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### Helping Women Who Sell Sex: The Construction of Benevolent Identities Laura María Agustín

**Abstract:** Social interventions aimed at helping the group positioned as most needy in Europe today, migrant women who sell sex, can be understood by examining that time, 200 years ago, when 'the prostitute' was identified as needing to be saved. Before, there was no class of people who viewed their mission to be 'helping' working-class women who sold sex, but, during the 'rise of the social,' the figure of the 'prostitute' as pathetic victim came to dominate all other images. At the same time, demographic changes meant that many women needed and wanted to earn money and independence, yet no professions thought respectable were open to them. Simultaneous with the creation of the prostitute-victim, middle class women were identified as peculiarly capable of raising them up and showing the way to domesticity. These 'helpers' constructed a new identity and occupational sphere for themselves, one considered worthy and even prestigious. Nowadays, to question 'helping' projects often causes anger or dismissal. A genealogical approach, which shows how governmentality functioned in the past, is easier to accept, and may facilitate the taking of a reflexive attitude in the present.

[1] This article addresses the governmental impulse to name particular commercial-sex practices as 'prostitution' and its practitioners as 'prostitutes.' Although it is conventional to refer to 'the world's oldest profession,' the term prostitution has never described a clearly defined activity and was constructed by particular social actors at a specific time for specific reasons. [1] Within feminism, the phenomenon called prostitution is the centre of an intransigent debate about its meanings, one aspect of the conflict revolving around what words should be used to describe women who offer sexual services for sale: prostitute, sex worker, prostituted woman, victim of sexual exploitation. The use of one label or another locates the speaker on one or the other side of the debate, which essentially asks whether a woman who sells sex must by definition be considered a victim of others' actions or whether she can enjoy a degree of agency herself in her commercial practice. In the prostitution discourse, those who sell are women and those who buy are men; it is a gendered concept, despite the enormous numbers of transgenders and men who sell sex and the transgenders and women who buy it. The anxiety to define and classify concerns the position of women, and this anxious debate should be seen as a governmental exercise carried out by social actors whose own identities are at stake. Academics and other theorists and advocates for one or another vision define themselves as good feminists or caring persons through their writing and advocacy. Being 'right' about how to envision women who sell sex is necessary to these identities, which explains the heated, repetitive nature of the debate. At the same time, for most of those who actually carry out the activity that excites so much interest and conflict, the debate feels far away and irrelevant.

[2] Nowadays, much of the discourse targets migrant women who sell sex, particularly in wealthier countries. I have written in other places about the construction by outsiders of these contemporary subjects as prostitutes, sex workers or victims of 'trafficking' when their self-definitions are different (2005a), the construction of victimhood in general (2003a, 2005a), the disqualification of other elements of their identity (2002, 2004b, 2006), the obsession with certain of their sexual practices to the exclusion of everything else about their lives (2003b), the difficulty on the part of many feminists to accept the agency of working-class women who sell sex (2004a) and the voluminous

quantity of interventions designed to help, save and control them (2005b).

[3] The social sector desiring to help and save women who sell sex is very large indeed. The proliferation of discourses implicated includes the feminisation of poverty, closing borders and immigration law, international organised crime (especially 'trafficking' and modern forms of slavery), sexual-health promotion, the control of contagious diseases, debt bondage, non-recognised economic sectors, violence against women, women's and human rights, social exclusion, sex tourism, globalisation, paedophilia and child labour, as well as policies aimed at controlling the sale of sex. Attendant technologies have also proliferated, including safe houses, rehabilitation programmes, outreach projects, drop-in centres, academic research, harm-reduction theory and a whole domain of 'psy' theories and interventions concerning the causes and effects of selling sex on individuals. People positioned as experts on the subject constantly lobby governments, write and speak at conferences on the subject, with the result that women who sell sex are pathologised as victims daily.

[4] All these preoccupations and apparatuses provide employment for large numbers of people, the majority women. These social-sector jobs are considered dignified, sometimes prestigious and may even be tinged with a sacrificial brush—the idea that those employed in 'helping' are unselfish, not themselves gaining anything through their work. The fact that their projects are governmental exercises of power is ignored. There is strong resistance to the idea that rescue or social-justice projects might be questionable or criticised in general, and the internecine feminist conflict focussing on whether the activity called prostitution is inherently a form of violence or can be a plausible livelihood strategy distracts from any real reflection on the usefulness of the projects. Yet, despite the abundant efforts carried out on their behalf, there has been little improvement in the lot of women who sell sex since the whole helping project began two hundred years ago. 'Programmes presuppose that the real is programmable,' said Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller (1992: 183). In this case, 'the real' is too often a woman designated victim who does not want to be saved, so it is little wonder that programming does not work. This article therefore explores the beginnings of the identification of a pathological activity (prostitution) and the labelling of its practitioners (prostitutes), the governmental projects that resulted and the social effects on both groups involved.

