

Book Review: *Trafficking Women's Human Rights*

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Trafficking Women's Human Rights by Juliette Hua looks at the way the media, government, and academia influence the description of sex trafficking for U.S. consumption. It also addresses the political, social, and cultural strains that underlie the issue. Hua writes that the book is designed to achieve four goals: First, to understand the process through which we come to know something as a human right or its violation. Second, to understand the conditions through which we constitute, circumscribe, and confer subjectivity. Third, to demonstrate how taking for granted certain conditions related to humanity reproduces unequal power dynamics (which once marked the period of European empire-building and the transatlantic slave trade). And finally, the fourth is to illustrate how our understandings of human rights are closely connected to domestic discourses, race relations, and national belonging (p. xiv).

Trafficking Women's Human Rights aims to develop an understanding of how the idea of universal human rights is threatened when put up against cultural relativism. The author specifically addresses the idea that what may be seen as a threat to human rights by one group may be seen as acceptable to another group, due to each group's cultural differences. The struggle comes when attempting to find a balance. The author outlines this by stating, "Universalism needs to be denaturalized and understood as a modern concept that helps structure how we know and understand human right" (p. 2).

Hua critically considers how the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (VTVPA) and its establishment of a trafficked victims “profile” to combat trafficking might impose new forms of violence even while trying to provide relief. For instance, she explores how trafficking victims come to be recognized as such through legal and state mechanisms. In other words, how does one differentiate “sex slaves from prostitutes and trafficking victims from illegal aliens?” (p. 40). Hua indicates that it is the development of this stereotype of trafficking victims that now makes it difficult for said victims to seek asylum/legal recognition as such, particularly if they don’t fit this socially recognized image.

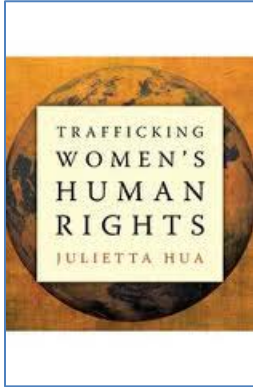
The third point that *Trafficking Women’s Human Rights* considers is the subject of sex trafficking through the eyes of mainstream media publications. Emphasis is placed on a “sex trafficking narrative,” which focuses on the discovery of hidden trafficking activities and it is recanted through images of brothel raids and rescues. Others tell the story of the “ethical john” who (though a participant) feels some sort of remorse for his actions and seeks redemption by attempting to help the victims. This section focuses on the moral dilemma of all parties involved (journalists, “ethical johns,” the police, the reading public) and there is a clearly defined line between the good actors and criminal traffickers (p. 58). These stories are what map out “how and at what cost human rights subjectivity is conferred” (p. 69).

Trafficking Women’s Human Rights also takes a visual look at sex trafficking. Hua states that “it is in the visual realm that the stakes of specifying the particular bodies prone to victimization are made explicit” (p. 71). A portion of the book touches upon the racialization of victims and the meanings attached to cultures that are seen as complicit in trafficking. That is, the cultures the public views as victims are based on the images fed to them by NGOs and government documents. The main point Hua addresses here is how the visual representations of sex trafficking uncover the outlining of international

human rights issues and also make the issue of sex trafficking about domestic discourses of race, gender, sexuality and national belonging.

The final portion of this book looks at history – specifically the transatlantic slave trade – to discuss and help develop an understanding of modern day trafficking and slavery. Hua discusses how governments, NGOs, and scholars use the transatlantic slave trade as a rhetorical strategy to get the public to see similarities between two unaccepted social norms; one modern and one historical. If human trafficking is the new face of the same kind of evils that made the transatlantic slave trade possible, then those who fought to abolish the “old evils” are “poised to lead anti trafficking efforts” (p. 100). Shining light on how this historical issue relates to modern problems can, according to Hua, tell us a lot about our understanding of national belonging and how defining trafficking helps shape the way we view nationality and human rights subjectivity.

The concept of looking at how our cultural beliefs affect how we think about sex slavery is an idea one may not initially consider. Yet Hua illustrates this concept in a way that makes it clear that culture really does play a role in how people think about issues (and this could be applied far beyond the issue of trafficking). She explores how the components of U.S. culture (i.e. the media, the government, and scholarship) map out the problem of sex trafficking for U.S. consumption. And through the exploration of each of these components, we begin to see how culture really does manipulate our views on such issues. It is for this reason that *Trafficking Women’s Human Rights* is of critical importance; not often is the issue of *why* we stand on one side of the fence versus the other explored. When the issue of what influences our opinions is analyzed more deeply, a better understanding can be developed. In this case, Hua challenges us to rethink what we know about sex slavery.

**Book Information**

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By Juliette Hua (2011)

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