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Who Were They Working For? Sex Work, Working Girls, and Patriarchy in the Late 19th Century

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Cover Page Footnote

While today we might call these women sex workers, throughout this paper I will most often refer to them using the language of the late 19th century. It is through the lens of this language—working girls, fallen women, soiled doves—that these women understood their jobs and their positions in society. Any references to sex work should not be taken to mean that these women were willingly engaged in the industry; rather, I use the term “sex work” to describe the industry because it is the simplest and most neutral description of the jobs these women had.

Who Were They Working For?

Sex Work, Working Girls, and Patriarchy in the Late 19th Century

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Abstract

In the Late 19th century, America's "wild west" was notorious for its sex trade. Some historians argue that the women who participated in sex work were victims of a patriarchal society, yet others claim such women were empowered. While late 19th century sex workers challenged certain aspects of patriarchy, they remained unable to escape from their overarching patriarchal society; their lives and work must be re-examined through a more nuanced lens.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Sex Work, Prostitution, Working Girls, 19th Century, West

Introduction

In the late 1890s, Lil Lovell opened an upscale parlor house in Denver where she employed several working girls, including her younger sister, Lois. A businessman fell in love with Lois and proposed, but the woman knew she would not be able to marry him without destroying his reputation. Distraught, Lois poisoned herself. When her lover discovered that she had committed suicide, he shot himself at her grave. Lil Lovell lived the rest of her life with the guilt of knowing that she was the one who invited her sister to come to Denver. She died a few years later with a fortune of about \$40,000 (MacKell 96). The Lovell sisters' story contains many of the contradictions embodied in the lives of late 19th century sex workers. While

successful financially, the sisters were ostracized socially and were both ultimately unhappy with their lives. Both knew that once they entered the world of fallen women—regardless of their motives—there was no going back. It was this fact that drove Lois to take her own life.

When faced with stories like these, many historians have traditionally painted working girls as hapless victims. Their lives as social outcasts were full of physical abuse, addiction, and financial strain. Desperate women were often chewed up and spit out by a society that both demanded their work and condemned it (Seagraves xviii). More recently, historians have begun to push back against these victim narratives. Many women who engaged in sex work, like Lil, became wildly successful financially. They transgressed social boundaries, taking on roles in political and economic spheres that were typically reserved for men. These women cannot be viewed simply as victims; their challenges to gender roles helped pave the way for those women after them who demanded access to rights previously reserved for men.

Neither of these narratives fully does justice to the situation of working girls in the late 19th century. Many women were victimized; many others were bold transgressors of gender norms. Oftentimes, their lives were a mix of both. These women did cross social boundaries in ways that helped to resist the patriarchal society they lived in, and their accomplishments and achievements in doing so must be recognized. However, their lives as working girls and madams ultimately served to reinforce the patriarchal structure of society, even as some of their actions confronted the norms that structure created.

Gender Roles and Relations in the Late 19th Century

In the late 19th century, social norms were largely informed by the growing white middle class of Eastern cities. These norms centered Victorian gender roles, which located power, authority, and respect in masculinity. Women were valued primarily for their purity and piety

(Pascoe xv). These gender roles created “separate spheres”; men belonged in the public and controlled politics, economics, and labor, while women were expected to remain in private and dedicate their lives to domesticity (Hoganson 3). Women were also considered the guardians of virtue and morality; it was their job to “civilize” men (Hoganson 19, 22). The Victorian standard of morality held that “true” women were asexual (Jameson 150-151). A woman’s honor was therefore entwined with her sexual virtue, and any woman who did not protect that virtue would quickly become an outcast (Rutter 2). When it came to men, however, Jeremy Agnew describes that, “sex was considered to be a base form of male expression that had to be given periodic release in order to prevent dire consequences” (Agnew 17-18). These conceptions of morality led to a double standard: sex work was considered by many to be a necessary evil, and men who visited working girls did not face devastating social stigma. The same men that created the demand for sex work, however, would only respect “good” women, because ultimately it was women’s duty to keep men moral (Rutter 30, 32). In this way, women were placed on a “moral pedestal” which, while nominally proclaiming respect, allowed men to engage in non-marital sex while condemning women who did the same thing (Rutter 101).

