

# Child prostitution in eighteenth century london essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



I will be studying child prostitution in the 18th century in England's capital city London. I will look at many different issues, in particular the social and cultural aspects. Throughout I will discuss some of the debates and concerns of different historians, and mention what they agree and disagree on. Finally, I will bring all the major points and key aspects together in a conclusion.

London was and still is a major European capital. It stood far above any other English towns. It possessed an almost tempting attraction, drawing in immense quantities of food, produce and most important of all people. Many were young women and girls hoping for the chance of finding employment. 'The city was perceived by many contemporaries not just as the political, the social or the economic, but as the degenerated heart of the nation' (Henderson, 1999, p2).

While prostitution was given leeway, the act of kidnapping young girls into the service was focussed upon heavily. Brothel-keepers, many of them women, would capture girls into their service. 'It has been estimated that in between 1830 and 1840, as many as 400 people in London made their living as slavers of young girls' (cited on [www.crain.english.mwsc.edu/major/2society.htm](http://www.crain.english.mwsc.edu/major/2society.htm)).

During the 18th century, analysts and social reformers became increasingly keen to impress their readers with their comprehension of prostitution. They would put forward a number of reasons why they believed young women and girls would go into the trade and the type of characters they were.

I found very few sources which allowed me to construct my own perceptions of what women who would enter into prostitution appear to be like. Pictures I have seen give me the impression that they were extremely poor; I believe, like most prostitutes today, that they must be so desperate to make some money that they sell their bodies. John Fielding, the London magistrate, found that 'most of the twenty-five prostitutes he had arrested and questioned on the night of the 1st May 1758 were born into pauperism' (Henderson, 1999, p14). Quite often the parents of child prostitutes had died or deserted them, leaving the child orphaned. Instead of going in to an orphanage they turned to prostitution.

Although Fielding did not record the occupations of the prostitutes, if in fact they had one, there was a general agreement amongst most historians that certain trades were responsible for a large number of women pursuing a career in prostitution. The clothing industry was one trade that some felt was to blame as they had bad working conditions; there was very low pay and the nature of the industries products was trivial. Parents were warned about letting their daughters become milliners, dress-makers as there was a risk they would be forced into prostitution. Many historians blame men as the reason why women take up this trade, 'We have men mantua-makers, men-milliners, men stay-makers, men shoe-makers for women's shoes, men hair-cutters for ladies hair; and, to the shocking indecency of the sex, even men corn-cutter! ...Such are some of the many causes to which we owe that awful excess of female prostitution' (The Times, 8th Dec, 1786: cited in Henderson, 1999, p15).

' Prostitution, in the eighteenth century, was perhaps as close as it has ever been to being an acceptable livelihood' (cited on [www.las.alfred.edu.htm](http://www.las.alfred.edu.htm)).

General views changed, from disapproval and abolition, to widespread sympathy and acceptance. It was an ill society that was responsible for it.

The women and children were simply its victims, many regarded prostitution as an economic necessity, and as an acceptable way for " randy" young men to get their jollies without ruining honourable, virtuous young virgins. ' Some suggested that prostitution should be turned into a public enterprise, rather than a private one, to regulate both prices, and diseases' (cited on [www.las.alfred.edu.html](http://www.las.alfred.edu.html)). Reasoning being, that since it was happening anyway, why not make sure that all participants are healthy?

Despite the physical and social risks of prostitution, such as disease and arrest, the popularity continued to grow. Venereal disease was the worst of all possible risks in prostitution. In addition to the common man's risk, many people of society were scarred and crippled by these diseases, which were often fatal, and completely incurable. Besides being shunned in society and morally, the opinions of prostitutes, was one of disgust, others saw them as living a lifestyle like that of the rats, which carried the plague. Women were blamed for this infection of society, and in fact, one theory was that of Buret's ' the medical profession held that syphilis could arise spontaneously, but only in a woman, if she had sexual relations with a number of healthy men' (cited on [www.crain.english.mwsc.edu/major/2society.htm](http://www.crain.english.mwsc.edu/major/2society.htm)).

Born into poverty, often outside London, frequently orphaned or deserted by their parents, trained if at all, for the most unskilled and ill-rewarded occupation, these women and children chose or were forced by economic needs.

