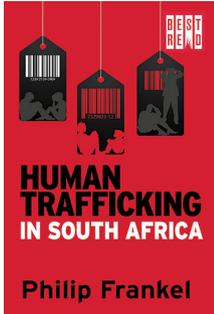




Human trafficking: Misery and myopia in South Africa

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Human trafficking in South Africa



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Frankel's second comprehensive book surveying the landscape of human trafficking and counter-trafficking governance in South Africa, written during the COVID pandemic, offers a considered and nuanced account of this heinous and pervasive phenomenon. Frankel's description of the diverse manifestations of the crime remains dispassionate and analytical throughout. Drawing from local research, international reports, indices, and measured media reports from 2016 onwards, as well as interviews conducted with key stakeholders, academic experts, victims, perpetrators, and civil society, Frankel weaves together a cogent narrative that is accessible to the wider public.

What sets Frankel's work apart is twofold: (1) the inclusion of 'outlier' aspects of trafficking¹ ignored by the vast majority of South African trafficking research; and (2) an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the phenomenon.

The book is divided into seven chapters. Frankel provides a foundation for understanding trafficking in persons from an international perspective in Chapter 1, as well as key concepts such as the nature of social vulnerability, the complexities of the trafficking process, and victim and perpetrator profiles. The controversial nature of trafficking and questions of prevalence are also addressed here. In the next three chapters, Frankel paints with broad brushstrokes how sex trafficking, child trafficking and labour trafficking manifest in the South African context. Frankel successfully offers a critical gaze on the state of human trafficking research, and the disproportionate focus by some researchers and policymakers on sex trafficking (historically to the disadvantage of other forms of trafficking). He further highlights the stark realities of child trafficking – and the often multiple, and concurrent, forms of exploitation children are forced to endure. Children are particularly vulnerable to being exploited for sex, labour, forced marriage, illegal adoption, and their organs. Child labour, also discussed in the chapter on the regional framework, is a particularly significant issue in both South Africa and the surrounding region. Labour trafficking, which is preminent in Africa, and disproportionately affects male victims, who are predominantly exploited in agriculture, mining, and commercial fishing, does not receive as much attention in the South African context.

He illustrates the need to challenge stereotypical understandings of victims and perpetrators. Various criminal syndicates in the more organised forms of trafficking are also unpacked throughout these three chapters. What becomes apparent is that although human trafficking is understood as a clandestine crime, it is more often than not a crime hidden in plain sight. This is reflected in some offender profiles that mirror Hannah Arendt's contention about the "banality of evil"¹ and is particularly true in cases of 'incidental trafficking'. A reoccurring theme throughout the book is the role that corruption and complicity of various state institutions play in the perpetuation of trafficking within South Africa – even more dangerous when apathy and self-interest are intermixed in a counter-trafficking environment plagued by incapacitation of key stakeholders.

Having provided a conceptual understanding of the often-intersecting broad categories of trafficking, and the operational challenges that exist in successfully addressing them, Frankel turns his focus to counter-trafficking in South Africa, and the regional framework in Chapters 5 and 6. These two chapters provide a unique analysis that has not been well addressed in previous research. Frankel offers a comprehensive and analytical critique of counter-trafficking, and the legislative and policy framework within which it occurs, and its coordination structures. Frankel claims that "deficiencies in the PACOTIP create dysfunctionality in its key implementation vehicle...the policy framework is at this point in its existence a very weak tool for catching traffickers" (p. 109).

One of the most damning findings in the book is the penetration of the South African political economy by transnational criminal networks coupled with a relative absence of political will and capacity. This in turn plays out in the apparent reluctance of the criminal justice system to punish perpetrators commensurate with their crimes, and poverty of resources allocated to rehabilitation and reintegration systems for victims (p. 116). Issues that are similarly mirrored across the region.² Chapter 6 then turns to the regional framework and the transnational nature of trafficking. As Frankel succinctly notes, "at a time of globalisation we cannot comprehensively understand trafficking within the Republic without reference to what takes place immediately outside its territory" (p. 124). The regional perspective is often lacking in South African trafficking research and/or strategic initiatives. Frankel discusses the regional threat matrix as witnessed in the six countries comprising the southern African region, and more generally in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). However, he does not survey the East African migration-trafficking nexus originating in Ethiopia and traversing through Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique. This is a minor critique – as the logic for his exploration of trafficking in the region is limited to southern Africa.

One of the book's strengths is its commitment to not only highlight the problems but also to propose tangible solutions. Frankel's ten-point counter-trafficking strategy is rooted in a deep understanding of the South African context, acknowledging the need for comprehensive and collaborative efforts. He advocates for capacity building and strengthening law enforcement, confronting corruption, improving victim support systems, mobilising civil society and a proactive approach to dismantling trafficking networks. Frankel delivers a clarion call to policymakers, civil society, and citizens alike to contribute meaningfully to the fight against human trafficking in South Africa.

References

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2. Ras I, Els W. Southern Africa's security hinges on actioning its organised crime strategy. *ISS Today*. 23 October 2023. Available from: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/southern-africas-security-hinges-on-actioning-its-organised-crime-strategy>

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