[5] The history of philanthropy tends to treat as progressive and unproblematic the entry of capable women into the field, referring to them, for example, as 'willingly giving of their time and money' to 'take up the cause of the poor' (Vicinus 1985: 212). My object is not to construe all charity as simple self-servingness but rather to discuss a particular case at a specific time in history in which those doing charitable works entered into a governmental relationship with the objects of their charity, and created themselves as important social actors in the process. This period is known as 'the rise of the social.' Governmentality theory illuminates how social critics and philanthropists constructed an identity for 'the poor' in general, and 'prostitutes' in particular, which necessitated intervention, at the same period when the same critics, in need of and desiring employment, designated themselves as peculiarly suited to intervene. I explicitly highlight the non-abstract, on-the-ground practices they undertook in order to 'do something' about the identified problem, thus showing how new understandings of the object of charity permitted the exercise of power and the formation of identities in projects of saving, educating, reclaiming and protecting. 'Helping' became a profession that relied on identifying subjects and then placing them in closed spaces where they could be worked upon and controlled.

[6] On the subject of commercial sex in general (a more inclusive concept than prostitution), one can find people with reforming, repressive and regulatory theories and projects throughout history. But during the period when our contemporary concept of prostitution began, philanthropy came to be seen as an appropriate sphere of paid employment for middle-class women, who designated themselves as those authorised to care for a group of working-class women they designated prostitutes. Both groups were engaged in the search for livelihoods and a degree of independence during the development of industrial capitalism. In the new 'prostitution' discourse, both figures, the victim and the rescuer, belonged to a new vision of society in which good conduct was linked to

bourgeois, domestic marriage and family. In this vision, the woman who sold sex outside marriage could have no place.

[7] Although I have studied the European evidence in general and both French and British evidence closely, in this article, I concentrate on Britain. It should be understood, however, that studies from all over the European continent reveal similarities, making it possible to speak of general trends in the treatment of commercial sex from the Middle Ages on (Richards 1992). [\[ii\]](#)

### **Before the Invention of 'Prostitution'**

[8] I begin with the comment of a scholar of patriarchy, who points to how the term prostitution has been imposed on the past.

To understand the historic development of prostitution we need . . . to examine its relationship to the sexual regulation of all women in archaic states and its relationship to the enslavement of females. . . It is unfortunate that most authorities use the same term to cover a broad range of behavior and activities . . . which occur in archaic states. (Lerner 1986: 124)

According to Gerda Lerner, modern historians have confused distinct cultural activities, cultic sexual service and commercial sex, when writing about ancient worlds, and thus have created a cause-effect relation between the two that cannot be proved. Lerner's sources for this unjustifiable fusion are encyclopedia and historical works, the earliest William Sanger's *A History of Prostitution*, published in 1858. The date is not coincidental, falling squarely in the period which the present article explores.

[9] All over Europe before the Enlightenment, a wide range of evidence indicates that the buying and selling of sex was treated as one of an array of social offences, often considered petty. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, theologians were arguing, after St. Augustine, that it was a necessary evil (the 'sewer in the palace'). Both monarchs and municipalities began attempting to suppress various kinds of 'vice' and to limit commercial sex to designated districts, but all evidence shows that sex was sold at every place and hour and that those selling it were 'an integral part of urban life in the Middle Ages' (Richards 1992: 116). The recurring issues were (1) juridical (what offences to punish and what methods to use) and (2) zoning (where to allow women selling sex to operate). Leah Otis, writing of the Languedoc, believes that modern concepts of deviance and marginality cannot apply to the medieval period and describes the sale of sex as a 'recognized, if not particularly respected, profession' (1985: 2). Mary Perry, describing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Seville, considers that the common maxim of the day that women who sold sex were moral cesspools actually had the effect of integrating them into the social order (1985: 143).

