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28/02/2011 16:08:00, Posted by: Brittany Stewart

Topic: **Historical Perspectives of Prostitution (Brittany and Elsa)**

Often regarded as the oldest profession in the world, prostitution offers an extensive history of toleration, regulation and criminalization.

In ancient civilizations, prostitution was seen as an act of worship. Women worked within the temple and engaged in promiscuous relationships to pay homage to particular deity (Clarkson, 1939, 297). These celebrations were often in the name of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Women who worked within the temple were referred to as 'priestesses'. They were held in high esteem and treated with respect and dignity (Clarkson, 1939, 297). These women were considered to be holy and engaging in sexual acts with these individuals bestowed blessings on both parties involved (Valley, 2006). In addition, worshipers who engaged in these sexual acts were expected to receive great fortune. Ritual prostitution was viewed favourably by society until ceremonial acts became corrupt (Basserman, 1967, 68).

The diminished popularity of ritual prostitution led to the creation of brothels. In ancient Greece prostitution was used to distract uncontrollable men in hopes to reduce the opportunity for disorder and mischief (Basserman, 1967, 3). The state in both ancient Greece and Rome taxed prostitute's earnings and imposed strict regulations on the prostitutes (Basserman, 1967). Women were required to register with the state and wear certain garments that would allow others to recognize them for their profession. In addition, their movements were also restricted as the state wanted to ensure that women would remain with the brothel (Basserman, 1967, 6). Individuals who taxed prostitutes and collected rent from brothels were some of wealthiest men in society and this type of occupation was largely accepted (Valley, 2006).

Prostitutes in ancient Greece were admired and envied for their beauty and intelligence (Basserman, 1967, 15). Women working in the brothels came from all social classes and despite their background had the potential to secure a high position within society (Clarkson, 1939, 297). Their presence did not go un-noticed and influenced the surrounding culture in terms of fashion, hair and jewellery (Valley, 2006). These women were trained by veteran prostitutes to become female companions, individuals who were both captivating and exciting (Historical Timeline, 2009). In comparison to ordinary women, prostitutes were capable of reading, writing, singing and composing music. Their talents attracted many artists that immortalized these women in the arts (Basserman, 1967, 110) In Rome, however, prostitutes were not viewed favourably but rather with contempt. Men who served as clients often found themselves adopting a disguise before entering a brothel. Clarkson (1939, 300) argued that some men perceived prostitutes to be pathological liars, devising tragic stories about their downfall to lure men. Poverty was not a casual factor that led them to prostitution but rather it was the pursuit of a luxurious lifestyle (Clarkson, 1939, 300)

The tolerant attitude towards prostitution lasted up until the middle ages. At this time regulations that had been previously put in place had been abandoned and more societies began to criminalize the act (Historical Timeline, 2009). Women who engaged prostitution were often punished through the means of imprisonment, torture and fines (Clarkson, 1939, 299). During the 13th century brothels were destroyed and prostitutes were deprived of their earnings and driven out of the country (Clarkson, 1939, 299). The syphilis pandemic of the 16th century led to the belief that prostitutes were a health problem and should be segregated into what is now commonly referred to as 'red light districts' (Clarkson, 1939, 299).

The stages of criminalization can also be viewed the UK's efforts to deal with prostitution from the 19th century
History in the UK

Looking at the history of prostitution in Britain, the 1824 Vagrancy Act was the first law trying to control prostitution in a more systematic way, referring to "common prostitute". The Act stated that "every common prostitute wandering in the public streets and behaving in a riotous or indecent manner shall be deemed an idle and disorderly person" and was liable to a fine or imprisonment. Together with the Metropolitan Police Act of 1839 and the Towns Police Clauses Act, those 'solicitation laws,' were used by police in Britain to control unruly women in public. The crime here was being idle, being a nuisance. Prostitution was not being seen specifically as a sexual crime. In 1885, the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed and the age of consent for girls was raised to 16 in an attempt to end 'white slavery' and protect girls from the exploitation they faced in Victorian Great Britain as the organized child-prostitution ring in the heart of London, entitled 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' revealed. Under the Act, any person who kept, managed, or assisted in the management of premises used as a brothel, or was the tenant or landlord of such premises, was liable to a fine or a maximum of three months' imprisonment. Yet, the Act did not define what was meant by 'brothel'. In 1895, the case *Singleton v. Ellison* ruled that 'brothel' referred to premises used by more than one woman for the purposes of prostitution, meaning that any prostitute living with another would be guilty of keeping a 'brothel', leading to the development of blocks of flats, individually rented by prostitutes. This change resulted in third parties helping prostitutes to get clients in more subtle ways (cabmen, bellmen, pimps) often exploiting and abusing them. Three years after the Act was passed, Jack the Ripper became known as the first serial murderer of prostitutes, The women killed were the first of many street prostitutes, victims of violence, abuse and serial murder worldwide over the course of the 20th century.

After wartime, special focus was placed on re-establishing the family unit. Sexual relationships between spouses were seen as necessary to a good marriage and many books were devoted to improving sex within marriage. Thus, prostitution was seen as very threatening to marriage and the British way of life. Prostitutes were constructed as pathological, psychologically flawed. 'Both the prostitute and the homosexual are symptoms of a malaise in sexual relationships' (Billy Graham). There was also a racial element to this movement as prostitution became associated with immigration, especially West Indian men considered as pimps corrupting British girls. In 1957, the 'Wolfenden Report' was published leading to the Street Offences Act 1959 aiming at taking prostitutes off the street, by implementing much harsher penalties for soliciting, and loitering. The Wolfenden Report argued that prostitutes should be punished as they were the ones who had put themselves outside the society and were thus not entitled to the same legal rights as other people. While, what people did in their private life was considered as not the state's affair, it was thought that the state should intervene if sexual behaviour was made public and caused nuisance. Simultaneously, off-street prostitution, like escort services and massage services, increased as did incidences of violence against prostitution and the involvement of pimps.

Looking back at how prostitution was approached in the past is relevant to the current debate. Most of the approaches considered nowadays have already been experimented at some point in the past. Besides, although the media represent the choice that governments face as one between tolerating and eradicating prostitution, the history demonstrates that this is a false dichotomy. Providing legal justice

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and protection to prostitutes is not tantamount to tolerating prostitution (J. Laite, Paying the price again: prostitution policy in historical perspective). More importantly, history shows that every attempt to make prostitution and its accessorized vices more criminalised, results in prostitutes being increasingly victimized, marginalised, and abused by third parties (J. Laite, Paying the price again: prostitution policy in historical perspective).

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