

Prostitution in Nineteenth-century England

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William Ewart Gladstone told the House of Commons in 1857 that he was afraid that there was hardly any country in the world where prostitutes prevailed “to a greater state than our own.”¹ In a society where Victoria and Albert stood as the perfection of morality and examples of sexual repression, there existed a sexual double standard that perpetuated the widespread usage of prostitutes by male Englishmen. During the reign of Queen Victoria, there was an increase in demand for the company of prostitutes, and a large number of women willing to supply their services. An examination of the challenges facing working-class women in the nineteenth century leads one to the main cause for the rise in prostitution: industrialization of England. The anonymity, familial breakdown, poverty, and misogyny of industrialized England led more women to engage in prostitution, while the views of sex held by men within this era permitted, even encouraged, the patronage of their services.

The industrialization of England brought many former agricultural workers into large cities where they had to deal with the anonymity and alienation of working-class occupations and locations. Moreover, they faced a great deal of economic hardship and mistreatment at the hands of their social superiors. Although there are records of high-class prostitutes, known as “pretty horse breakers” since they would ride alongside rich young men within fashionable parks,² most prostitutes in the Victorian period were the “unskilled daughters of the unskilled classes.”³ In studying the factors that led to prostitution, middle-

¹ Trevor Fisher, *Prostitution and the Victorians* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1997), vii.

² Trevor Fisher, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of Late Victorian Britain* (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1995), 8.

³ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980), 15.

class commentators put much emphasis on the family backgrounds of prostitutes. They thought that a broken family would lead to economic hardship that a young woman would be unable to cope with. The historian Judith Walkowitz notes that an “extraordinarily high” number of prostitutes had lost one or both parents, or had had one parent desert the family.⁴ Yet, before assuming that the orphaning or abandonment of a young woman led to a life in the sex trade, it should be noted that the claim of being an orphan was effective in eliciting sympathy from a curious, and authoritative, inquirer. Perhaps if these women had been under the influence of their families they would not have chosen prostitution as an occupation. By breaking free of the pressures and strict control of the normative patriarchal family, a woman of a so-called “broken home” presumably had less emotional attachment to a parental figure and therefore felt freer to break social convention.⁵

Walkowitz challenges the stereotype that these women were “passive victims” of their circumstances, and argues that some sought out prostitution because other options for work were so limited. This assumption is supported by the fact that during the mid-nineteenth century there was increased urbanization that resulted in a “population of impoverished people concentrated in cities competing for what little low-wage work existed.”⁶ Women especially were discriminated against when it came to finding work. The work that women found was often in horrendous conditions due to few labour rights and wage regulations. Along with the increased urbanization came the anonymity of cities, which led to freedom from community pressures. A strict social hierarchy existed within cities with little room for social mobility. To be born into the working class meant a life of eking together enough money to put bread on the table. Therefore, some working class women turned to prostitution because of economic necessity.⁷ Although poverty appears to have been the main factor for a woman’s move into prostitution, most women were not driven to prostitution at

⁴ Ibid., 16 – 17.

⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶ Elizabeth Clement, “Prostitution,” in *The Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. H.G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 213.

⁷ Rachel G. Fuchs, review of *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-century Paris*, by Jill Harsin, *The American Historical Review* 91, no.3 (1986): 677.

the point of actual starvation.⁸ Rather, prostitution was another option for supplying the basic necessities. For most working class women, prostitution was a highly casual and seasonal occupation depending on the financial situation of the woman and the demand that existed for her services. This casual aspect of prostitution can be compared to other legitimate occupations open to the class of women who moved into prostitution, such as factory work or piecework. Prostitution was “linked to male leisure patterns,” like alcohol consumption, and there was a correlation between the trade cycle and the economic rhythms of the customers of the prostitute’s services.⁹

For women frustrated with how little control they had in their lives, prostitution was an attractive option, as “seasoned prostitutes were capable of independent and assertive behaviour rarely found among women of their own social class.”¹⁰ This report, however, should be viewed with a critical eye, as people who were working in the field of “rescuing” prostitutes may have seen these characteristics as a simply way to explain the prevalence of prostitution without having to look at the broader picture of poverty and misogyny. One post-feminist theory that Walkowitz puts forward is that women turned to prostitution because it offered them the option of seizing more power than they would have had if they remained working in factories. The independence of a broken home further enabled many working class women to choose an occupation (prostitution) that offered some sense of power.

Beyond the environmental circumstances, the intrinsic nature of the women themselves played a major role in their involvement in an occupation that resisted societal expectations of women. Rescue workers working with prostitutes in the nineteenth century characterized the women as having a wild impulsive nature, restlessness, and a desire for independence. This was perhaps a reaction to the Cult of Domesticity¹¹ and the strict

⁸ Walkowitz, 19.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹ The Cult of Domesticity was a nineteenth century ideal that viewed gendered differences as innate. Women were restricted to the roles of nurturers, homemakers, and moral vanguards.

