



## **Human trafficking: Modern day slavery?**

### **Michael Seward**

Welcome to the Open University's Open Politics Podcast on Human Trafficking. I'm Michael Seward from the Open University and I'm joined by Bridget Anderson of Oxford University; Rutvica Andrijasevic of the Open University and Claudia Aradau also of the Open University. The issue of human trafficking is often discussed by governments and by media and others in terms of criminals and trafficked victims, in terms of slavery, and often in terms of the new slavery. The notion of protection is very important in these debates. There seems almost to be a consensus amongst government and the media for example, that these are the appropriate terms to use to describe the debate.

But some researchers and others are challenging aspects of this seeming consensus. Can I ask you first about the notion of victimhood or indeed the word victim in these debates? Why is that problematic? Claudia:

### **Claudia Aradau**

It assumes the idea that you need a third party, a sort of mediator that intervenes in order to save the person who is a victim, and therefore there's no questioning of the actions that this third party engages in, so there's no questioning of what state policies are actually doing and what state interventions are doing in that situation.

### **Michael Seward**

So those interventions are seen as almost automatically protective?

### **Claudia Aradau**

Exactly.

### **Michael Seward**

Bridget?

### **Bridget Anderson**

I think more than that, attention is diverted from the ways in which the state creates vulnerabilities, which is very clear both with migrants, because certain people are not granted protections or are made more vulnerable because of their immigration status. But it's also true I think of citizens. So if you think about people who are working in deregulated sectors where the state has actually pulled back from labour protections and labour enforcements. Again, people are rendered vulnerable because of the state. So to then depict the state as a neutral actor who then intervenes as a protector, I think is deeply problematic.

### **Michael Seward**

Rutvica:

### **Rutvica Andrijasevic**

It's also about politics itself and what we see as political and not when you talk in terms of slavery or victimhood. We don't perceive migrants as political actors. Because the whole issue of slavery, and victimhood, depoliticises the issues that are migration and migrant struggles. So for us is to bring this back into, into politics and conceive migrants themselves as the actors participating in the struggles around the issues such as labour or citizenship for that matter.

### **Michael Seward**

There's also a gender issue here, specifically about the protection of women. Is that something that comes into this notion of victimhood and protection as well, Rutvica?

**Rutvica Andrijasevic**

Gender aspect is really strong in relation to the issue of victimhood, in particular when it comes to trafficking. Because trafficking is seen as a matter of prostitution in the first place, and this leads to the question that is asked again and again and again, whether women have chosen or whether they have been forced into prostitution.

And that's exactly the question we wanna open up, we should be asking in the first place about the migration process and the labour conditions in which these women find themselves.

**Michael Saward**

What government ministers do often say is that they are in a very difficult position in terms of time and resources and they need to make their priorities. And their priority ought to be, and is, specific victims, specific people who are exploited. And there's only ... there isn't really scope for them to, to do more, to take many of these other issues on board. What would your response be to that kind of argument?

**Rutvica Andrijasevic**

It's important that we acknowledge that some people are exploited. However, we also need to move beyond the image and the discourse of victimhood because what it does, it puts the focus on the extraordinary and this is a very small amount of people.

**Bridget Anderson**

On the one hand there's very small numbers of people but their situation is so extreme we have to focus on them. But on the other hand, we hear stories of millions of people being trafficked every year across international borders.

Infamously, the Home Secretary in 2007 in the UK said three quarters of illegal immigrants are trafficked, and yet at that time there were only 32 places for trafficking victims. So there's a huge discrepancy between the rhetoric around trafficking and the actual investment in victim protection by states.

**Claudia Aradau**

This dovetails with a sort of moral injunction to fight human trafficking as a form of modern slavery, or a form of new slavery, which somehow intensifies the question of numbers. So it's not about extensive numbers but it is about intensive suffering.

**Michael Saward**

So if the current measures to protect are inadequate, and we've seen that perhaps there are reasons to question them in various ways, what can be done, what should be done? Bridget?

**Bridget Anderson**

I think that the measures to protect are inadequate. Firstly because of the consequences if one doesn't fall within a very narrow definition. So for example, even the archetypal cases of victims of trafficking, people who have been rescued, women who have been rescued from brothels, and we saw an instance of that in the famous rescue from the Cuddles massage parlour in Birmingham a couple of years back which was intensively trailed by the, by the media, as an example of people being saved from trafficking. Now in that instance I think there were about 14 women who were EU citizens and who were simply released into the community, so were granted no support for the allegedly traumatic experiences that they'd been through.

The six non-EU citizens were taken to police cells, held overnight and then put in an immigration detention centre. That is, they weren't given the support that would be due to victims of rape for example. So in practice, actually the protective mechanisms for even those people who're identified as victims of trafficking, are extremely limited.

**Claudia Aradau**

I guess what you're saying, Bridget, is that we shouldn't kind of stay back on to this idea of the state as the protector. That all these measures are obviously inadequate, and by focusing just on the state as, as the protector, we actually efface and we forget about the ways in which migrants themselves are not actually victims but try to organise and try to change

power relations in very concrete situations, in their labour places, they try to challenge and disrupt and create more equal power relations in a way and conquer their own rights where they work.

So this is not about the moral injunction, it's not about asking somebody to come in as a saviour, somebody to rescue them, but it's about doing things and engaging in different actions and claiming rights.

### **Michael Saward**

It's interesting that we started with the issue of human trafficking and by putting that in question, we brought on to the table as well questions of migration, legal migration and illegal migration and various other categories, so I wonder if we can capture how the notion of human trafficking for example, relates to the notion of migration and immigration?

### **Rutvica Andrijasevic**

I think what it leads us to conclude around the issue of, of human trafficking, is actually that human trafficking is the wrong term and it doesn't serve us well, and that all of this issue should be discussed much better and we will have a better grasp of them if we talk about immigration, about labour issues, about rights and about citizenship.

I think what it also means for us is that when we talk about human trafficking, when we talk about victims, when we talk about organised crime and slavery, it actually hides some of the key issues.

### **Claudia Aradau**

It is important to question exactly this hierarchy of victims and hierarchy of groups that is the result of using the term human trafficking with all the other terms that come together -- victimhood, protection, modern slavery -- and maybe start thinking about the conditions in which people work and live, people who are here, they're simply here and not try to make all these hierarchies and draw all this distinctions.

### **Michael Saward**

If I was to try to summarise some of the key points that we've discussed today, one of them would be about language. How the language, for example, of victimhood, the language of agency, the language of protection and of rescue and so on, is itself a very particular and partial way of looking at this issue and indeed looking at the political world. That this is not an objective language and it needs to be interrogated from various angles as we have done. It seems secondly, and related to that, there is an issue about this system of states, the system of nation states within which we live and government policies that are produced by those states. And it may, surprisingly, be that states, and particular governments, wittingly or unwittingly, contribute to problems around human trafficking and related issues, whereas they are normally seen as those who would mitigate or solve those problems or at least be attempting to do so.

It strikes me that third and finally, we have here a good example of a debate which engages in a particular form of critical social sciences. I would like to thank very much Bridget, Rutvica and Claudia for their debate this afternoon and we hope you enjoy the podcast.

### **Liza Pulman**

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