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Book Review: *Sex, Slavery and the Trafficked Woman: Myths and Misconceptions about Trafficking and its Victims*

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***Sex, Slavery and the Trafficked Woman: Myths and Misconceptions about Trafficking and its Victims*, Ramona Vijayarasa, 2015. Ashgate Farnham, England. 279 pages, photographs, none appendix (i.e. “annex”) & index included as it applies to hardcover and/or paperback copy; hardcover \$119.95 (as of 1/16). Hardcover.**

Reviewed by Jennifer A. Fallas¹

A timely text, this book investigates prevailing ideas about trafficking and its victims. Vijayarasa's purpose is to expose and deconstruct sensationalist depictions about this issue, depictions that are crafted and perpetuated by government and NGO agencies, and even by feminist research and writing about this topic. The text begins by explaining that, originally, her own research stemmed from these types of tropes, but by and by evolved to become more keenly aware of the highly structured and gendered understandings of trafficking. The author offers that discussions about trafficking often turn a blind eye to persons who do not fit the stereotypical framework of those who are poor, female, uneducated and unwitting.² Vijayarasa acknowledges that some readers might feel unsettled as a result of her proposition that even well-intentioned efforts and dialogues about this issue tend to rely on hierarchical and generally binary thinking that ends up reinforcing delimiting imaginaries about trafficking victims. She concedes that her research and efforts might not mesh with readers' immediate expectations because of such prevailing and powerful imagery of trafficked persons (7). She states “it is always confronting when ideas and theories you believe to be correct fall apart the deeper you investigate” (xv). Yet, this confrontation illuminates the series of complex and purposeful decision-making processes that contribute to why persons may become trafficked. Through her investigation, Vijayarasa brings much needed balance (in terms of its unique foci on the agency and actions of victims and the factors that influenced how they became trafficked) to this body of research. The author thereby carves out a far more nuanced understanding of the processes at work behind trafficking and people involved in it.

For this text, Vijayarasa, a lawyer and a policy advocate who is a frequent writer for *RH Reality Check*, (a news website devoted to “Reproductive & Sexual Health and Justice” topics) conducts both qualitative and quantitative research in Vietnam, Ukraine, and Ghana.³ Her research brings attention to these areas of the world which have the highest rates of trafficking, but which are underrepresented in literature about trafficking. Her interviews of persons who have been trafficked and/or held in exploitative working conditions, administrators, officials, and advocates, point to the dynamic situations that contribute to trafficking. Her research demonstrates that larger understandings of trafficking overlook the interconnectedness of social, familial, and cultural forces that influence migratory movements.

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² What's more, Vijayarasa skillfully argues that these sorts of depictions also often rely on racialized and nationalistic ideologies that, by definition (and perhaps purposefully, depending on the motives of the aforementioned agencies and groups) ignore persons involved in, exploitative conditions that give rise to, and purposes of trafficking (23).

³ Questionnaires and an overview of researched results are provided in the book's Appendices.

The text is divided into three parts, each of which details and then counters widely-held ideas about trafficking, traffickers, and victims. The first section, “Trafficking Myths and Misconceptions in Context,” explains the ways in which various agencies, academic, and even activists construct inaccurate imageries of victims through language and resulting policies that emphasize *females as victims* and which focus on their (seemingly inevitable) sexual exploitation. Next, “Dispelling the Myths and Misconceptions” takes aim at these same constructions in terms of the assumed natures and identities of persons who are trafficked. Finally, in the third section, “An Alternative Approach to Trafficking,” Vijayarasa sets out an argument that trafficking, if it is reframed as an issue of failed migration (and not simply based on the stereotype of the male aggressor-female victim interaction) would be more clearly understood. From such an understanding, the author believes that more effective policies that *meaningfully* address these issues and that offer tenable and long-lasting results could be developed.

“Trafficking Myths and Misconceptions in Context” lays out that popular media often discusses trafficking but it circulates messages about victims from within a one-dimensional way of thinking. For Vijayarasa, the basis of this problematic conceptualization (and also the difficulties eradicating trafficking) lies within the rhetoric put forth by academics, policy-makers, legislative approaches, and activists. Stemming from her assertion that these entities have undue influence mainstream conceptions of trafficking, Vijayarasa argues that popular, primarily Western, discourses surrounding trafficking and slavery rely on the stereotype of *women as victims*. And couched within these same discourses is the belief that these female victims are, by and large, poor, uneducated, and often sold or kidnapped. In turn, the language used obscures the nuances of decision-making processes and situations that underlie such exploitation. Therefore, the book asserts, the conflation of terms regarding this issue reinforces the public’s binary thinking about trafficking. So then, while the public is becoming increasingly aware of trafficking, its understanding is based on the concepts of *sexual* exploitation and the frequently interchanged terms of *slavery* and *trafficking*. This practice of seeing the victims as having no agency and as virtually *passive* in their exploitation, adds an additional insulting layer to their victimization. Section One thus lays the groundwork and provides working definitions and concepts for the entire text.