Victorian gender roles were additionally restrictive for women who were structurally barred from upholding them and were therefore trapped in the category of “bad women.” Victorian standards of “proper” womanhood automatically excluded women of color, as white society hyper-sexualized these women and therefore barred them from upholding Victorian sexual standards. Working-class women who could not remain in the domestic sphere and had to transgress into the male-dominated labor market were also structurally barred from fulfilling Victorian standards of female domesticity. Their failure to live up to the impossible standards of

femininity meant women of color and working-class women were largely marginalized and disrespected by white, affluent society.

Madeleine Blair, a woman who engaged in sex work in the late 19th century, exemplifies Victorian thinking in her autobiography. Madeleine, who published under a pseudonym, grew up somewhere in what she refers to as the “Middle West” (Blair 4). As a child, she was raised in a middle-class white family who instructed her in morality based on what Madeleine characterizes as “a strict heaven-and-hell belief” (Blair). Although Madeleine was raised in a rural community, her class consciousness is evident in her disdainful description of her hometown. She states, “This community was new and crude, and its inhabitants were for the greater part persons of little education and few aspirations” (Blair). Her reference to education is a thinly veiled class reference, as Madeleine recognizes her own privilege in being one of the only educated children due to her family’s affluence. Her disdain for the working-class based on her perception of their lack of “aspirations” remains with her throughout her autobiography, as she often describes working-class people she encounters as uneducated, lazy, or morally destitute.

Madeleine’s upbringing also instilled in her ideals of Victorian gender roles, exhibited when she describes her parents by saying, “My mother seemed to have been created for the expressed purpose of being a mother...My father was the mainspring of our pleasant home life. Mother was the balance wheel” (Blair 5). She describes her mother as a site of “balance” in the family who dutifully serves her domestic role in taking care of the children. Her father is the “wellspring,” the source of vitality who imparts education to Madeleine when she is young. These descriptions exemplify Victorian gender standards that cast women in domestic roles. Such gender roles also included an emphasis on female sexual morality which Madeleine deeply internalized.

As Madeleine grew older, her father became an alcoholic, plunging the family into destitution. However, Madeleine's childhood instruction in Victorian social standards remained with her. When her family moved to a working-class neighborhood where their neighbors were "fallen women," Madeleine described them as "ignorant, corrupt women" (Blair 7). She maintained her belief that it was her moral duty as a woman to abstain from sex and describes her struggle to do so, saying, "I made a terrific effort to keep above the level of my environment and that of my forbidden companions. My mother's training and example, and my own inherent sense of decency, fought for the right. My environment and social isolation fought against it. The result was inevitable; I lost the battle" (Blair). Despite her eventual career as a working girl and, later, a madam—an owner and operator of a brothel—Madeleine maintained the view that sexual abstinence was of the utmost importance for women throughout her life, something that led her to grapple continuously with guilt over profession. Her beliefs about class, gender, and sex all illustrate the more widely held beliefs of Victorian society in the late 19th century.

Looking West

In the West, Victorian moral standards held less weight. A significant proportion of women of color lived in the West in the late 19th century, from Mexican women along the Southern border to Chinese women along the west coast. Additionally, working-class women who needed to make a living were more likely to move west than comfortably affluent middle- or upper-class women. Because the lofty standard for womanhood was largely modeled off middle and upper-class white women, many western women could not fit these standards due to their varying class or race (Jameson 147). The impossibility for these women to uphold the social standards of white, affluent society made it more acceptable to disregard those standards.

Importantly, there was also a significantly skewed sex ratio in the beginnings of western settlement by non-natives (Seagraves x). Without the “civilizing” influence of wives, mothers, and children, moral boundaries became more fluid. Largely out of necessity, women began to engage in what had previously been “men’s work.” Western women additionally became more involved in government; western states and territories were the first to grant women the vote (Rutter 96-97). Despite the more flexible nature of western morality, however, western society still expected women to attempt to uphold Victorian standards. This was especially true in areas with a higher proportion of middle- and upper-class white families; as more middle- and upper-class white women moved west, they brought their standards of femininity along (Seagraves xi). While the West provided unprecedented opportunities for women to engage in non-normative gender behavior, western women still often wanted to appear respectable, and those who moved too far outside the realm of acceptable behavior typically faced social stigma (Jameson 154).

