

Preface

The sale of sex is complex and the reasons why people do it can be very different. The baseline, however, is dependency and economics. In the historical sources that I have examined, I rarely came across an argument to this end; rather the sale of sex, or the facilitation thereof, was typically moralised and patronised by elites, albeit with differing opinions and motivations. Over the past decade, several historians have begun the important labour of moving away from the examination of these kinds of figures inside of international movements to rather focus on the historical actors who sold sex, or facilitated its sale. This book might ostensibly appear as if it is overlooking this trend, but in fact it is in compliment to it.

I have worked with sources which were created by European elites and elitist European institutions. In terms of content, these were a production of knowledge about global poverty migrants and their associates, which resulted in the sculpting of categories for the description of such figures. Many of these sources were created to communicate with the broader European populous and thus often in a highly sensational tone. As the categories used were diverse and often derogatory, I have at times opted for the use of “subalterns” (taken from subaltern studies) as a shorthand for broadly representing highly disadvantaged social groups relevant to this work. This indicates my awareness that historical actors such as people who sold sex, poverty migrants and refugees all exercised agency, carved out spaces for themselves and impacted the shape of social structure, even though this is not my object of analysis in this work. Rather, this book on the one hand focuses on how elites used language to describe and categorise subalterns, particularly migrants involved in the sale of sex. On the other, it analyses the conceptual development of the linguistic equivalents “white slavery”, “*la traite des blanches*”, and “*Mädchenhandel*” from 1866 to 1881.

Although of central focus here, these concepts were consciously excluded from the book’s title due to the heavily loaded meanings which they carry. As the analysis shows, the concept cannot be defined in one way as their meanings developed transnationally and even had a plurality within national contexts.

Denoting something in relation to migration and the sale of sex by the end of the nineteenth century, “white slavery” and its linguistic equivalents enabled the telling of populist narratives. This concept informed state and organisational practices of categorising subalterns on the move. The sources from which historians have already tried to extract knowledge of subalterns involved in the sale of sex have been by and large found in state-produced archives, with their state-produced categorisations. I push further to examine how certain categories for subalterns came to be produced historically; after all, it goes without saying that

the “migrant”, “white slave”, or “trafficker” are and were not self-descriptions as is the case with the emancipatory term “sex worker” which came out in the 1970s.

Looking at the historical roots of such categories, it was entirely my own doing to examine a topic which is morally charged and highly polarised. From the beginning, I struggled hard with how to formulate things, wondering in what vocabulary and language the (un)knowable experience could be best expressed. Experience should no doubt be given privilege over concepts when it comes to knowledge production on exploitation and violence; yet stories and personal experiences have also taught me that there is little to be communicated in coherent explanation and chronology. Experience happens in the body and is splintered or processed in the mind. Thus, it was clear to me that it is not in the state archives or police files that one will find the traumatic experiences of women’s and girls’ encounters in a brothel, on the road or at home.

I can only try to articulate my non-scholarly knowledge of how trauma and violence have the power to paralyse; how learned behaviours reproduce the same, and the acceptance of them; of how upon repetition, trauma, and violence produce relationships of co-dependency, be them familiar, employment-based, or (post) colonial. I am aware that, on an individual and collective level, there are endless complexities of pain, though with this book I dare not try describe nor heal them. With that said, I need a caveat on categories for people and territory that I have decided to use.

In relation to racialised terms, I left them as they were in source quotes. In my own use of language, I have opted for descriptive categories that reflect current Western discourse. Debate on how to use and not use racialised terms heightened following the #BlackLivesMatter movement which began around 2013, gaining global support in 2020 thereafter. Ever since, a large cohort of the Black community began to capitalise the term Black so as to indicate an empowering self-designation, rather than a colour or a historical racial construct. As a result, many newspapers, particularly in the US, have begun adapting this as standard practice in their style guides. There is, nevertheless, an ongoing debate among the global Black community regarding this new trend.

Directly related to this newly emerging stylistic norm, there are debates as to whether the descriptive term ‘white’ should also be given stylistic emphasis so as to point out how it is neither a self-designation nor a colour, but a historical racial construct. As I on a very rare occasion needed to use the term Black to describe people, I have decided to capitalise the B with conscious anachronism in times that consensus still needs to be reached. Considering that the racial category of white appears several times on each page of this book, I have decided to use the lower case, predominantly for the sake of the reader’s eye.

As with racial constructs, gender categories such as “men” and “women” are used throughout. Here I am speaking of and to a gender normative of the late nineteenth century which indicated cis-gendered people on a binary scale. I decided to apply these categories for clarity.

Most poignantly to the project, however, was my decision on how to deal with the socio-economic and judico-moral categories of “sex worker” and “prostitute”. Prostitute, a derogatory term, appears commonly as a source category, while sex worker is an emancipatory category which emerged in the 1970s, the history of which is outlined in the introduction.

Harald Fischer-Tiné was to my knowledge the first historian to employ the term “sex worker” to speak about his actors in colonial British South Asia. Indeed, he was also one of the first to set the agenda for lifeworld histories as a means of capturing the agency of historical subalterns, that has come to shape the historical scholarship on the topic over the past ten years.¹ Often anachronistically, but intentionally, the majority of these scholars have adopted the category or concept of “sex worker” to describe their historical actors. Shiohán Hearne, however, decided against this conscious anachronism. Rather, she chose to speak about prostitution or women who sold sex, as opposed to sex workers.² I have for similar reasons also decided on my own alternative, whereby I speak of people who sold sex and facilitated the sale thereof. Exceptions on the odd page may of course be found, where I have, in fact, drawn upon a category like “prostitute” or “pimp”.

It also needs to be noted, that I at times speak about territories such as the Balkans and Europe or Eastern Europe. I do not clearly define the boundaries of these spaces. When used, these categories were intended to give a sense of region or place, while the period is defined by the analysis and the sources. For cities like Istanbul, I have decided for conscious anachronism, unless colonial terms like “Constantinople” were unavoidable due to a direct quote. As a final note, source translations of quotes are all my own.

1 Harald Fischer-Tiné, “White Women Degrading Themselves to the Lowest Depths”: European Networks of Prostitution and Colonial Anxieties in British India and Ceylon ca. 1880–1914’, *Indian Economic Social Review* 40, no. 163 (2003): 163–90.

2 Shiohán Hearne, *Policing Prostitution: Regulating the Lower Classes in Late Imperial Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 7. In their edited volume, Garcia et al. decided to use the terms of “sex worker/sex work” and “prostitute/prostitution” interchangeably. 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* (Studies in Global Social History, 31) (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2017).