The first section establishes that attempts at holding nuanced discussions are undermined from the outset because the prevailing rhetoric clouds the true nature of trafficking. The writer maintains that this sort of approach to thinking about and describing “trafficking neglects more multifaceted economic and social circumstances and fails to capture the complexity of the decisions of potential migrants that might lead to a situation of exploitation, not to mention their [victims’] agency” (6). So then, while *perhaps* well-intentioned, the aforementioned groups can inadvertently end up exacerbating the problems that they purportedly seek to wipe out. Vijayarasa shows that although such entities rightly emphasize the social, political, educational, and economic disenfranchisement of people who may become trafficked, the scope is too narrow a view as it focuses its attention on those who fit historical stereotypes of who is a victim.

The book’s second section, “Dispelling the Myths and Misconceptions,” begins by challenging the prevailing myth of the coerced victim. In it, Vijayarasa dismantles the notion that victims, given the nature of their exploitation, much necessarily have been coerced and/or kidnapped because, at least from within the larger popular mindset, no one would *choose* to become trafficked, especially for the purposes of sexual exploitation. However, her research demonstrates that “examples from the field illustrate that trafficking and trafficking-like experiences commonly begin with a rationally-based, voluntary journey” (73). A journey in which

eventual victims “were seen as exercising some degree of free will in the process of [their] movement[s]” (73). In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 Vijayarasa points that victims often set out on their migrations with misconceptions of the work they sought and where they would obtain it. Destination cities were thought of as being “promised lands” in terms of economic profitability and social mobility. Likewise, misrepresentations of the nature of employment often prompted initial movements. For the author, her interviews with victims pointed that often they had decided to migrate with the intention to better their lives socially (versus solely in terms of economic boons). Furthermore, her research shows that these decisions are frequently based on socio-cultural expectations of them (females *and* males) to assist their families and, perhaps, communities as well. Migration, therefore, is dictated by the cost-gain rationalization; it must be economically feasible for the victim to migrate. What’s more, victims often set out to promote themselves socially to places they understand to have higher standards of living, better pay, and more desirable working conditions (122-123). As a result of social, familial, cultural, and economic forces, the construct of the coerced or kidnapped, uneducated, and/or poor was not representative of those who actually became victims.⁴ She cites that there is a “possibility of an inverse relationship between education levels and greater vulnerability to trafficking” (104).⁵ Here the writer successfully demonstrates that education levels increase the likelihood of migration which, in turn, statistically increases the possibility of becoming trafficked. Similarly, the notion that victims are often if not always the poorest of the poor ignores the fact that migration itself is a costly endeavor. For all of the above reasons the author concludes that traffickers would not need to rely on coercion or violence to obtain victims as there is a ready supply of individuals.

In the book’s final section, “An Alternative Approach to Trafficking,” Vijayarasa advocates that the best way to eradicate trafficking is to start by addressing the policies that currently inform discussions about it. The author writes that most legislation relies on a focus on the traffickers (often as a criminal element in a society) and through this focus, ends up drawing attention away from victims. The author proposes that refocusing by taking the victims’ life situations (as laid out in the previous section) into account *first*, policies will be able to better respond to such incidents. She calls for a revamping of human rights and labor rights policies; policies she maintains would come closer to dismantling the structures of trafficking. Vijayarasa’s strongest point of the book comes in Chapter 9, “The ‘Voluntary’ Victim, Unmet Expectations,” wherein she lays out how she would redefine who is a victim of trafficking. In it, she proposes that central focus be placed on the migrant populations that are overlooked, as laid out in the previous parts of her book. Furthermore, that their autonomy and their decision-making be taken into account yet not used to undercut their victimhood (177). In reinterpreting trafficking in this way,

⁴ In this same section, Vijayarasa offers explanations that attempt to unravel prevailing myths about child victims who are usually understood to be entirely incapable of making decisions and/or as having been “sold” or who are “unwanted” by their families. Wider conceptions typically reflect on the assumed horrific nature of the experiences these children go through. The author details that age of consent is different among various countries. Also, there is growing recognition of children’s evolving capacities to make decisions. She states that policies and ideas that conclude child migration should be largely prohibited in such cases ignore “the complexities whereby such migration may be voluntary, beneficial, valued by children and their parents alike” (84).

⁵ Interestingly, Vijayarasa points out that popular ideas of victims as uneducated might arise from the possibility that educated victims may not report their exploitation out of a sense of shame (i.e. *I should have known better because I am educated*). She takes a similar stance in Chapter 7, “The Female Victim of Trafficking,” where she dismantles gendered notions of and the stigma surrounding victimization. As with those who are educated, the author offers that males too might underreport or choose to not report their victimization because of sexist tropes about manhood and masculinity.

Vijayarasa reframes the discussion as one about human rights. By her own definitions then, human rights would include the right to be free from such exploitative conditions and dynamics (177).

Vijayarasa's identification of trafficking as a human rights issue instigates reading and thinking beyond existing polemics regarding trafficking. In doing so, the author transforms understanding of trafficking and the people involved in it outside of the norm. In acknowledging that her study is limited (though the extensive questionnaires, maps, charts, tables, and bibliography at the end speak otherwise), the author encourages readers (though she does not explicitly say so) to delve further into the *true* causalities behind trafficking and to conduct our own research toward uncovering the networks behind it as well.

As it expands the corpus of research and offers a unique approach to defining trafficking, the volume as a whole will be of interest to scholars in the fields of Women's and Genders Studies, feminist studies, anthropology, global politics, cultural studies, and labor and migration studies.