Working Girls’ Place in Society

Working girls lived outside the realm of social respectability. Across the United States, consensus held that working girls were necessary, but they had no place in the social sphere (Tong 25-26). An unwillingness to deny male sexual urges (McGerr 90) meant that the demand for sex work remained high, even as the trade was publicly abhorred (Agnew 16). Beginning in the mid-19th century, middle class campaigns against vice—including sex work—arose (McGerr 85). In the West, these crusades gained traction as more “decent” women and children began to arrive in the later decades of the century. Communities made increasing efforts to eradicate immoral behavior that they previously tolerated (Rutter 98-99). However, these campaigns did little to eliminate sex work. Instead, they typically increased spatial segregation as laws forced working girls to move into separate districts or operate clandestinely (Rutter 79, 104).

Most of these women were working class and poorly educated, and many came from dysfunctional homes (McGerr 87; Rutter 2). Lack of education or familial support systems made them more vulnerable to exploitation; most women were forced into sex work out of economic necessity (McGerr 87; Murphy 193, 195). Madeleine, for example, did not become a working girl until economic and familial support from her father disappeared. When Madeleine eventually tried to leave sex work, a financial crisis made her feel it was necessary to go back to the trade to support her family (Blair 37-38).

Because working girls occupied a position outside the acceptable boundaries of womanhood in society, they were strictly separated from “decent” girls (Rutter ix). Once a girl turned to sex work, she forfeited the division between private and public that was central to Victorian gender roles as her private life became the subject of public scorn (Murphy 194). Because the separate spheres still held moral weight, however, the public had more respect for a working girl that kept her business more private (Murphy 195). Within this context, a hierarchy of sex work emerged in the West that was largely class-based. At the top were parlor houses. The working girls were boarders in these houses, and they entertained wealthy, upper-class customers (Seagraves 24). Parlor house girls might entertain only one or two clients a night; they lived the most glamorous lives of working girls in the West (Rutter 13-16). The next step down were high-end brothels, which were similar to parlor houses but not quite as luxurious (Rutter 18-19). Working girls made less money than parlor house ladies, and they had a faster turnover (Seagraves 29). While this higher end of the sex work hierarchy afforded more privacy to the women and therefore more respect, working girls in parlor houses and high-end brothels were generally relegated to red light districts—designated areas for “vice”—in towns to emphasize their separateness from truly “respectable” women (Seagraves 28).

The same red light districts that might hold high-end brothels would certainly segregate common and high-volume brothels, which were more run down and typically serviced a working-class clientele (Rutter 19-21). Working girls in these brothels saw a higher number of customers; depending on the quality of the brothel and the customer base, a woman might see up to twenty-five men in one night (Seagraves 56). Common brothels were also more subject to legal troubles and had higher instances of venereal disease (Rutter 21-22). Even worse than the run-down brothels, however, were the “cribs.” Many crib women worked for pimps and operated out of tiny apartments, tents, or shacks. They might see up to eighty men in one night, although twenty or thirty was more common (Seagraves 60-61). These women were usually desperate, experienced higher rates of physical abuse, and expected venereal disease (Rutter 22-23). The only thing worse than working from a crib was becoming a streetwalker (Seagraves 63). Streetwalkers were often homeless with nowhere else to turn; many were serious addicts. This hierarchy illustrates that the more publicly a working girl conducted her business, the more society scorned her. However, the hierarchy also shows how lower-class women were often forced to operate more publicly when they were unable to access the material goods, such as fancy clothes, or the social connections that got women hired in the higher-end brothels. The upper-class clientele that frequented such high-class brothels wanted to be serviced by only the “best” women, and many working-class girls found themselves unable to make the cut. Madeleine worked largely in high-end brothels at the upper end of the sex work hierarchy. She attributes her ability to make connections that allowed her to find these jobs to her educational background and upper-class manners. For example, Madeleine shares the story of her work at a brothel in Chicago. While there, Madeleine repudiated the advances of a man who wanted her to engage in an orgy—a repudiation that stemmed from her Victorian sensibilities. Her moral

fortitude caught the eye of another man who asked how a “nice girl” like Madeleine had come to be in such a “notorious place” (Blair 40). When Madeleine explained her situation, he tipped her off to another parlor house that was more respectable—“the most exclusive trade in Chicago” (Blair). Madeleine’s attempts to adhere to class-based Victorian standards were what would make her eligible for a place at this more “exclusive”—read: private and wealthy—employer. However, most working girls did not have Madeleine’s upper-class upbringing or her education in Victorian morality, and Madeleine acknowledges how this background distinguished her from many of the other working girls she encountered throughout her life.