[10] There was no word or concept which signified *exclusively* the sale of sexual services until the social period. 'Whoring' referred to sexual relations outside of marriage and connoted immorality or promiscuity without the involvement of money, and the word whore was used to brand any woman who stepped out of current boundaries of respectability. Ruth Karras demonstrates how 'the connexion of sexuality, greed, and commerce permeates the view of gender relations presented in late medieval English as well as Continental literature' (Karras 1996: 95). A consistent thread in all accounts refuses to isolate women who sold sexual services into a separate, identifiable group, rather considering them nuisances who assaulted men in the street and offended good taste. Jacques Rossiaud considers that there was a general change toward more social integration of those selling sex from the fifteenth century on in Europe (1988), but the evidence points both ways: toward a greater acceptance and normalisation and also toward a greater moral censure. The latter pressure came from Protestantism as well as in reaction to the severe syphilis epidemic that swept Europe in the early sixteenth century. The way was certainly prepared for further repression (Richards 1992). [\[iii\]](#)

[11] Edward Bristow suggests that 'for conventional moralists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, sexual misconduct was a serious matter; but there was no reason to single it out as the ultimate in wickedness' (1977: 20). But as the eighteenth century went on, repressive movements grew in France, related to denunciations of the hedonistic habits of nobility and royalty, and in Britain, associated with the evangelical Protestant revival. 'Vice' and the 'obscene' were to be rooted out on the stage, in books and in a general reformation of manners. Improper sexual relations, including commercial sex, formed part of this general concern, but there was still a lack of consensus on how to frame the problem itself. Most attempts to control it referred to disorderliness, public scandal, riot or indecency, in which non-sexual offences were included with sexual. In eighteenth-century London, women who sold sex 'both individually and collectively, were perhaps as much an accepted part of plebeian London as any other identifiable group,' and seem to have had little difficulty in moving into other social roles (Henderson 1999: 44). [\[iv\]](#)

[12] Prior to the rise of the social, royal, civil and clerical figures pronounced and issued decrees on activities considered to be obscene. The relationship between those doing the decreeing and those being decreed about was hierarchical and juridical, those above deciding what the duties and faults were of those below them in the social order, without any self-reflexion on their own roles (Foucault's 'upwards continuity,' 1979a). The question is not whether the sale of sex had long been simultaneously deplored, combated and tolerated, because it had; the stigma against women who sold sex had been severe and the punishment at times horrible, as it was for many crimes. But what appears in histories prior to the social period consists of authorities' dictates on how to deal with problems of delinquency and public scandal in their locality, with the clergy providing pious justifications. Beyond that, discourses on the subject were rudimentary and changed little over many hundreds of years. Although religious projects had provided 'homes' for reformed women all along, most such attempts failed, and inmates went back to their former occupation (Bristow 1977).

### **'The Rise of the Social' – and the Family**

[13] In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when concepts of the divine rights of kings were being swept away or discredited in northern Europe, self-appointed observers and commentators consciously set out to consider major social questions: the existence of poverty, the effects of industrialisation and the growth of cities. Until this time, most people believed that destiny decreed that some people be wealthy, virtuous or lucky and others be poor, deprived or unlucky, but now the belief arose that destitution and depravation might be prevented or repaired through the intervention of educated and virtuous social actors. Philosophers and new social experts felt called to decide the right way for people to live in civilised societies and how to bring this about. This project began to take shape before the French Revolution, forms part of the Enlightenment and continued through the nineteenth century and into the present, when the social becomes a major element of government. This definition of the social does not refer to 'society' but to techniques and practices constituting 'a particular form of social cohesion' (Smart 1986: 159), and can be seen in the way social problems, social reform and social welfare are formulated. The concept derives substantially from the work of Jacques Donzelot, who closely linked the social with conscious efforts at philanthropy predating their governmentalisation, which he calls *policing*, (from the French *police*):

The growth of the police in the eighteenth century relied on the power of the family, promising it peace and happiness while extending police authority over the family's revels and cast-offs. Hence the central apparatus proclaimed itself to be in the service of families. (Donzelot 1979: 24)

During the rise of the social, the bourgeoisie began to achieve the status it had long been seeking. For the nobility, lineage (and pride) relied on securing property for the family line (Barber 1955), but the bourgeoisie defined 'family' in a more emotive way, as society's central unit but also as a domestic way of life. The development of the notion of privacy and the cultural construction of childhood as a time of innocence requiring long years of protection

and instruction contributed to the cult of domesticity, and families were seen to require supervision, spiritual nourishment and a specific place of their own, 'the home' (Ariès 1960). The reproduction of these values was raised to a calling for women, who were considered innately gifted with virtue and affection, and they were to be carried out either directly or through the correct supervision of servants. Women's work was 'increasingly represented as the emotional labour motivated (and guaranteed) by maternal instinct' (Poovey 1988: 10). Theories of hygiene, nutrition and regulation of personal behaviour were turned into a series of norms intended to prevent the family from falling apart, now widely known as the 'domestic ideology' (Armstrong 1987).

