

Book Reviews

Magaly Rodríguez García, Lex Heerma van Voss, and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (eds.), *Selling Sex in the City. A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s* (Leiden: Brill, 2017). 891 p. ISBN 97804346246.

DOI: 10.18352/tseg.1130

Selling Sex in the City. A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s is an important work on the history of prostitution. This volume is a massive undertaking, one which adds considerably to what is known about prostitution, while simultaneously making a compelling methodological claim. Its exclusive focus on urban female heterosexual prostitution is justified by the argument that most sex workers were, indeed, women catering to men in cities, and that these histories are the best researched. The editors and many contributors also make clear that theirs is a history of prostitution as work; not crime, morality, or oppression, perspectives which have shaped many studies of prostitution in the past. The volume, consistent with the most recent trends in prostitution studies, considers sex work from the perspective of labour relations. It is in this vein that the *Selling Sex in the City* makes its most critical contributions.

The first and longest section of the book is comprised of 27 essays, each on the history of prostitution in a particular city in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, and the Asia-Pacific region, from the seventeenth century to the present. Each author was asked to treat three broad subjects: the historiography and historical contextualization of prostitution; the labour market for prostitution; and, societal reactions to prostitution from state and non-state actors. Given the availability of primary sources, the existing scholarship, and each author's interests, the essays necessarily vary in their chronological coverage and their engagement with these topics. A number of essays, for example, begin only with the late nineteenth century. Authors also differed in their explanations of what shaped sex markets. For example, Julia Laite in her article on London linked shifts in the urban geography of sex work to changes in how sex was bought and sold, while Sue Gronewold, in her essay on Shanghai, pays particular attention to the political and economic development of the city.

Individually, these essays offer valuable overviews of prostitution in various cities. The true power of the volume, however, comes from what can be learned by reading them against one another. This was the work of the eight thematic review essays that constitute the volume's second section. These essays considered topics ranging from labour relations, working conditions, and the social profiles of prostitutes, to agency, migration, and colonial relations. Collectively, and in conjunc-

tion with the volume's conclusion, they construct the armature of a global history of prostitution, which one can then fill out or dispute by returning to the essays in the first part of the volume. The review essays offer long chronologies of, for example, state reaction to prostitution. They also identify the various structures that shaped particular aspects of prostitution over time, including, for example, the rise and fall of empires/nations and the gendered nature of labour markets.

These essays present a number of broad conclusions. Women tended to earn more as sex workers than in other occupations. Many women chose prostitution and also chose to migrate to engage in sex work. Yet the essays also deeply and necessarily complicate the question of agency, removing it from the dualism (free will/exploitation) which has marked many current debates on prostitution and instead urging deep contextualization with the understanding that agency is often a matter of degree. The essays highlight the complex intersections of migration, urbanization, colonization, and globalization with prostitution. They show how these intersections had enormous impact on a wide range of developments from the layout of cities to shifts in migration policy. The volume thus makes the argument, tacitly, that the study of prostitution is integral to understanding the forces that shaped the modern world.

Examining prostitution in the context of labour relations enabled contributors to avoid the pitfalls associated with older paradigms, which tended to reduce prostitutes to objects, either of lust or bureaucratic practice. Instead, contributors were able to identify those structures and historical shifts that influenced the shape of the sex market and the experiences of those in it across numerous cultures and time periods. The labour relations framework thus allowed for a global history of prostitution. The same framework, however, also made aspects of the history of prostitution less legible. The essays mostly fail to get at what it meant to be a prostitute. How did sex work affect the standing of women in their communities or even their own sense of self? We might push and ask how prostitution affected and was shaped by various sex/gender systems. It might have been possible to think through such questions within the labour relations paradigm by considering status. The bigger historiographical question, however, is whether a project that accomplished so much by deliberately focusing on economic, social, and political structures might have accomplished even more had it widened its gaze to consider culture, or whether doing so would have led to diminishing returns. Whatever the answer, *Selling Sex in the City* is a model of global history and will no doubt become a landmark study in the history of prostitution and the history of work.

Nina Kushner, Clark University