Politics and Space C

Contested geographies of trafficking borders

Ayushman Bhagat
Brunel University of London, UK

Sallie Yea
Charles Sturt University, Australia

Abstract

This article introduces a special issue on Contested Geographies of Trafficking Borders. This collection broadens the understanding of trafficking borders by examining their materialisation, impacts, and contestation across different spaces and times. Expanding this notion of Trafficking Borders, the articles in this issue explore key questions: Where are trafficking borders found, and how do they manifest? Who creates these borders, and what are their motivations? How do those targeted by trafficking discourse resist them? How can researchers effectively study trafficking borders? Together, these contributions establish a critical agenda for contesting the geographies of trafficking borders.

Keywords

Borders, human trafficking, migration, resistance

Over the past century, anti-trafficking initiatives have largely failed to protect people from exploitation (Bernstein, 2019; Doezema, 2010). This failure can be attributed to several factors, including the ambiguity in the United Nations' legal definition of human trafficking (Chuang, 2014; Gallagher, 2010), the existence of multiple competing categories of exploitation (e.g., forced labour, slavery, servitude, and 'modern slavery') (Murphy and Lazzarino, 2024), an over-reliance on criminal justice approaches, which often prioritise prosecution over survivors' protection and rehabilitation (Milivojevic and Pickering, 2013), Further, states often hesitate to provide adequate support to trafficking survivors due to the financial burden such measures impose (Ditmoreen and Wijers, 2003).

Yet, the trafficking discourse remains influential and continues to expand globally. Despite a substantial body of critical anti-trafficking literature (O'Connell Davidson, 2015), dominant discourse continues to justify raid-and-rescue operations (Kempadoo et al., 2012), the detention and

Corresponding author:
Ayushman Bhagat, Brunel University of London, Kingston Ln, London UB8 3PH, UK.
Email: ayushman.bhagat@brunel.ac.uk

deportation of survivors (Findlay, 2024), and the portrayal of traffickers as racialised, evil outsiders. Simultaneously, it frames survivors as both lacking agency (Andrijasevic, 2007) and opportunistically exploiting a system designed for 'worthy' victims (Cockbain and Bowers, 2019). Furthermore, the discourse continues to bolster pre-emptive protection measures, such as awareness campaigns (Konrad, 2019), migration bans (Bhagat, 2023) whilst placing undue trust in ineffective rehabilitation and reintegration programmes (Shih, 2023).

Collectively, these anti-trafficking measures function as bordering interventions that reinforce restrictive and exclusionary practices. Rather than addressing structural conditions that makes people vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, these measures align with border control agendas that criminalise migration and restrict access to support. For example, in the aftermath of migration related tragedies such as the Essex lorry deaths (BBC, 2019; Gentleman and Trong, 2020), the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh (Ahmed and Hölzl, 2024), or the exploitation of Venezuelan and Nepalese migrant workers in Colombia (Venezuela Investigative Unit, 2023) and Gulf countries (Pattisson, 2016) respectively – most anti-trafficking actors demand stringent bordering measures to prevent such future disasters. This demand for bordering echoes the anti-immigrant sentiments of immigration-phobic countries, where billions in taxpayers' money are channelled into addressing the issue without scrutiny (Bhagat and Quirk, 2024; Dottridge, 2014; Sharapov et al., 2024).

Critical scholars argue that trafficking discourse normalises border control (FitzGerald, 2016; Lee, 2013), border security (Campbell, 2013), border externalisation (Ha, 2024), immigration control (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud, 2007) and other anti-migration initiatives (de Vries et al., 2019). While critical anti-trafficking literature has examined the link between trafficking and borders, much of it focuses on immigration controls designed to prevent non-citizens from entering certain territories (Andrijasevic, 2003; FitzGerald, 2016; Plambech, 2017). Further, this assumes borders to be fixed lines in the sand, reinforcing the idea of borders as rigid and exclusionary devices deployed to prevent trafficking. However, emerging literature from the Global South highlights that multiple forms of bordering practices produced within emigration countries under the pretext of protecting people from trafficking (Ham et al., 2013; Laurie et al., 2015; Pickering and Ham, 2014; Yea, 2022). For example, Laurie et al. (2015) have shown, even those who are legally recognised as victims of trafficking find that borders become part of their everyday experience, underscoring the fact that trafficking is a border producing discourse.

