

Prostitution in 18th century



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Prostitution in Europe in the 18th century was a widely accepted in the European society despite religious leaders and the government efforts to contain it. Pornography was a flourishing business. Even poets wrote about these beautiful sexy girls. It was one of the few arenas that women could gain economic independence.[1]The prostitution could be classified into different classes. There those who were mistress to prominent men, those worked in urban taverns, tea parlor, bawdy houses, theatres and even on the streets. The mistresses attained social success, riches and even derived power from prostitution. Prostitutes especially from low socio-economic background were vulnerable and subjected to cruelty, sanction and reformation throughout the 18th century.

Background information

Prostitution has been in existence throughout human history and it is regarded as the oldest profession. During medieval times prostitution in Europe was tolerated with public bathtubs giving prostitutes channel of contact with their customers. In other places such as Victoria, England prostitution was disgraceful but at the same time accepted a necessary social and sexual outlet for men.[2]It was considered to be less evil if a middle-class man engages in a sexual relationship with a prostitute other than being engaged in a sexual relationship with another middle-class man's wife or daughter. 18th century was tremendous for England. It was the time it became Great Britain, lost thirteen of its colonies, launched industrial revolution and achieved parliamentary government.[3]It was an age when men struggled to be reasonable. Life was leisurely and everything was elegant. This created an enabling environment for flourishing of prostitution.

Prostitution gave men of the middle and high class sexual gratification which they could not obtain from their partners. During this era capitalism flourished making the political class swim in riches leaving the lower class people (those who worked in industries such as textile industries) to live in abject poverty. Thus many engaged in prostitution for financial gain.

As mentioned earlier, the society tolerated prostitution. England being a male dominant society, men were freer to engage in promiscuity before marriage and within marriage. They could give money to buy sex. In contrast women rarely paid money in exchange for sex on the contrary they went into prostitution for monetary gain. They desperately required financial independence but there were very few opportunities for them to achieve it. Thus prostitution was the alternative channel for them. Presence of public bathtubs in England in the 18th century where prostitutes could freely find customers shows that prostitution was widely accepted in England. Vern and Bonnie Bollough affirm that prostitutes provided men with “ sexual outlet before and during marriage”.[4]

Initially, poets praised prostitution, representing young prostitutes as healthy, fresh and lovely.[5]This shows that prostitutes were held in high social status. The role was significantly accepted in the society. Prostitutes in London could even advertise their services on card which were distributed throughout the city.[6]However over time, this perception changed. The society later understood that there were negative consequences of prostitution. There was increased spread of diseases, illegitimate children and poverty tarnished the initial image.[7]Perfect image of a mother flourished as sensibility and concern for the health overpowered the spirit of

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sexual experimentation. Prostitution became ridicule in public discussion. It was represented as filthy, degraded and diseased.

Why prostitution flourished in England in the 18th century

Several factors led to flourishing of prostitution in England and more so in London in the 18th century. London being a port city received many sailors. There were several districts in the city that provided for sailors.[8]One of the best known districts was Ratcliffe Highway that lay on the north of Wapping water-front.[9]Although subsequent kings of England made effort to keep prostitution away from London, they did not succeed much. Streets like Shoreditch, Petticoat Lane, Cheapsides, s Grope cunt Lane, and Clerkenwell were very common with prostitutes.

The period between 1750 and 1850 was characterized by great economic change in England.[10]British agricultural revolution in the 18th century was characterized by high agricultural output. This led to population explosion and people had look for alternative jobs to meet their needs and those of the population. It is this agricultural revolution that ushered in industrial revolution. During the agricultural revolution women used to work alongside their husbands in the farms. However, industrial revolution at the end of 18th century caused people to migrate to the urban areas to seek better pay in the industries.[11]Introduction of machinery made it difficult for women to work in industries and therefore other social duties were relegated to women. These jobs were not well paying. As a result some women ventured into prostitution in order to become economically sufficient.

Industrial revolution great Britain lead to improvement of economic status of many people. There was money to spend on anything elegant including prostitutes especially by the people of the high-class. More bathhouses, theatres and alehouses were opened in London. Bathhouses mainly concentrated around Covent Garden and unlike the stews of earlier centuries they were more luxurious. Theatres and alehouses became newly fashionable coffeehouses and public tea-gardens such as the Dog and Duck in St. Goerge's Fields.[12]Some brothels could even have a card table among the attractors of the house.

Lack of strong government policies to contain the vice made it to flourish instead. Decrees to close down alehouses and theaters made prostitution to spread to other areas. The involvement of aristocrats in prostitution fueled it more. Prostitution cut across all social classes. Unlike the poor who even live entirely on the streets, elegant women practiced prostitution in King's Place off Pall Mall or Miss Fawkland's in St. James' Street. The high-class prostitutes catered for wealthy men, aristocrats and members of parliament.[13]They did their trade in freedom without being troubled by any threat of official hindrance.

