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’.

References

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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 exit – or illicit evasion of exit – often using services provided by the ‘immigration industry’.

Far from being helpless 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 unwilling 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.

**The Rumour of Trafficking**

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 400 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, at least by the mid-1970s, in the aftermath of the Second World War. It was generated by fears that 700,000 women and children were ‘700,000 women and children trafficked across borders in 2001’. As the source

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