Building on critical geography literature (Blazek et al., 2019; Laurie et al., 2015, 2016; Laurie and Richardson, 2020; McGrath and Watson, 2018; Yea, 2020), critical anti-trafficking literature (Kempadoo et al., 2012; O'Connell Davidson, 2015; Quirk, 2011), critical border studies (Brambilla, 2014; Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012; Salter, 2012), and empirical insights from participatory action research in Nepal (see Bhagat, 2024), Bhagat (2022) conceptualised *trafficking borders* as 'spaces of restriction and negotiation contingently produced, encountered, and escaped along mobility routes' (Bhagat, 2022: 8). Using a case study of emigration bans in Nepal as an anti-trafficking measure (Bhagat, 2023), he offered a conceptualisation of borders that reflects the failure of trafficking discourse to fully manage, control, and contain the mobility, agency and desires of people on the move.

This special issue, *Contested Geographies of Trafficking Borders*, attempts to broaden the understanding of trafficking borders by exploring their materialisation, impacts, and how they are contested across different spaces and times. Expanding the notion of trafficking borders, the articles in this special issue highlights: Where are trafficking borders found, and how do they manifest? Who creates these borders, and what are their motivations? How do those targeted by trafficking discourse resist them? How can researchers effectively study trafficking borders? In doing so, the articles collectively establish an agenda to contest the geographies of trafficking borders.

Geographies of trafficking borders

The articles in this special issue examine spaces where trafficking borders are produced across various countries, including Brazil (Portes Virginio and Ferreira, 2023), the United Kingdom (Waite et al., 2023), Turkey (Lenti and López Marín, 2024), Italy (Anderlini, 2024) and Nepal (Bhagat and Yea, 2024), and in virtual transnational spaces (Mendel and Sharapov, 2024).

Trafficking borders materialise at physical borders through the securitised practices of law enforcement in immigration-phobic countries (Anderlini, 2024; Lenti and López Marín, 2024). They emerge through the actions of anti-trafficking charities and faith-based organisations serving victims and vulnerable individuals (Waite et al., 2023). They are embedded in restrictive policies, societal norms, and surveillance practices in emigration countries, where mobility is constrained under the pretext of protecting citizens from trafficking risks (Bhagat and Yea, 2024). These borders also appear in humanitarian contexts, where aid efforts intersect with border control, and in logistical systems, particularly in militarised humanitarian zones (Portes Virginio and Ferreira, 2023). Furthermore, these borders extend into the virtual realm and blur jurisdictional boundaries through interventions against hypothetical scenarios, as seen with the US FOSTA-SESTA legislation, which restricts online freedoms even beyond national borders (Mendel and Sharapov, 2024).

The articles highlight sites of analysis while revealing the complex, relational dynamics of anti-trafficking measures, migration, and border control. It is therefore critical to examine the role of state policies, the anti-trafficking industry, protectionist infrastructures, societal norms, and technological advancements in materialising these borders.

Agents of trafficking borders

The articles in this special issue also reveal the numerous agents of trafficking borders – government officials, law enforcement, and border security forces; immigration authorities; anti-trafficking NGOs and faith-based organisations; community members, hotel owners, and bus/taxi drivers; as well as users of digital platforms.

The states and their apparatus (such as law enforcement officials, border guards, and immigration authorities) remain key border agents, enacting policies and practices that restrict movement and scrutinise individuals. This is evident in the EU's hotspot approach, where security-driven procedures, as described by Anderlini (2024), overshadow genuine humanitarian concerns, transforming migrants into potential threats rather than individuals in need of protection. However, the border work of trafficking extends far beyond state actors, implicating a range of other agents. For example, faith based organisations and NGOs while aiming to assist victims reinforce bordering practices by navigating restrictive policies prevalent in countries like the UK (Waite et al., 2023). In emigration states such as Nepal, societal norms and anxieties around trafficking, often fuelled by anti-trafficking discourse, can lead families and communities to restrict women's mobility, effectively acting as border agents within the intimate spaces of the home (Bhagat and Yea, 2024). The 'logistics of unfreedom' as explored by Portes Virginio and Ferreira (2023) further highlights how logistical systems controlled by private companies and informal labour intermediaries themselves become mechanisms for bordering. Finally, the virtual realm adds another layer of complexity, with tech companies, policymakers, and those involved in online anti-trafficking efforts contributing to the construction of 'potential borders' that restrict online freedoms based on hypothetical scenarios of harm (Mendel and Sharapov, 2024). Together we highlight that the agents of trafficking borders include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based organisations (FBOs), international bodies, corporations, and individuals, each operating from different positions of power and influence in the construction and enforcement of trafficking borders. These anti-trafficking agents,

with varying levels of power, intentionality, and awareness, are crucial to understanding the distributed nature of border work serving trafficking discourse.

Contesting trafficking borders

The articles in this special issue not only highlight the multiplicity and heterogeneity of trafficking borders and trafficking border agents, they also reveal the diverse ways in which these borders and border work are being (or should be) contested.