One type of sex work that was uniquely Western and did not fit neatly into the hierarchy were cottage girls: independent contractors who worked out of their own homes. These women typically lived in more rural areas and sometimes became well-respected members of their communities. Small, rural communities in the West were often more accepting of support from non-conventional sources, because their isolation meant they had to be more self-sufficient. This need for self-sufficiency meant that all members were expected to chip in, and cottage girls were therefore able to gain respect through both financial contributions and their roles as one of the only sources of female companionship for lonely men. Cottage girls illustrate how the West was a site that often allowed for non-normative gender expression: while working girls who operated more publicly were typically scorned, many cottage girls were open about their professions and still gained some level of acceptance in rural, Western communities.

Working Girls’ Challenges to Patriarchy

Regardless of where she worked, the working girl transgressed one of the most important social boundaries of her time: she expressed her sexuality. This act in and of itself resisted the gender norms imposed on women; it forced Victorian society to confront the reality that female

sexuality existed, when moral standards insisted that such sexuality was natural only in men (Agnew 17-18). This confrontation challenged Victorian morality, and, because of this challenge, society was forced to explain away sex work as a corruption of the natural order. This explanation went so far as to redefine gender boundaries, placing working girls in a position outside “true womanhood” (Murphy 195).

Working girls were additionally placed outside “true womanhood” by Victorian society when they refused to bind themselves to men through marriage. Through the slang word “tom,” which was often applied to working girls, these women were sometimes conflated with “masculine” women who preferred female to male company (Halberstam 51). Some working girls enjoyed female company so much that they engaged in sexual relationships with other women (Seagraves 117; Murphy 199). While such relationships were not common, the fact that they existed goes even further to show how many working girls claimed ownership over their sexualities and had sex lives centered not only around men, but also for their own enjoyment. In a society that ostracized and condemned women who did not suppress their sexuality and tried to silence those who provided evidence that such sexuality existed, these were all subversive acts. Going even further to challenge the norm of nonexistent female sexuality, some working girls enjoyed their work (Seagraves 57). Big Nose Kate, a working girl who was involved with the notorious Doc Holliday, is reported to have said that she enjoyed her job; she certainly had opportunities to leave, yet consistently returned to brothels (Rutter 149). Madeleine Blair also describes instances of women who willingly chose and seemed to enjoy sex work. The women that Madeleine describes were middle or upper-class; many were engaged to respectable men and studying at conservatories. While they kept their jobs secret, they still chose to engage in sex work to earn extra spending money (Blair 67-68). This choice indicates that they preferred sex

work to other work that were both available to women and considered more socially respectable, such as jobs in department stores. In fact, despite hiding their sex work—which indicates an awareness of the public ostracization the work could cause—these women chose to become “soiled doves.” Since their choices did not come out of necessity, they may have even enjoyed the work if they willingly chose to risk becoming social outcasts.

The respect that many working girls accrued in the West also speaks to their abilities to challenge social norms. In the earlier days of western settlement, many communities accepted working girls as part of their societies (Seagraves 149). One example of this acceptance is Tascosa, a Texas town where working girls were not spatially segregated (Seagraves 154-155). Anne Seagraves describes, “The dance hall girls and prostitutes were included in the community. Their children went to school and played with the other children, without a hint of discrimination” (Seagraves 155). Despite the reigning social norms that insisted working girls were “fallen women” and should be socially ostracized, in Tascosa working girls were treated as community members, fully integrated into town life. And Tascosa was not the only Western town where working girls could live harmoniously within a larger community; some places established legal “vice zones” that lasted for up to a decade (Rutter 29-30). While the spatial segregation of “vice zones” still marginalized these women by physically restricting where they were allowed to conduct business, the legalization of these zones was a unique occurrence that indicated a level of acceptance not typically found in the urban “vice zones” of the East. Even in towns where sex work was illegal, many women became integral community members. Julia Bulette, a cottage girl who worked in Virginia City, Nevada, was held in high esteem for her charity and support of the city’s firefighters (Rutter 111-114). When she was suddenly murdered, the town came together to hold a funeral that was “the largest and the grandest in the

history of Virginia City.” The local authorities thoroughly investigated her murder until they caught the culprit and sentenced him to death (Rutter 117-119). In a society where crimes against working girls were typically ignored, the effort of Bulette’s community to hold her murderer accountable goes to show how integral Bulette was to Virginia City: a crime against her was a crime against the community.

