

History of Prostitution

Throughout history/herstory, women have prostituted themselves by choice but especially by force; it was imposed on them. It is believed that prostitution has existed since the beginning of time. As a matter of fact, "acts of prostitution must have occurred when primitive man paid for the sexual favors of woman he wanted – with a special morsel of food or some object – when he was not inclined or not strong enough, to take her by force."



(Benjamin 35) In this text, I will attempt to summarise the history of women's prostitution – mostly its major points throughout the world – from 300 B.C. up to now.

Ancient Cyprus

Around 300 B.C., prostitution was seen and existed as “temple” or “sacred” prostitution. In Ancient Cyprus, each respectable woman was required to prostitute herself at least once to a stranger in order to become eligible for marriage. Once this was done, she had to wait, in the temple of Mylitta, for a stranger to come along and ask a favour from her. Some women, who were less pretty, would wait years in the temple. The money earned would be dedicated to the goddess Mylitta. (Benjamin 1964)

Ancient Egypt

In Ancient Egypt, prostitution “has throughout history been exceedingly prevalent and popular.” (Benjamin 37) One story, the story of Cheops, relates that when Cheops



“was short of money, he would send his daughter to a bawdy-house, with instructions of charging a certain sum¹” (Benjamin 37). It is also stated in Harry Benjamin's book that Egyptian fathers prostituted their daughters.

Ancient Greece

In Ancient Greece there were four general classes among prostitutes: *Hetairae*, the aristocrats of Greek prostitution who “were able to attach themselves to the most famous and distinguished men of their time and became ‘powers behind the throne’ in politics, the arts, and other important areas of Greek life”, (Benjamin 40).



Auletrides who were musicians and dancers, usually foreigners; *dicteriades* who were brothel prostitutes; and *concubines* who were slaves.

Rome

In Rome, more severe laws were instituted but with no great effect. “From comparatively staid beginnings Roman sexual history moves toward a crescendo of eroticism such as the world has rarely seen.” (Benjamin 45) Nevertheless, it still remained a “double standard” that favoured the freedom of the male. “Prostitution is recognised as an essential and useful institution, but the prostitute is condemned and despised.” (Benjamin 49) All in all, in Rome, there were periods of tolerance and periods of persecution concerning prostitution.

Middle Ages

Europe

During the 12th century, prostitutes were not “supported” during Charlemagne’s and Frederick Barbarossa’s reigns, consequently, whores were beheaded during these periods. Then, in the 13th century, a man named Saint Thomas Aquinas defended prostitutes and argued that: “prostitution is a necessary evil preventing seductions and rapes.” (Benjamin 51)

Toward the modern world

Italy



“It would be difficult to overestimate the sexual freedom, and sometimes sexual violence, of Renaissance Italy. [...] Restraints upon sexual expression were limited” (Benjamin 56). Prostitution was not accepted everywhere (Mantua, Parma, Bergamo, Padua) and consequently, measures were taken to regulate it, for example prostitutes had to go through identification proceduresⁱⁱ, they were secluded and restricted to special quarters. On the other hand, in other places such as Naples, Venice, Florence, and Bologna, prostitution flourished.

England

During the 16th century, after Henry VIII’s reign, whores could start practising again (under the reign of Edward) but still, prostitution was “technically” considered illegal. This is when the “Catholic argument of Thomas Aquinas was being resurrected, but to no avail – brothels remained illegal – although the authorities could now be encouraged, through bribes and free sex, to turn a blind eye.” (Roberts 122) By the end of the 16th century, there were a lot of whore on the market, yet, the demand was even bigger than what was available. In the 17th century, Puritans propagated the anti-pleasure of whores; “all forms of pleasure (were) seen as sinful”. (Roberts 1992)

France, London

The 18th century was “The Golden Age of Prostitution”. As a matter of fact, during this period, prostitution was very popular. There were even places where whores could get training in order to be professional and adaptableⁱⁱⁱ. This was the case in Mme

Gourdan's establishment in Paris and in Mrs Goadsby's and Miss Fawkland's establishments in London. (Roberts 1992)

These types of places mainly received wealthy clients.



France

In the 19th century, France established the “Bureau of Morals” (Bureau des Mœurs). “The new agency was essentially a police force responsible for monitoring houses of prostitution.” (Head 2009)

Japan, Sweden



20th century's prostitution was seen as “a fate worse than death”. “During World War II, the Japanese government abducted between 80,000 and 300,000 women and girls from Japanese-occupied territories and forced them to serve in ‘comfort battalions,’ militarised brothels that were created to serve Japanese soldiers.” (Head 2009) By the end of the 20th century, Sweden takes a feminist approach, prostitution is classified as a form of violence against women. (Head 2009)

Canada

As for the 21st century, “Canada has become poised to implement pragmatic solutions that outweigh the argument for ideological interventions that would further criminalize sex-trade workers.” (Now Public 2008)



To know more about the **mainlines** of the history of prostitution, you can visit this website:<http://civilliberty.about.com/od/gendersexuality/tp/History-of-Prostitution.htm>

ⁱ “This she actually did, adding a further transaction of her own; for with the intention of leaving something to be remembered by after her death, she asked her costumers to give her a block of stone, and of these stones (the story goes) was built the middle pyramid of the three which stand in front of the great pyramid.” (Benjamin 37)

ⁱⁱ “Twin effecta: prostitutes are prevented from passing themselves off as respectable women, and men are able to locate prostitutes with a minimum of difficulty.” (Benjamin 57)

ⁱⁱⁱ “The whores would be cleaned up and instructed in the arts of whoring.” (Roberts 157)

Works Cited

Benjamin, Harry. *Prostitution and Morality*. New York: The Julian Press, 1964.

Head, Tom. About.com: Civil Liberties. 2009. *Prostitution. An Illustrated History and Timeline*. 19 March 2009
<<http://civilliberty.about.com/od/gendersexuality/tp/History-of-Prostitution.htm>>

Now Public. *Prostitution in Canada: History and Reconciliation*. 2008. 19 March 2009
<<http://www.nowpublic.com/world/prostitution-canada-history-and-reconciliation>>

Roberts, Nickie. *Whores in History*. Great Britain: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1992.

Pictures and Images

(In order of appearance)

Caveman carrying a cavewoman

<http://www.geocities.com/marktape/marktape_yahoo_database.html>

Three Pyramids

<www.101destinations.com/images/pyramid.jpg>

Greek Prostitute

<<http://z.about.com/d/civilliberty/1/0/d/6/-/-/hop2.jpg>>

Italian Prostitute

<<http://z.about.com/d/civilliberty/1/0/g/6/-/-/hop5.jpg>>

18th century brothel

<images.newstatesman.com/.../2006/949/949_p40.jpg>

Forced Prostitution in Japan

<z.about.com/d/civilliberty/1/0/j/6/-/-/hop8.jpg>

“Canadian Prostitute”

<<http://www.nowpublic.com/culture/prostitution-canada-0>>