

Book Review

Human Trafficking Around the World: Hidden in Plain Sight

by Stephanie Hepburn and Rita J. Simon

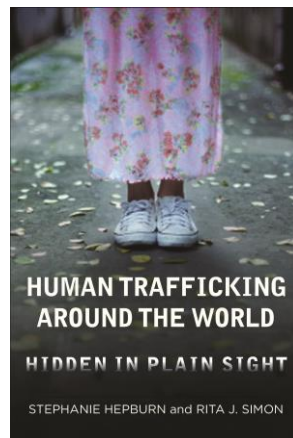
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Reviewed by Dr Susan Robinson



Human trafficking is the illegal trade in buying, selling and transporting of human beings for the purpose of exploiting them as slaves. The most common forms of modern day slavery involve commercial sexual exploitation and labour servitude. This book reports on the findings of an unprecedented, comprehensive study of sex trafficking across twenty four countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Chile, Colombia, France, Germany, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Niger, Poland, Russia, South Africa, Syria, Thailand, The United Arab Emirates, The United Kingdom, and the United States. The authors are journalist Stephanie Hepburn and justice scholar Rita Simon who delve into the statistics and personally acquired qualitative data which they obtained from intimate personal interviews with victims, perpetrators and lobbyists to shed light on the illegal human trafficking practices known to exist in these countries.

The authors confront the reader with the harsh reality of human trafficking; the victims of which include men, women and children. When considering these crimes in the context of social inequality and powerlessness, as the authors do, it is no surprise that while men are sometimes victims, the majority are women and children. Hepburn and Simon point out that more than 12.3 million people are affected by this crime worldwide that reaps a profit of around \$44.3 billion

annually. They report that 43 percent of victims are trafficked for commercial sexual slavery, 32 percent for forced labour and 25 percent for a mixture of both. Between 40 and 50% of trafficked victims are children with 98% of victims trafficked for sexual exploitation are women and children.

The authors tell the background story that gives context to these figures and demonstrates that these victims are often forced into slavery in their own country or may be transported across international borders to be sold into slavery in other countries. Victims are taken by deception, coercion or force and once in the control of the trafficking ring they are controlled by severe deprivation, isolation, abuse and intimidation. Exorbitant fees are placed on such things as recruitment, travel, accommodation and food even when the victim is non-consenting or under the age of consent. They are commonly held in debt bondage and forced to repay these fees while being subjected to multiple other abuses that bind them psychologically to their captors.

Human trafficking is analysed from a global perspective and the complex nature of sexual slavery and forced labour, which are predominantly hidden practices, is highlighted. In addition the authors focus on anti-trafficking efforts and critique the current efforts to impede this form of organised crime. They discuss the obstacles and challenges posed by economic, political, geographical and social impediments and civil unrest.

One of the major underlying problems associated with the continuation of this crime is inequality and gender disparity. By tackling the context in which human trafficking is able to manifest and flourish, Hepburn and Simon tackle the difficult issues of power and control in the societies involved. What is astonishing about this problem is the way in which the immigration laws of several countries provide the conditions for human trafficking to occur. For instance, the work visa system that ties people to a particular employer actually works in the favour of traffickers who withhold passports and provide them to the authorities should a victim dare to try to “escape” or leave to go to another employer. Ironically, when victims are finally liberated it is they, rather than the traffickers who are prosecuted for breaches of visa conditions and crimes such as prostitution. Their status as a victim is often lost within the enforcement of border laws. In addition, they are often not included as trafficking victims in official statistics.

Human Trafficking Around the World: Hidden in Plain Sight is a very readable book that utilises real case examples to illustrate the abuses and back stories of the victims involved in this terrible practice. The authors deal sensitively but assertively with the issue, including the status and treatment of women and children in several of the countries of origin, which they argue allows such crimes to occur in the first place, and certainly allows them to continue.

The book provides numerous insights to help the reader understand the awful injustice of what has become a worldwide trend to blame the victim and to further victimise people liberated from trafficking by prosecuting and deporting them. But there is a glimmer of light on the horizon—Hepburn and Simon highlight the global effort underway to provide safe houses for victims and to change legislation and practices so that victims are no longer blamed and instead perpetrators are made accountable. This book is recommended reading for scholars and students interested in the topic.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Dr Susan Robinson is a criminologist, lecturer and researcher with the Charles Sturt University, School of Policing Studies. She has extensive experience working as a practitioner and manager in the public service in South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, and the United Kingdom in the areas of child protection, juvenile justice and adult corrections. She holds a PhD in sociology (criminology) from Flinders University in South Australia and an Honors Degree in Social Work. Her research interests include: women in policing; female offenders; juvenile offenders; crimes against children; child protection; correctional services; custody; and police leadership.

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