Bulette’s story also illustrates a wider theme of social acceptance across the West. Despite their status as fallen women and their transgressions of Victorian moral codes, many western citizens still viewed working girls as assets to their communities. This acceptance challenged the stereotypes that fallen women were either victims or perpetrators of sin—instead, they were people who had important contributions to make to western society. The sheer lack of women in the West can explain some of this acceptance; the expectation that men treat women well meant that if the only women around were working girls, they were sometimes regarded as women first and soiled doves second (Tong 5). However, this explanation is not sufficient on its own. The fact that working girls could break a cardinal rule of “respectable” society and still manage to earn places as productive and valued members of their communities speaks to their abilities to challenge ideas about why women deserved respect and the possible routes available to women looking to find a place in a community. Working girls helped carve a larger space for women in society by insisting that they be respected for reasons that held no weight under the pretext of Victorian morality, but that made sense for western communities, and in doing so they further undermined the foundations of Victorian morality and helped lay a new foundation for rethinking gender roles in American society. If a working girl could become a respected part of a western community, perhaps the only “respectable” options available to women were not just virginity or motherhood—maybe women could explore other roles and create new options.

There is perhaps no greater testimony to working girls' abilities to challenge notions of respectability than those who eventually married. Despite her status as a fallen woman, a working girl in the West had a chance of marrying and becoming a respectable member of society, particularly in smaller, more rural towns (Seagraves 58). For Chinese working girls across the West coast, this was especially true due to the fact that Chinese women were largely banned from entering the country. Thus, most Chinese women were smuggled into the United States through the illegal sex trade. Chinese men looking to marry, then, often turned to these women. During the 1870s many Chinese working girls left their trade for matrimony, and those who married rarely returned to sex work (Tong 159, 175). The life of Lalu Nathoy is a particularly poignant success story when it comes to challenging social norms. Her impoverished family sold her to a Western saloon keeper in 1866, at age thirteen. After engaging in sex work for some time, Nathoy married a Euro-American man—an interracial union that the laws of the time prohibited (Shah 137). The two lived together on a homestead, which Nathoy eventually ran after the death of her husband (Tong 22-23). Throughout her life, Nathoy crossed racial, social, and economic barriers. Clearly, she found ways to carve her own path in a society where her life should have been strictly regimented by social norms.

Above all, working girls broke down social boundaries in their trespasses into the masculine economic sphere. Many women used sex work to become economically independent (Seagraves 62). In an era when women were almost universally dependent on male relatives to survive, female economic independence was subversive in and of itself; it challenged the notion that a woman had to depend on a man to survive. While some working girls became financially successful, madams had the greatest amount of success. Many fallen women saved money until they could open their own businesses—which quickly became integral to the 19th century

Western economy. Seagraves describes, “Collectively, their businesses employed the largest group of women on the frontier. They supplied a home for thousands of females” (Seagraves 87). Most western madams owned real estate, paid taxes, bribed corrupt town officials and law officers, and donated to charity; the money they made went back to their communities (Seagraves). Sex work provided one of the only avenues through which women could become not only financially independent, but successful. By transgressing moral norms of the time, women were able to enter the public economic sphere that had been previously reserved for men.

Patriarchal Constraints on Working Girls

Undoubtedly, working girls confronted the social norms of their time. The work they did and the lives they led helped question long-held convictions about what roles were socially acceptable for women in society, and their accomplishments in breaking down social barriers should not be overlooked. However, sex work still operated within patriarchal society. Although many working girls challenged the ways that patriarchy was instituted, few—if any—directly challenged the patriarchal structure itself. While some working girls enjoyed their work, sex work was ultimately a business centered around male sexual pleasure. There is nothing subversive about the use of female bodies for male pleasure in a patriarchal society that already insists that the primary purpose of women is to please men. Additionally, though some women willingly chose to become working girls, the vast majority were forced, often out of economic necessity; women had few economic opportunities in a labor market dominated by men (Rutter 7). Other women were kidnapped or trafficked (Rutter 90-92); this was the case for almost all Chinese working girls in the West (Tong 54). Forcing women to sate male pleasure did nothing to undermine a patriarchal structure in which women were expected to dedicate themselves to attending to the needs of men.

