

Review of *Hollow Bodies: Institutional Responses to Sex Trafficking in Armenia, Bosnia, and India* by Susan Dewey, Kumarian Press, Sterling VA, 2008.

Reviewed by Tiantian Zheng, State University of New York, SUNY Cortland

Through her ethnographic research as a consultant on Gender and Counter-Trafficking to the International Organization for Migration, author Susan Dewey examines the institutional responses to trafficked women in three societies: Armenia, Bosnia, and India. Dewey examines life stories of victims of trafficking, sex workers, and dancers vis-à-vis the bureaucratic stories of international and local officials. Dewey contends that key to the phenomenon of traffic in women is what she describes as “institutionalization of victimization” which includes poverty, sexism, endemic power inequalities, and corruption. She argues that “bureaucracy and social discrimination consistently hinder counter-trafficking efforts in almost the same ways they directly facilitate the traffic in women” (p. 9).

The book provides a platform where women’s voices can be heard. Dewey stresses that women forced to engage in sex work are both agents and victims. As she points out, they are agents as they actively make choices to improve their lives, but they are also victims as they are coerced by poverty and a lack of opportunities. In the case of topless dancing girls in New York, for instance, they exhibit a great deal of power from their female sexuality and the ability to “exploit men’s money.” However, many have been, and still are, in abusive relationships, and no one among them has alternative employment skills to support themselves or their children. Indeed, all the women portrayed in the book are poor, desperate, and do not have economic alternatives to prostitution.

Dewey points out that the issue of traffic in women cannot be resolved unless we deal with the root causes that include feminization of poverty, class inequality, and labor migration. However, instead of assisting victims of trafficking and addressing the root factors, these three societies of Armenia, Bosnia, and India exhibit “institutional apathy, organizational paralysis, and government corruption” (p. 2). As Dewey observes, none of the counter-trafficking efforts in all these above-mentioned societies offered victims of trafficking opportunities for sustainable and long-term economic support. Rather, as she intimates, the trafficked women are constructed as hollow bodies to be filled up with the assumptions of staff members from organizations at all levels – international, governmental, and non-governmental.

In the book, Dewey debunks the understanding of “debt bondage” in counter-trafficking organizations. As she contends, although traffickers do capitalize on women’s ignorance of their new environment and overcharge for necessities, “debt bondage” does consist of a real debt that women have incurred to the trafficker. Dewey states that many women noted that they were indebted to the person who had paid for travel expenses, clothing, and other objects before they engaged in sex work, and that this debt necessitated a period of repayment. Hence, for the women, it was their due responsibilities to hand over their earnings from client to pimp as a repayment plan which would allow them to earn an income of their own after they cleared the debt.

Dewey is an admirable activist deeply concerned about the plight of her subjects. I deeply respect her compassion for the women in her research and in her activist spirit in attempting to achieve human dignity for us all. The result she produces is a model for feminists and activists around the world seeking to achieve equality and freedom for others.