Prostitution thrived due to supply and demand. If men wanted it all they had to do was pay for it. Women and girls needed the money in order to survive poverty, and selling sex seemed to be an easy way to make money especially if you did not have any other skills. Some young women and children would live in a brothel (also known as a "bawdy house") where they would bring men back. It was usually owned and run by a woman, although men house-keepers were not unheard of. Many houses would employ one or sometimes more men, commonly known as "bullies" or "pimps" to take care of the money and women. The prostitutes would either get paid a weekly wage or get some type of commission. As historians make out a lot of prostitutes would work in a brothel, but it appears only a small minority in London did. Usually they would walk the streets, parks and drinking places looking for men.

Contradictory though it may seem, prostitution was, in a way, a rather romantic occupation. ' There were several classes of prostitutes: those "common" who walked the streets and could be had for a shilling and a bottle of wine; those a little better, who charged three or four shillings and perhaps lived in a brothel; those yet a little better, and so on and so on; until the upper-class tart. This woman may have been high-born to begin with. She is

probably relatively famous, and certainly respectable in some twisted way' (cited on [www.watson.vampires.co.uk](http://www.watson.vampires.co.uk)).

The magistrates and police officers generally denied any knowledge of the brothels, despite the committees' insistence that brothels which were devoted to children alone were particularly recognised. This suggests that although there almost certainly were some very young streetwalkers in this period, their numbers were very much exaggerated.

The age and the existence of child prostitutes soliciting on the streets of London became a matter of great concern to observers and authorities throughout the 18th century. Charles Horne complained that ' girls of twelve and thirteen years old who were thought of as far too young for marriage were nevertheless considered perfectly fit for prostitution' (Henderson, 1999, p21).

The legal system was very unfair to women, if a man was found in an indecent situation with a prostitute by the police; the consequence of prosecution would have been commonly more severe for the women than for the man. She would be sent to a prison like Bridewell for being a disorderly person or for being a common streetwalker. He would just be released only if he promised not to repeat the offence again.

The nature of prostitution brought the young women and girls in to daily contact with the law. Some tried to be on the appropriate side of the law to kept out of trouble; others were not bothered and did not keep their activities quiet, so paraded the streets " scantily clad". If not, they could

quite often find themselves in and out of jail, this made business very difficult. It was not until the very end of the 18th century that the term “ prostitute” appeared in the text of a public act; they were formerly known as “ idle and disorderly persons”.

Many prostitutes of London were born and raised outside of the capital. Cesar de Saussure concluded that ‘ most of London’s streetwalkers were from the country; they came to London to seek their fortunes’ (Henderson, 1999, p18). A record of where prostitutes were born had been logged. They had been arrested in Southwark between 1814 and 1829. Seventy-eight women and children had their places of birth recorded. London women formed the most single result, but the immigrant prostitutes made up over sixty percent of the group. Predominantly in would be white, working-class young women and girls who would become prostitutes, but black women were not unknown to be prostitutes in London at this time. These particular women were most likely to solicit in the poorest areas of London. ‘ Lord Pembroke told Boswell in 1775 of a brothel that at one time had been entirely staffed by black women’ (Henderson, 1999, p20).

Prostitution was an acceptable, and often recorded way of life in the 18th century, though things got, more restrained as the century wore on and the reign of Queen Victoria began to loom large and repressed in the age to come. Also, at this time, there was not as much medical data regarding just what venereal diseases could do to someone, and once people began to realize the effects, they began to exercise a little restraint. But, for most of

the century, the ladies of the evening enjoyed a profitable and almost respectable business.

In conclusion, throughout this assignment various issues have been investigated. From my findings I believe that children, who were born into poverty, would usually have one or more parents that had died or they might have been abandoned. These children were most likely to have chosen or were forced into prostitution by economic needs. Most prostitutes may have been born outside of London and come to the city to find work. The majority would tend to look for men by walking the streets, parks and drinking areas. As they would come into contact with the law on a regularly basis it was for the best if they could stay on the appropriate side of the law. If not, they could find themselves in and out of jail, this made business very difficult.

There is no single factor that can explain prostitution. It might seem that men simply have stronger, or more persistent, sexual needs than women, and therefore require the outlets that prostitution provides. But then if it was just down to sexual needs why were there not as many, if any, male prostitutes at this time?