[14] At this time, the working class came to be considered to need 'civilising' by the bourgeoisie, as the bourgeoisie had before been considered to need it by the aristocracy (Elias 1939). And in the same period that explorers encountered 'natives' in faraway places and set out to colonise them, so an 'enlightened' class came to believe that the working class needed exploring and would benefit through intervention in their affairs. Thus the middle class set out to carry the message of the right way to live to everyone else.

[15] With the identification of married couples and their children as virtuous and normal, large numbers of people were discursively converted into social misfits: people without proper places in a domestic structure. Not only flagrant beggars, homeless children and criminals but even people who were thought to spend too much time in taverns, who gambled, who ate food outside the home, who weren't interested in marriage and who liked to dawdle in the streets: all were peered at through a lens that sought to know why they engaged in these practices and how they could be prevented. Non-conforming subjects, those outside the family hearth, were seen as threats to normal society and became 'populations' that had to be dealt with, steered toward a right way of life, cared for and protected from their wrong impulses (Foucault 1979a). This meant setting up apparatuses of social control, technologies that included investigation of the target groups, methods of surveillance, codes of dress and behaviour, definition of correct pastimes and vocations, as well as techniques for classifying and recording all the information collected. Donzelot called this philanthropy:

. . . not to be understood as a naively apolitical term signifying a private intervention in the sphere of so-called social problems, but [to] be considered as a deliberately depoliticising strategy for establishing public services and facilities at a sensitive point midway between private initiative and the state. (1979: 55)

The vast surge of theorising, proposing and acting on behalf of the well-being of groups identified as problematic was undoubtedly often sincerely motivated by a desire to prevent unhappiness and injustice, because of sympathy with or anger about the lot of the poor. Apart from the time they may have dedicated to practical 'social work' (Leach 1980; Ferguson 1992; Walkowitz 1994), philanthropists also dedicated themselves to theorising, forming associations to debate social theories and believing that their conclusions were the key to achieving a good society. But the invention of socially problematic groups necessitated (and justified) the creation of a series of jobs for those who would carry out the defined social projects.

### **The Construction of the Prostitute**

[16] This is the period when 'prostitution' was identified as a distinct social problem (women selling sex to men, regardless of the existence of men who sold sex) and the identity 'prostitute' was created. At the beginning of the period, the most widespread image of the woman who sold sex was 'vile harlot,' whose body was a stinking sewer threatening society but who was also carefree, pleasure-seeking and attractive. Another, alternative, image positioned her as a victim of circumstances, and it is this image which came to predominate as the period went on. Lynda Nead theorises the metamorphosis from dangerous to victimised as a mechanism that allowed outsiders to feel pity, rather than fear: 'Pity deflects the force of that group and redistributes power in terms of a conventional relationship organized around notions of social conscience, compassion and philanthropy' (1988: 139). [v] So

women who sold sex came to be considered in need of rescue and control. Where before a small number of religious projects aimed to help women who renounced their own immorality, now a whole social and laic discourse was dedicated to the identification of victims. A new moral charge was assigned to these projects, and a commitment to them emerged on the part of educated and middle-class women.

[17] The Vagrancy Act of 1822 first named 'prostitutes' as offenders, but efforts to control them were frustrated by the impossibility of agreeing on a definition of who they were, exactly. In his mid-century investigation *London Labour and the London Poor*, Henry Mayhew used the word prostitutes but he described them as 'park women,' 'female operatives,' 'maid-servants,' 'ladies of intrigue,' 'keepers of houses of assignation' and 'cohabitant prostitutes'—a very wide range of people indeed. At this point the term does not signify victimhood, since Mayhew classified such women with vagrants, professional beggars, cheats and thieves. No wonder early social projects aimed at locating and counting such women were hard put to identify them.

