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**Magaly Rodríguez García / Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk / Lex Heerma van Voss (eds.): *Selling Sex in the City. A Global History of Prostitution, 1600's–2000's*, Leiden: Brill 2017, 891pp.**

Reviewed by  
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According to common wisdom (in the West), prostitution is known to be the oldest trade in the world. The four hundred years of policies, attitudes, and practices captured in “*Selling Sex in the City*” tell us, however, that if not untrue, such a statement is at least highly oversimplified and Eurocentric depending on where and when one looks. Spanning the precolonial period up to the present day, this book explores how European colonial expansion, urbanisation, and globalisation have changed, introduced, and/or influenced the regulation and practice of prostitution around the world. It too looks at how the labour market of sex work has been moulded by migration and war as well as political, social, and technological revolutions.

The editors Rodríguez García, van Nederveen Meerkerk, and van Voss have brought together a mighty band of historians to grapple with this complex subject matter, which has long been medically and morally contended. They take on these multifaceted debates across the books two parts, consisting of twenty-three urban overviews and eight thematic papers. Guided by the same set of questions, each overview hones in on a specific town or city to explore the perceptions of varying actors, the profiles of prostitutes, the cultures in which they were embedded as well as the policies, structures, and social attitudes which affected their lives (p. 2). The thematic contributions then engage the reader in a conversation by weaving in and out of the preceding chapters, highlighting the common threads as well as underlining the exceptions. All the while light is collectively brought to matters of definition, historiography, and historical contextualisation. As a whole, the project addresses the sale of sex across world regions with constant reflection upon broader entanglements in global history. The editors nevertheless note that the lack of sources for certain periods and spatial contexts has led to unavoidable underrepresentation. Likewise, several authors are careful to point out that even when an abundance of sources are available, there is need for critical re-

flection upon colonial and police records, judicial files as well as media, medical, missionary, and philanthropic reports. As these are often steeped in moral prejudice and institutional bias. The voices of sex workers themselves were seldom to be heard and descriptions of them being predominately limited to either “victim” or “criminal” which has contributed to the prevailing stereotype of the young, naïve, uneducated, migrant woman (see Maja Mechant’s chapter on “The Social Profiles of Prostitutes”, p. 833).

“Prostitution” is often a-historically assumed to have always existed, yet as we learn from several chapters, that the concept only first emerged in European languages in the 17th and 18th centuries.<sup>1</sup> Much of how we currently perceive prostitution has been historically framed by the regulation systems which were transferred around Europe, the New World, and subsequently the colonies via 19th-century imperial and colonial projects. Lumped in together under the imported category, the Yuroban wife who took a lover, as well as entertainers, dancers, concubines, and courtesans from Shanghai to Cairo all came to be known as “prostitution” through the colonial gaze.<sup>2</sup>

These pages capture the global transfer of regulated prostitution, while at the same time they show the unevenness of its implementation and the reactions towards it. Regulationists of the 19th and early 20th centuries had typically viewed prostitution as a “necessary evil” and the prostitute as a genetically predisposed “deviant woman” in need of state control. The so-called “French System”, which made its way throughout the Napoleonic Empire, as well as to the US and Britain in

the 1860s, was not intended to dispense of prostitution, but to monitor behaviour, protect state/military actors whilst curbing the spread of venereal disease.<sup>3</sup> Whereas comparable systems of regulation in the Ottoman Empire were left largely unchallenged, the abolitionism of Western Europe which rose at the end of the 19th century contended such state practices and the idea of a pathological prostitute. Taking up descriptions of “fallen victims”, tricked, trafficked, and trapped into registered brothels, *Selling Sex in the City* explores these debates which still bear significance on how we talk about prostitution today.