Once in the business, working girls lived with the constant threat of physical violence. Some suffered at the hands of abusive pimps (Murphy 196), while others were subject to cruelty from madams (Rutter 63). Ah Toy, a ruthless and wealthy Chinese trafficker, encouraged the crews on voyages across the Pacific to “break” the girls by raping them (Rutter 132). Working girls additionally encountered violence from each other—competition was fierce, and disputes often erupted (Murphy 198; Rutter 61). Above all, however, these women lived under the threat of physical abuse from clients (Rutter 63). Anne Seagraves explains, “The woman was considered fair game and required to do as he [the male client] wished...No matter how humiliating or painful it became, she had to pretend she was enjoying her job” (Seagraves 25-26). Many working girls suffered physical and sexual abuse as well as rape (Tong 147-148). The risk of violence existed regardless of what type of sex work a woman engaged in. Julia Bulette, a woman highly respected in her community, was still brutally murdered: she was found strangled, shot, suffocated, and severely beaten (Seagraves 62). Women like Bulette had little to no legal recourse for the violence they suffered; working girls essentially forfeited their rights to physical protection (Rutter ix).

In addition to physical violence, the nature of sex work meant that working girls’ health was continuously put at risk. Sexually transmitted diseases were a frequent occurrence and could sometimes be lethal (Rutter 11, 73). Madeleine explains how a venereal disease put her in the hospital and prevented her from traveling (Blair 20); doctors also told her the disease had made her sterile, although she later discovered this was untrue (Blair 58). STDs, however, were simply a matter of course for most working girls. When Madeleine was hospitalized, she found herself bedfellows with a fallen woman who had the same disease but treated it “as a matter for jesting” (Blair 21).

While STDs may have been a matter for jesting, pregnancy was no joke. A disease could be treated; a child was not so easily dealt with (Seagraves 62). Pregnancy was dangerous, and the medicine of the time could do little to help difficult births (Rutter 67). Madeleine describes her first pregnancy, at seventeen, as one of the most difficult times in her life, saying, “I had grown very nervous and irritable, and cried almost constantly for my mother. I was sure that I would not live through the coming ordeal” (Blair 30). Madeleine was right; the birth nearly killed her (Blair 31). Because working girls could not use the most common forms of birth control (abstinence and withdrawal), they had to turn to other methods which were rarely effective (Seagraves 62; Rutter 68). More often, working girls had to rely on illegal and unsafe abortions (Seagraves 63). When Madeleine discovered that she was pregnant for a third time, her young son had just died. Unable to bear the thought of having another child, she terminated the pregnancy herself. The abortion nearly cost Madeleine her life; she writes, “When peritonitis set in he [the doctor] sent me to the hospital, and for the second time in a few weeks I heard from his lips the words, ‘There is no hope.’” She goes on to say, “Within two months I was sound and well physically, but the dark veil of sorrow which had settled down upon me shut out all the joys of life. I was twenty-two years old, and life seemed over for me,” emphasizing that the emotional toll of her ordeal was as great—if not greater than—the physical toll (Blair 70-71).

In addition to violence, disease, and unwanted pregnancies, working girls experienced a greater incidence of addiction (Murphy 200). In her lifetime, Madeleine struggled with both a gambling addiction and alcoholism. Both addictions were a direct result of the pressure she felt in her work, first as a working girl and then, later, as a madam of her own brothel (Blair 101). This was not uncommon; many madams and working girls fell into substance abuse and gambling due to stress, depression, or simple bad luck (Rutter 17).

Clearly, sex work was extremely harmful to a vast majority of women who entered the business. The demand to satisfy male pleasure came at the expense of the lives of countless women. Whatever boundaries working girls crossed in making their sexualities public, physical subjugation kept these women firmly in place. Similarly, even those women who became financially successful did so in an industry that forced them to cater to men. Because of the nature of sex work, women had to submit to men or risk losing their jobs; thus, even the wealthiest, most successful working girls were still ultimately economically dependent on men. Madeleine, who was unusually successful and sheltered compared to many of her fellow working girls, describes the trauma that resulted from sex work when she writes about a doctor, “His hands made me shudder, for I had grown very sensitive in the matter of hands. Whenever I had been forced to submit myself to customers I looked at the hands that were to touch my bare flesh before I looked at the face of the man who was buying the right to handle me at will” (Blair 31). While some women were able to thrive in this system, most were not. Many had little control over the money they earned, as it ended up in the pockets of brothel owners or pimps—this was especially the case for trafficked Chinese women (Tong 13, 104).