For example, targets of anti-trafficking often and actively defy restrictive practices, often refusing to accept immobility as a form of protection and demonstrating their agency in pursuing their right to work and migrate (Bhagat and Yea, 2024; Lenti and López Marín, 2024). They do so by navigating and subverting restrictive spaces, finding alternative routes, and engaging in collective action to demand policy changes, as documented by Bhagat and Yea (2024). This contestation is also evident in the victim care support systems in countries like the United Kingdom. Within these systems, individuals who have experienced exploitation and abuse in their labour relations demonstrate resilience in navigating complex and often hostile bureaucratic processes, challenging the 'culture of disbelief', and advocating for their rights, as highlighted by Waite et al. (2023). Further, the work of Lenti and López Marín (2024) reminds us that challenging societal attitudes towards sex work and recognising the agency of migrant sex workers are essential components of dismantling trafficking borders. By centring the voices and experiences of those directly affected and advocating for their rights and safety, it becomes possible to challenge the dominant narratives that perpetuate vulnerability and exploitation.

Authors in this special issue expose trafficking discourse thereby contesting these borders. For example, by highlighting the securitisation of borders and how humanitarian aid is often used to justify restrictive measures that turn migrants into potential threats rather than individuals in need of protection Anderlini (2024) exposes efforts to re-centre humanitarian principles and advocate for the rights of migrants. Similarly, Portes Virginio and Ferreira (2023) critiques the 'logistics of unfreedom' by highlighting the exploitative labour practices embedded within logistical systems and reveal how the militarisation of humanitarian zones contributes to the trafficking of migrant workers, holding both state and corporate actors accountable for their complicity in perpetuating unfreedom. However, Mendel and Sharapov (2024) emphasise the importance of resisting 'potential borders' in the virtual realm. This pushing back against the overreach of anti-trafficking measures that restrict digital rights based on hypothetical scenarios of harm. Together, we argue that contesting trafficking borders requires an effort that involves challenging restrictive policies, exposing harmful practices, advocating for human rights, and supporting the agency and resilience of those most affected by trafficking.

Problematising trafficking borders

The articles in this special issue collectively demonstrates multiple dimensions of trafficking borders highlighting the diverse agents, institutions, and practices involved in their production and maintenance. These borders are not simply physical lines on a map but are instead dynamic, contested spaces of restriction and negotiation, shaped by a variety of factors and actors. These borders highlights violence embedded in anti-trafficking measures as it excludes, re-routes, immobilises, and incarcerates its objects.

Each of the papers draws on rich, original research, offering insights that draw extensively on the voices of migrant workers, brokers and intermediaries, and those who act to support or to subvert their mobility rights. The authors of this special issue offer range of methodologies to research such borders. For example, Lenti and López Marín (2024) employ ethnographic methods to explore the

experiences of Latin American female migrants in Istanbul; Anderlini (2024) relies on ethnographic fieldwork conducted within and around hotspot facilities in Sicily; Bhagat and Yea (2024), for instance, draw on Participatory Action Research (PAR) conducted in Nepal; Waite et al. (2023) also utilise a qualitative approach in their study of faith-based organisations in the UK's anti-trafficking sector; Portes Virginio and Ferreira (2023) adopt a case study approach, focusing on Venezuelan truck drivers trafficked in Brazil; Mendel and Sharapov (2024) take a more discourse based approach, critiquing the narratives and justifications on anti-trafficking efforts online. By drawing on both qualitative and quantitative methods, the special issue offer valuable insights into ways to research geographies of trafficking borders.

Finally, the special issue raises key questions to shape the future agenda on trafficking borders. How do the diverse actors involved in producing trafficking borders interact, and what power dynamics are at play (Bhagat and Yea, 2024)? How do the tensions between anti-trafficking discourses and security-driven border practices affect migrants' lived experiences (Anderlini, 2024)? How does state-corporate coordination sustain migrant unfreedom within and beyond the workplace (Portes Virginio and Ferreira, 2023)? What are the implications of the relationships between faith, support, and bordering for individuals subject to immigration controls, and for those working in the anti-modern slavery sector (Waite et al., 2023)? How do 'potential borders' in the digital realm affect real-world practices and policies, particularly in anti-trafficking initiatives (Mendel and Sharapov, 2024)? How can we move beyond state-centric definitions of trafficking to better understand migrants' lived experiences (Lenti and López Marín, 2024)? These questions provide a solid foundation for future research to contest trafficking borders.

ORCID iD

Ayushman Bhagat https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8878-4668

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Ayushman Bhagat is a Lecturer in Political Geography, Brunel University of London, London, UK.

Sallie Yea is a Senior Lecturer in Environmental Studies, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW, Australia.