

A Labor Approach to Human Trafficking: Twenty Years of International Efforts to Address Human Trafficking

Hila Shamir

Although human trafficking has drawn unprecedented national and international attention and condemnation over the past two decades, the legal instruments developed to combat this phenomenon have thus far proved lacking. In particular, current efforts end up helping an alarmingly small number of individuals out of the multitudes currently understood as falling under the category of trafficked persons, and even in these few cases, the assistance provided is of questionable value. In view of this reality, this article calls for a paradigm shift in anti-trafficking policy: a move away from the currently predominant human rights approach to trafficking and the adoption of a labor approach. The current predominant approach to human trafficking understands the phenomenon as an exceptional transnational crime that results in severe human rights violations. The tools used to address it are therefore criminal law, border control, and some human rights protections for identified victims of trafficking. This article develops an alternative approach – a labor approach to human trafficking, which targets the structure of labor markets prone to severely exploitative labor practices and, as such, offers more effective strategies for combating trafficking.