Literally every woman who yields to her passions and loses her virtue is a prostitute, but many draw a distinction between those who live by promiscuous intercourse, and those who confine themselves to one man. (Mayhew 1851: 215)

Q. You know the man who goes by the name of William Simmons. . ? A. Yes. Q. Have you lived with him for some time? A. Yes, for six or seven years. Q. As his wife? A. Yes. Q. And you are not a prostitute? A. No; only to the one man. Q. Only to Simmons, you mean? A. Yes. Q. You mean that you are not a prostitute, other than as living with one man without marriage? A. Yes, that's what I mean. (*Abolitionist Flysheets* 1870)

These testimonies make it clear that a social explorer, a judge and a woman who lived with a man outside marriage used the word 'prostitute' in different ways. But the image being constructed by reformers depicted a woman with a particular life trajectory: not only promiscuous or charging money for sex but fallen into degradation, torturing guilt, drunkenness, failing looks and, within a few years, syphilis and suicide. Numerous texts, including from medical authorities, insisted this was the story of large numbers of poor women (Tait 1840; Logan 1843; Greg 1850; Sanger 1859).

[18] When they had to identify such women, however, observers relied on superficial indicators: clothing, manners and speech. The sole fact of standing on a notorious street corner, going bare-headed, wearing 'garish' dress, talking in a loud voice or engaging in 'rowdy' behaviour were enough to incriminate women of any class or education. 'Good women' were besieged by police and social investigators; one charged with ferreting out vice complained that 'the way women dress today they all look like prostitutes' (Peiss 1983: 78). In fact, mainstream fashions have often been initiated by women who sell sex, a phenomenon particularly lamented during the social period (Nead 1988: 180).

[19] Yet despite the difficulty in identifying those women thought to need help, perhaps even because of it, helpers were incited to produce more discourse, investigation and surveillance. Some investigators tried to prove through anthropometry that 'prostitutes' were biologically degenerate, born with a constitution and disposition to this particular evil (Lombroso and Ferrero 1895). The British government moved toward a form of regulationism in passing the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869, which mandated the medical examination of women identified as prostitutes in garrison and port towns (for the stated protection of the armed forces). Non-uniformed police officers were charged with selecting the offenders, who were submitted to compulsory medical examinations and isolation in hospitals and penitentiaries if found to be suffering from venereal disease (regimes described in detail by Judith Walkowitz 1980 and Linda Mahood 1990). A social movement arose to abolish the Acts as violation of the rights of women (Bristow 1977; McHugh 1980; Walkowitz 1980).

[20] Women considered prostitutes who were interviewed by medical and social researchers revealed that they did

not see themselves as prostitute, victims or 'fallen women'; instead, they were working-class women who sold sex from time to time or during periods between other kinds of employment (Parent-Duchâtelet 1836; Acton 1856). Although this discovery might have thrown doubt on the identity 'prostitute,' it seems rather to have encouraged social reformers in their task of extracting women from pernicious, non-family lifeways and perverse sexual practices and restoring them to virtue.

[21] Foucault has elucidated how sexuality came to be conceived as a concept and homosexuality as a category during this same period. In a way that had not existed before, people were now obliged to assume identities based on their sexual practices. 'Good' women were conceptualised as capable of sexual abstinence, while men were thought to have a biological need for frequent sexual relations. These sexual practices were linked to other characteristics, for women moral superiority and natural domesticity, for men a predisposition to moral laxity and a propensity to leave home for bars, streets, gaming houses, brothels and theatres. Women were expected to delay practicing sex until men could provide for a family, but men were not. Women were denied the possibility of sex outside marriage, whereas men were permitted it.

[22] For commercial sex, the focus first went to incorrect practices ('prostitution') and next to *some* of the people who participated in these ('prostitutes'). Although the activity requires two figures, one who sells and one who buys, the pathologising discourse was not interested in the purchaser, understood to always be a man, his desire incorrigible and biologically driven. The vendor of sex, on the other hand, conceived of always as a woman, could be removed from the situation. By the late nineteenth century men did occupy a central role for a movement that demanded universal purity (Pankhurst 1913), but no programmes or projects were set up to save men from themselves, incarcerating them to prevent the realisation of their desires, and no social actors conceived of themselves as called to employ themselves in his rescue. The drive to save was limited to the woman who served man's desires for a price: any other aspect of her life, any other talent, activity or responsibility, including motherhood, was made secondary to this one of her sexual practices.