restrictions that it placed on women. More women were coming to the forefront of society; women were seeing themselves as integral citizens deserving of the right to vote. These women also sought to expand their economic independence and social influence in one of the few routes available to them: their sexuality. Furthermore, it does not come as a great surprise to any modern reader that woman who followed the 1888 case of *Regina v. Clarence* would be restless within her position in society. In this case, the court ruled that a husband who raped his wife after she refused to have sex with him because he had a venereal infection was not guilty of the crime of rape.¹² In a society so hostile to women, the lure of prostitution offered a sisterhood of women in equal distress¹³ and may have been hard for some women to resist. Moreover, prostitutes were in a unique social position. They were ostracized from society because of their profession,¹⁴ and therefore had to become assertive and independent in order to survive. Middle-class commentators of the time were shocked by the degree to which these women were expected to survive independently at such a young age.¹⁵ Even if the rise in prostitution partly contributed to women seeking to escape the struggles of their gender and social position, those who were attracted to prostitution as a method of asserting their independence may have found themselves in for a surprise. Although prostitution afforded poor women more autonomy than they would have otherwise received and offered them the chance to assert themselves, it was still not a way out of a life of poverty and insecurity. Indeed, there were the additional risks associated with selling one's body illegally, such as physical danger, alcoholism, venereal disease and police harassment.¹⁶

Males who employed prostitutes were also drawn to the city because of industrialization. Many men had to delay marriage due to economic concerns, and therefore turned to the company of prostitutes. A single man who utilized a prostitute's services was

¹² George Robb, "Marriage and Reproduction," in *The Modern History of Sexuality*, ed. H.G. Cocks and Matt Houlbrook (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 90 – 91.

¹³ Walkowitz, 27.

¹⁴ Fuchs, 677.

¹⁵ Walkowitz, 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

not seen as out of place, and doctors would even recommend “sexual release with prostitutes” for unmarried men.¹⁷ Dr. Acton pointed out that one of the most significant causes of prostitution was that the majority of soldiers were prohibited from marrying. Therefore, these men, who were “exposed to circumstances particularly calculated to develop animal instincts,” could not help but demand the services of prostitutes, and towns could not help but comply with this demand.¹⁸

Victorian attitudes were very strict concerning premarital sex, particular towards women. Regulationists, as well as doctors, reinforced a double standard of sexual morality, which justified male access to prostitutes.¹⁹ The view that men needed prostitutes due to their “animal instincts” was an accepted one, similar to the modern notion that “men will be men.” It was also believed that an intrinsic male quality provided legitimate justification for treating other people, such as women or Blacks, like worthless objects. Moreover, marriage did not seem to offer a haven of sexual release for men. Within marriage the ultimate ideal of sex was reproduction, so birth control was frowned upon. This also meant that masturbation and excessive marital sex were seen as aberrant behaviour.²⁰ In fact, there was a general consensus that men should not “impose their animal desires” any more than necessary, which would be once a month for preference, once a week if desperate, and never during the menstruation or pregnancies.²¹ Therefore, there was an imposed celibacy on a husband and wife for roughly six years out of the first twelve years of their marriage. The same doctors who recommended “release” with prostitutes for a single man would attend to a married man who was having passionless sex with a prostitute “with less derangement” than if he were having sex with his wife.²² This reaction was based on the belief that a husband spoiled his wife’s moral qualities by encouraging her sexuality.

¹⁷ Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 183.

¹⁸ William Acton, *Prostitution*, ed. Peter Fryer (New York: Preager, 1969), 125.

¹⁹ Walkowitz, 3.

²⁰ Estelle B. Freedman, “Sexuality in Nineteenth-century America: Behaviours, Ideology, and Politics,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no.4 (1982): 203.

²¹ Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History* (New York: Stein & Day, 1980), 355.

²² *Ibid.*

The extensive use of prostitutes was a reflection of how Victorian males saw themselves and their position within society. For many, prostitutes were seen as a “repository of that side of man that was deemed bestial and vile.”²³ Presumably, a man was supposed to keep this “bestial” aspect of his personality out of his marriage and everyday life, preserving it for a prostitute who would either be deserving of it due to her status, or so beneath him that her opinion of his nature would be inconsequential. Harrison also points to the erotic appeal of the prostitute, which seemed to stem from the fact that they could be easily and cheaply bought and the relations could be conducted on an exclusively monetary basis. One of the common myths surrounding prostitution was that the majority of customers were working class men, but men of all levels of society used prostitutes, probably to a similar degree.²⁴ Therefore, in a society where “men’s power and their money were virtually indistinguishable, where possessions were a source of honour and purchasing power guaranteed respect,” the prostitute’s positive association with consumerism could not be ignored.²⁵ Dr. Acton, while commenting on prostitution, dismissed the idea that women could choose prostitution for the enjoyment of sex, since he held the view that women did not actually have any sexual desires. Though, like many of his contemporaries, he could believe that a woman’s love of idleness and fancy dress would draw them towards selling their bodies.²⁶ This illuminates an interesting pattern in the male consumption of female prostitution: the prostitutes then had the means to consume material goods. Although the turn to prostitution was more often for bread than couture, the fact that Victorian men accepted this as a valid explanation reveals a darker side to the often-celebrated emergence of a large urban economy in the nineteenth century.

In conclusion, a variety of causes have been attributed to the prominence of prostitution in Victorian England. The main causes of Victorian prostitution and its associate conditions of poverty and social disconnect, however, were rooted in the

²³ Fraser Harrison, *The Dark Angel: Aspects of Victorian Sexuality* (London: Sheldon, 1977), 252.

²⁴ Mason, 103.

²⁵ Harrison, 252.

²⁶ Acton, 118.

industrialization of England in the nineteenth century. The anonymity, familial breakdown, poverty, and misogyny of industrialized England led more women to engage in prostitution. Great economic and power disparities existed between the sexes, and these created a demand for, and supply of, women willing to offer their company to single and married men alike.

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