Additionally, men profited heavily from sex work. Male pimps could live off the earnings of the women they exploited (Seagraves 57-58). Chinese gangs—called tongs—played a large role in trafficking Chinese women, and the men in these gangs enjoyed the financial success of the working girls (Tong 10-13). Even “respectable” men profited from sex work; sometimes wealthy businessmen would secretly do business with madams, and city officials made money from taxing and fining working girls (Rutter 13, 60). Corrupt city officials also made money from bribes; Madeleine recounts in her autobiography how she had to pay off both the municipal and mounted police in Canada when she opened her own brothel (Blair 96-97). Although the

economic independence of individual women was subversive in a society where women were expected to be directly dependent on men, the personal economic freedom of wealthy working girls and madams was gained within an economic sphere that remained male-dominated, making even financially successful working women indirectly dependent on men for their money. This market structure ultimately did nothing to undermine the larger patriarchal structure in which women were kept dependent on men.

Furthermore, while men often profited from sex work, the financial success that women in the flesh trade experienced—although an important achievement under the social conditions of the time—was an anomaly. Many madams, brothel owners, pimps, and tongs purposely kept women indebted so that they would not be able to leave the business (Seagraves 25; Rutter 45). Madams and working girls alike often died in poverty (Rutter 58). One example is the story of Calamity Jane; originally driven to become a crib girl out of desperation, Jane eventually became a celebrity (Rutter 160-168). However, even her fame could not guarantee her economic security; Rutter describes, “the money she made was quickly spent, and she didn’t have the ability to build a career on her legend. She found herself employed as a sporting woman, usually in low-end dives” (Rutter 168). While men could consistently profit from sex work, the women generating the profit had little economic security even if they managed to become celebrities. This pattern typically held true; oftentimes, both the sexuality and the money of working girls benefited men more than they helped the girls themselves. And while some western working girls managed to garner respect from their communities, the vast majority remained ostracized from the same communities that their work helped to support. No matter how wealthy or upscale a brothel was, the vice almost always remained segregated within towns to specific districts,

clearly distinguished from polite society. Towns like Tascosa were abnormalities that had virtually disappeared by the beginning of the twentieth century.

When a woman became a working girl, she was not only scorned by her community; she often forfeited her chances of having a family. If a woman who entered the profession had family, they often disowned her. Pearl Starr was a wealthy, successful madam who ran an upscale parlor house and used her earnings to bail her brother out of jail. Even after her kindness, her brother refused to speak to her or acknowledge their relation because he was so ashamed of her work (Rutter 180). When Madeleine's family discovered that she had become a working girl to support them, she writes, "they cast me out of their lives" (Blair 61). When working girls were shunned by their families, they rarely had the opportunity to start new ones. Although some working girls—particularly Chinese women—were able to find husbands, marriage was typically out of the question, especially under Victorian moral strictures (Rutter 8). Madeleine exemplifies this perspective when she writes of a man who proposed to her, knowing she was both pregnant and a working girl, "Surely it was not I who was mad; it was he, that he should be pleading for the privilege of marrying a woman of my kind, and be ready to fill the place of a father to a child who might even be the offspring of a man like the 'Beast.' That this man had lost his mind was quite evident to me. No sane man would do this thing" (Blair 60). Madeleine's insistence that a man must be out of his mind to want to marry a girl of "her kind"—a fallen woman, a soiled dove—exhibits how Victorian morality led many to believe that once a woman had engaged in sexual sin, there was no turning back. Additionally, those working girls who had children were often unable to provide the care needed and had to give the child to relatives or other families (Murphy 197). Other working girls' children ended up in poor farms or orphanages (Seagraves 116). The isolation of working girls served to keep them subjugated—they might cross social

boundaries and break down social barriers, but those actions could have little impact if they were shunned from wider society.