High economic independence associated with women who practiced prostitution also fueled increase of prostitution in London in the 18th century. Mistresses to aristocrats and members of parliament were held in high esteem by other women in the society. This motivated other women to go into prostitution to gain economic independence.

Effects of increase in prostitution on lives of the people

The government of England tried very much to reduce prostitution in England and particularly in London. Laws were put in place to close down brothels and alehouses which were areas of trade for the prostitutes. Those who defied the law were convicted and jailed making their lives even more miserable.

Most of the women who engaged in prostitution were teens. They never wanted to get pregnant as this would interfere with their trade. They used different methods to protect themselves from becoming pregnant. Chemicals and plant extracts such as wormwood, hyssop and fassron among others were used without much consideration of the harm they might cause.

[14]When these methods failed they would wait until the baby is born and then kill. Some prostitutes also died in their effort to abort the fetus. All these consequences of prostitution affected their psychological well-being. This added misery to their poor state.

Increase in prostitution increased incidences of venereal diseases mainly syphilis. Many died of the disease for fear of seeking treatment. This was a lot of stigma attached to the disease even at the hospitals. For example the addition of wards in Lock Hospital allowed discrimination of patients and women thought to be blamable in the contraction of the disease were isolated from the innocent.[15]Men of high social status could not also seek treatment due to fear of tarnishing their social standing. Some of them being married transmitted the disease to their partners. Who suffered the brunt of stigma attached to the disease although innocent. Venereal diseases and the stigma attached to it cut short further the lives of the people of London already languishing in poverty.

Prostitutes' state of life

Life was very difficult for the prostitutes especially after the initial image of prostitutes as healthy, fresh and beautiful had been marred were regarded as diseased, and disgraceful. Their social status dwindled and the society alienated them. They had caused a lot of problems in families and the society in general. Abandoned children were on the increase because they were not ready to take up responsibility of parenthood. Some left these children with their old parents who were burdened with responsibility of bring up the children. Worse still, the rise in prevalence of venereal diseases was attributed to prostitution. They became people who should be sympathized with. Slump in their social status caused them to be objects of oppression, exploitation and coercion. Life became so hard for the prostitutes. They became people who should be sympathized with and many organizations sprang up to assist them.

The health status of prostitutes worsened with the spread of venereal diseases like syphilis. The sickly could no longer go out on the streets to earn money which further aggravated their health status because they could not afford treatment. With no source of income even affording food was difficult.

The economic status of prostitution reduced when the image of prostitution as a noble job changed. The fact that they were no longer well tolerated by the society meant fewer clients. Clients became even fewer due to fear of contracting venereal diseases. Government policies directed to reducing prostitution in London and other cities of England saw some brothels and alehouses closed. Places where prostitutes could meet their clients freely

became fewer and those that remained could not be accessible to the poor class of prostitutes. They became even poorer with very little to sustain themselves.

Most of the women who engaged in prostitution were from poor background. They had little education that could have helped them to find other kinds of work away from prostitution unlike the women from high social status who engaged in prostitution on part-time. They had education that helped them to find work elsewhere. With king's decrees to close down brothels and alehouses, prostitutes from poor socio-economic class could not be able to find work elsewhere making sink further into poverty. They went on practicing prostitution in secret and of course with fear of interference by the law. On the other hand, women of high socio-economic status who practiced prostitution were less affected by laws imposed against prostitution. Even when the king gave decree of closing down brothels and alehouses those that belonged to people of high-class were never interfered with. Those who were mistresses to aristocrats and members of parliament felt secure from the law.

Conclusion

Prostitution in the 18th century has two stages. The initial stage is where it is widely tolerated in the society and even poets sang praises of prostitutes. They were beautiful, lovely and healthy. They provided a sexual outlet for men. Its increase was fueled by the explosion of population during the British agricultural revolution. The farms could no longer provide employment for everybody. The Agricultural revolution led to industrial revolution that saw

introduction of machinery in the industries. Women were believed to be unable of driving the machines due to their weaker body as compared to men. The society relegated other duties to women and many joined cottage industry, others became domestic servants and others prostitution. Some women opted for prostitution a means of earning money that was so much needed and it was tolerated by society. However, the image of prostitution took a twist in mid-18th century. Due to rise in prevalence of syphilis attributed to prostitution as well as increase in number of illegitimate children, society started regarding prostitution as diseased and disgraceful. The prostitutes suffered alienation from the society, exploitation, poor economic status, ill-health, and became objects of oppression and coercion.