of anti-trafficking discourse took another turn in the late 1990s, when it was hijacked from its initial context of imported developing world prostitution and reframed in the larger one of illegal immigration and European asylum policy. The turning point can be traced to the 11th IOM Seminar in 1994 devoted to the theme of 'Global Human Trafficking'. In an influential paper, a leading European scholar on international migration introduced a model of the new trinity – trafficking, illegal immigration and organised crime – threatening Europe's borders:

*'Trafficking brings annual incomes to gangster syndicates in the magnitude of a least US\$5-7 billion a year. Other official data on illegal immigration to various countries is by definition not available. However, various estimates can be made. Thus, the number of aliens who in 1993 managed to illegally trespass*

*the borders of Western European states, for the sake of illegal employment or residence, could be estimated to have been in the magnitude of 250,000 to 350,000' (Widgren 1994).*

The political consciousness of Europe in the early 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall was haunted by the new migration frontier on its eastern flank. Following the termination of guest worker recruitment programmes in countries such as the Netherlands and the Federal Republic of Germany in the mid-1970s, asylum applications rose steadily, fuelled increasingly by developing world migrants fleeing the last convulsions of the Cold War in Afghanistan, Iran and the Horn of Africa. In the early 1990s migration jumped exponentially owing to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the wars in its wake. Flights of population previously contained in distant peripheries were now in direct proximity to Europe's borders. Applications for asylum in the European Union jumped ten-fold: from 66,900 in 1983 to 675,460 in 1992, with Germany alone receiving 438,190 applications (UNHCR 2003). This was the context in which anti-trafficking discourse was introduced to European political consciousness at the 11th IOM Seminar.

## Are you the victim or the crime?

Since then, an elaborate discourse encompassing states, international organisations, NGOs and academic institutions has been established in a remarkably short time. Addressing prostitution, illegal immigration, asylum seeking and organised crime, the discourse works in a double-sense – morally and legally – to criminalise cross-border irregularities that contemporary migration research shows are extremely widespread and deeply embedded in formal state and market structures. Individual migrant lives constantly weave their way in and out of intersecting spheres of legality and illegality. Migrants resort to illicit entry – or illicit evasion of exit – often using services provided by the 'immigration industry'.

Far from being hapless victims of evil traffickers, most migrants – including women – are engaged in a constant struggle to retain control of their migration projects. So are states. That both often fail is not because of the evil machinations of human traffickers alone. The imagery of perpetrator and victim in the trafficking discourse, however, lends itself to discursive transference – from

the criminalisation of trafficking to the criminalisation of unwelcome migration. Similarly, with its metaphor of the materiality of the border and the criminality of border trespass, the image of victimhood evoked in trafficking discourse can easily be inscribed onto the personified body of the nation-state. ◀

## References

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