### **A Growing Need for Employment**

[23] Despite the reign of the 'domestic ideology,' not all middle-class women were comfortably settled inside good houses and homes; on the contrary, for a complex of demographic and social reasons, there were now more educated women, with time to spare and/or the desire or need to earn their living: widows, unmarried daughters, wives without access to their own property and leisured women. At mid-century, women with money to pay an attorney could denounce violent husbands, but only through laws passed in 1870 and 1882 did they have the right to their own earnings once they were married (Humphreys 1997). Many women who wanted to escape from oppressive situations, if they were not able or willing to return to parents or other relatives, could break away only if they could find paying work.

[24] Financial independence being such a difficult option and domesticity such a central value, it is disconcerting to find that in the British census of 1851, 42% of women between the ages of twenty and forty were unmarried, and two million of a total six million women were self-supporting: one-third of the female population (Poovey 1988: 4-5). In the census of 1861 women represented more than a third of the labor force, one-fourth of these married (Holcombe 1977: 10). Perhaps the most famous of these 'spinsters' was Florence Nightingale, an upper-class woman who became a nurse despite her family's disapproval on the grounds that it was not suitable to her station. According to the museum dedicated to her honour, her greatest achievement was the raising of nursing to respectability. For some extremist social commentators, such women were 'redundant' and ought to have been shipped to the colonies. [vi] In France, Jules Simon published popular works berating women who worked as 'impious' and sordid,' in fact no longer women. They represented disorder when order was defined as family and maternity. More to the point, the supply of women needing or wanting to earn their own living was growing. But how could middle-class women maintain respectability and still work outside the home?

[25] The occupations considered respectable for middle-class women were for a long time only lady's companion and governess, whose perceived decency derived from their association with a 'true' home, in which workers lived by the side of real, respectable ladies. These workers were required to possess a certain cultural level, ideally to be 'gentlewomen' themselves. At the same time, the governess shared the taint of forbidden sexualities ascribed to all house servants by a bourgeoisie frightened of contamination (Davidoff 1979; Donzelot 1979), which meant that the so-called respectable occupations were actually considered dubious. [vii] One middle-class lady considered engraving, drawing patterns and needlework to be acceptable tasks; another said her work was running a household, writing letters and seeing callers; while a third defined work as crocheting bonnets for friends (Davidoff and Hall 1987: 183-189). These ideas reflect what the bourgeoisie deemed correct for women, and have encouraged some to believe that few were found working outside the home. At the same time, women *could* take on many more kinds of jobs in nineteenth-century Britain (Scott and Tilly 1975).

[26] There were dressmakers, needlewomen, milliners, washerwomen, charwomen, milkmaids, nursemaids, circus women, shoebinders, mantuamakers, satin stitch workers, glove makers, strawbonnet makers, stay trimmers, hat binders, shop assistants and chambermaids. Women worked in the jute industry, as machinists in mills and as hawkers, flower sellers, message girls and match girls. They brewed and sold beer; they managed lodging houses and brothels; they tended silkworms. Outside the cities they kept vegetable gardens and animals, carried loads on their backs and picked strawberries and hops. 'Flither girls' gathered birds' eggs and limpets, and women hauled coal in the mines. Later in the century, more women did 'white blouse' work (school teaching, sales, office work and nursing) and were waitresses and attendants in toilets. Petty theft and picking pockets were other sources of income. Finally, as always, many who did these jobs *also* sold sexual favours at some time or another, to tide them over or to supplement income. All these options were conventional for the lower classes, with so many 'genteel' women needing work, wouldn't some have moved into these jobs? Inevitably, but many must have resisted such a move downwards as being the antithesis of the progress and betterment advocated by the social climate.

### **The Creation of 'Suitable Jobs for Women'**

[27] During the rise of the social, a discourse of social evolutionism placed societies on a 'stream of Time,' in which the bourgeois way of life was considered 'advanced' and the poor's, like that of primitive tribes, 'backward' (Fabian 1983: 18). Women were of course considered inherently inferior to men, but within all possible classifications, bourgeois women, as members of the most advanced class in the most advanced society, were placed ahead of poor women.

[28] A theory of self-government also began to arise, the idea that individuals could set out to tailor and improve their thoughts and behaviour according to virtuous models of conduct, but it was thought that only those with sufficient capacity for rational thinking could carry out such a project. Adam Smith believed that poor men were prevented from developing self-government in the modern liberal state's division of labour, a regime in which they were 'conceptualised as an aggregate' and thus treated differently from those individuals capable of 'specular morality,' the ability to reflect on one's own moral character (Poovey 1995: 34). Where this was lacking, other people were called upon to help.