A long entangled history stemmed from the emerging “white slavery” discourses of the 1880s, bringing about western dominated political and academic discourses regarding sex worker’s rights and human trafficking in the 1990s. Described by several authors and brilliantly articulated by Mark David Wyers (“*Selling Sex in Istanbul*”), dualistic notions of voluntarism and coercion in Europe and the United States began to pitch the sex worker against the trafficking victim, all the while the actions in the name of such discursive wars resembled neo-imperialism in post-colonial contexts.<sup>4</sup> For those of us who are familiar with these debates of the past 30 years, *Selling Sex in City* is a toolkit to resolving some of what often felt like irresolvable dualisms around prostitution as work or as slavery. By combining a comparative historical approach with a global labour perspective, this book has managed to grasp the complexity of individual experiences while articulating the complicatedness of capturing them on a spectrum bracketed by the language of coercion and choice.

Whether perpetrated by the state or other third parties, both violence and abuse have long been a common aspect of sex worker's lives. These chapters nevertheless demonstrate how such oppressive conditions are not innate to the trade but rather the result of stigma and lack of legal protection. The historic tendency toward increased criminalisation, along with 100 years of anti-trafficking discourses and actions against "slavery" has generally resulted in the further harassment of women by authorities, rather than any increase in rights.<sup>5</sup> While the editors are clear that this project does not view prostitution on a par with slavery, they point out that slavery has been examined from a global labour perspective for its historic function within economic systems.<sup>6</sup> Thus convincingly justifying their examination of sex work as a labour activity irrespective of ones positioning in contentious contemporary debates. *Selling Sex in the City* gives new insights into how sex workers, like other historically stigmatised labourers, have navigated the fine lines of consent, coercion, and economic constraint.<sup>7</sup> Addressing questions around work, legislation, migration, and prostitution, this book is a must-read for labour and legal historians, lawyers, and legislators, who are interested in the rights of sex workers and trafficking victims, as well as the conditions which affected them historically. It provides a densely rich and complex look at five hundred years of social, economic, and political entanglements that will fascinate global and world historians, as well as those interested in colonial, urban, and migration history. In providing novel approaches to understanding the contested theories and practices around sold sex, *Selling Sex in*

the City is an essential, even if very large, handbook for activists and political actors engaged in debates around sex work and human trafficking.

#### Notes

- 1 See the chapters of Mechant, *The Social Profiles of Prostitutes*, and M. Turno, *Sex for Sale in Florence*.
- 2 See S. Gronewold, *Prostitution in Shanghai*, pp. 567–593; H. Hammad/E. Biancani, *Prostitution in Cairo*; M. Umoren Ekpoottu, *Sexualizing the City: Female Prostitution in Nigeria's Urban Centres in a Historical Perspective*, pp. 306–328.
- 3 Mechant, *The Social Profiles of Prostitutes*, p. 67; E. Van Nederveen Meerkerk/M. Rodríguez García/L. H. Van Voss, *Sex Sold in World Cities, 1600s–2000s. Some Conclusions to the Project*, p. 871.
- 4 Umoren Ekpoottu, *Sexualizing the City: Female Prostitution in Nigeria's Urban Centres in a Historical Perspective*, p. 314; Van Nederveen Meerkerk/Rodríguez García/Van Voss, *Sex Sold in World Cities, 1600s–2000s. Some Conclusions to the Project*, p. 872.
- 5 M. D. Wyers, *Selling Sex in Istanbul*, pp. 791–792.
- 6 Van Nederveen Meerkerk/Rodríguez García/Van Voss, *Sex Sold in World Cities, 1600s–2000s. Some Conclusions to the Project*, p. 875.
- 7 Rodríguez García/Van Nederveen Meerkerk/Van Voss, *Selling Sex in World Cities, 1600s–2000s: An Introduction*, pp. 14–17.

**Leos Müller: *Neutrality in World History (Themes in World History)*, London: Routledge 2019, 178 p.**

Reviewed by Frederik Dhondt (Antwerp/Gent)

Leos Müller's book attempts to provide a conceptual overview of neutrality "in