Working girls felt the burden of their ostracization; many working girls and madams felt ashamed of their work. Wong Ah So, a Chinese girl who was tricked into sex work, tried to hide her situation from one of her father's friends when he attempted to help her. She writes, "Under the circumstances, I refused to admit that I knew my own parents, for fear that I would disgrace them" (Wong 32). Wong Ah So was afraid of bringing shame to her family, even though she had been forced into sex work without any say in the matter. Madeleine also expresses guilt throughout her autobiography, both for her time as a working girl as well as her work as a madam. She writes about her time as a brothel owner, "It made me heartsick to feel that everything that I had ever touched had been corrupted by my touch" (Blair 104).

The result of this guilt and shame was that most working girls—even those who were wealthy, famous, or well-respected—did not want to be viewed publicly as fallen women. Calamity Jane concealed the fact of her sex work (Rutter 166). Julia Bulette once refused to sit in a theater box for fallen women and dressed like a "decent" woman in public; she did not want people to discern her line of work based on her appearance (Rutter 116). Madeleine took pride in the fact that those who were not aware of her profession were unable to recognize her "fallen" status; even at her lowest point, she writes, "I walked over and looked at my own face in the mirror, searching for the signs of vice and dissipation which should have been there. My eyes looked very weary, and in repose my face was so inexpressibly sad that it was a subject of much comment, but it did not bear the scarlet brand" (Blair 107).

As Madeleine's description shows, happiness eluded even those who were successful in sex work. Suicide was common among working girls and madams alike. Girls would often

overdose on opiates or, if that did not work, shoot themselves (Seagraves 58, 117-119). These negative feelings—guilt, shame, anguish—served to prevent working girls from significantly challenging social norms. Desperate, depressed women often struggled to find the will to live, much less to acknowledge or fight back against patriarchal structures in any concerted effort.

The despair felt by so many working girls is palpable in the story of Wong Ah So. In recounting her experiences, she writes, “I can’t help but cry” (Wong 33). When writing to her mother, she says, “Your daughter’s condition is very tragic, even when she is sick she must practice prostitution (literally do business with her own flesh and skin)” (Wong 34). The girl goes on to express resentment, saying, “When I was at home, Mother, you looked down upon me as a daughter. Since daughter came to California by right she should forsake you” (Wong.) Wong Ah So’s letter shows a startling recognition of the unfair condition of women; she criticizes her mother for looking down upon her daughter as she does not look down upon her son. However, the girl then goes on to write, “But in thinking it over, the greatest virtue in life is reverence to parents, so I am keeping a filial heart” (Wong.) Despite her awareness of the disparity between how men and women are treated in society, Wong Ah So accepts her fate without questioning the patriarchal norms that have contributed to her forced sex work. This failure to challenge the larger patriarchal structure which they lived within holds true for most—if not all—western working girls during the latter half of the nineteenth century. While they transgressed social boundaries and challenged gender norms of their time, the nature of sex work was such that it reinforced the dominance of men over women even when it called into question the ways in which that dominance had traditionally been exerted.

Conclusion

This is not to say, of course, that it was the responsibility of working girls to interrogate the patriarchy. Rather, it is an attempt to reconcile two historiographical narratives that have been placed in tension. Working girls were not merely hapless victims of the patriarchy that they lived under; in many ways, they pushed back against their victimization. Neither is it true that all working girls were somehow empowered or posed significant challenges to the patriarchy. Instead, we must acknowledge both the ways that these women pushed back against specific patriarchal norms even while they were simultaneously victimized by a larger patriarchal structure that they did little to challenge. Susan Armitage insists that when writing about western women, “Whatever our final opinion of their lives, we must start with their own self-explanations” (Armitage 14). Working girls were by no means a homogenous group; their self-explanations were varied. Some insight, however, can be gained from the words of Madeleine Blair, who writes, “Few women, indeed, love the life, but many love the ease and luxury, the power over men, the idleness and freedom from responsibility, which they enjoy...But there are thousands of women who hate the life with such bitter loathing that nothing money procures can compensate them for their suffering. They are the ones who strive to prove to themselves that a woman with a past is not a woman without a future” (Blair 114). Any historical account of sex work must take into account both these women as well as all those who fall in between, and those accounts must give credit to their defiance of social norms as well as blame to the larger patriarchal society under which they were subjugated.

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