

Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Human Trafficking*

Article 16

2011

Review: Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective

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Recommended Citation

Greeley, Christopher (2011) "Review: Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*. Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58464/2155-5834.1041>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk/vol2/iss1/16>

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Title: Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective
Author: Louise Shelley (George Mason University)
Published: Cambridge University Press, 2010
ISBN: 978-0-521-11381-6 (Hardback)

Human Trafficking by Louise Shelley is a compelling, well-researched work of scholarship. The author, a professor in the School of Public Policy at George Mason University (Fairfax, Virginia, USA), has been active on the global front of human trafficking for three decades. She serves as director of the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center at George Mason University, which has given her first-hand exposure to this otherwise obscure and marginalized field. Her book reveals this front line level of exquisite detail. Dr. Shelley robustly cites from personal conversations, media releases, governmental (and non-governmental organization) documents and works of academic scholarship.

Human Trafficking is broadly divided into three parts. The first part is "The Rise and Costs of Human Trafficking." This section broadly outlines some of the secular trends of human trafficking. It explores the conditions which allow human trafficking to take place and protect those who traffic in people, as well as some of the threats to those who are trafficked. The author describes these threats in community, political, health and labor domains. Some of these threats are fairly intuitive (risk of HIV and violence) while others are less so (the role trafficking plays in internal geopolitical struggles). While data are calmly presented, the text does not feel cold or empty.

The second part, "The Financial Side of Human Trafficking", was, to this reviewer, the most revealing. The complex web of international trade and crime seemed like something from a Hollywood movie. The author used extensive citations to support the interrelations and similarities between drug traffickers and human traffickers. The symmetry in trade routes, recruitment, internal travel and control of the "product" was unsettling. The author goes into great detail outlining the financial enterprises constructed to support the global human trafficking syndicates. Different geopolitical regions have different "business models"; China is different from the post-Soviet states is different from U.S.-Mexican trade is different from the West African models. The amount of money involved in human trafficking is staggering.

The final section, "Regional Perspectives," takes five specific regional domains and describes them in granular detail. The regions explored are Asia, Eurasia and Eastern Europe, Europe, United States,

and Latin America and Africa. Each of these domains is described from an “on the ground” point of view, and each includes an exploration into why they are different from the other regions. While each section is valuable, I found the “Asian Trafficking” section particularly compelling. The regional differences within Asia exposed a fascinating interface in local history, traditions and cultures.

Human Trafficking by Louise Shelley is a comprehensive compendium which can serve as a great, scholarly introduction to a field in which data and clear information is at a premium. While there are no specific public policy recommendations made in the text, this will inform policy makers by providing data in a field with very little. For those who want to develop a better vocabulary in a complex, volatile and emotive topic, this would serve as an excellent resource.