The moral decay of the working class was seen above all in terms of its deficient pattern of family life, the apparently absent values of domesticity, family responsibility, thrift and accumulation. Hence the growth of the paradoxical phenomena of leisured middle-class ladies encouraging the education of working-class women in the virtues of housewifery, with the development of sewing schools, cooking classes and so on . . . (Weeks 1981: 32-3)

Middle-class women now came to be seen as embodying virtue and thus having a natural duty to care for the



incapable poor in a new 'missionary domain' (Donzelot 1979: 46). Whereas eighteenth-century salon hostesses had moral authority because of their 'disinterestedness and generosity, an eloquent concern for the public welfare,' 'respectability' now made virtue, and only married women were seen as respectable (Glantz and Maire, quoted in Barber 1955: 14-15). Nancy Armstrong discusses the developing ideology that held that the virtuous domestic woman, at least superficially, knew what was best for everyone (1987), and Poovey shows how domestic, middle-class women

were represented as protecting and, increasingly, incarnating virtue . . . their economic support tended to be translated into a language of morality and affection; their most important work was increasingly represented as the emotional labor motivated (and guaranteed) by maternal instinct. (1988: 10) [\[viii\]](#)

There is a paradox in this discourse becoming so strong just when women increasingly were looking for jobs *outside* the home, a paradox perhaps resolved by these women becoming active not only in preaching the new domesticity but also in carrying it to the level of a vocation, that of attempting to reclaim the poor to domestic life. Discursively, middle-class ladies were constructed as 'grac[ing] the homes of the underprivileged the way they graced their own homes' (Mahood 1995: 70). Thus

. . . the reformers discovered many of the elements from which they would forge their own class and sexual identity, still ill-defined and diffuse in 1850; women, particularly, strengthened their role as dictators of domestic and familial standards for all classes . . . (Stansell 1982: 311) [\[ix\]](#)

The phrase 'woman's mission to women' became current, contradicting another discourse holding that pure women should not know about 'vile' things that happened to less fortunate ones (Walkowitz 1994). It was argued that women magistrates and women police should be introduced to work with women (Bland 1992: 400) and that workhouses should be supervised by women, who would inject 'the law of love' into them (Louise Twining, quoted in Nead 1988: 199).

It has been felt that no efforts on behalf of the fallen were likely to be so successful as those which were made by their own sex. They are able better to enter into their feelings, to sympathise with them, to receive from them their tale of sorrow, and to advise them for their present and eternal welfare. (Charles 1860: 4)

Mary Higgs, in investigations presented in the pamphlet 'Three Nights in Women's Lodging Houses,' posed as a poor woman in order to find out what went on in the places where streetwalkers lived, and proposed that 'girls such as this should be passed on to some agency that would 'mother' them. It is easy to see how a little indecision, and the pressure of hunger, might anchor a girl to sin' (Higgs 1905: 281). The Reverend Frederick Maurice commented on the 'softening, humanising, health-giving influence' of lady visitors to hospital wards for the poor, who were seen as able to

supervise and reinforce the medical regime, administering medicines, scrutinising the nurses, reporting their behaviour and above all inquiring into the moral habits of poor patients—factors which were now known to play such a crucial role in the spread of disease. (Mort 1987: 43)

Many women reformers referred to class and cultural rather than gender differences *per se*, however, in arguing about who was in the best position to carry out reform projects. Ellen Ranyard ran the Female Bible Society on the principle that 'the poor could best be encouraged to help themselves if they were initially helped by another like themselves,' and the distribution of bibles had to be supplemented by actual physical presence and accompaniment in household tasks by the woman helpers (Poovey 1995: 46-7). Octavia Hill founded a charitable society based on the belief that 'personal relations between rich and poor would bring the deserving ones out of habits of

dependence and thriftlessness.' She bought tenements and sent out female home visitors to collect rents and supervise domesticity (Walkowitz 1994: 54-55). Linda Mahood describes the treatment of women interned as 'prostitutes' in Glasgow's penitentiaries as

. . . organized around the premise that inmates could only be reformed if order was put into their lives and a strict regime of 'mild, wholesome, paternal, and Christian discipline' was enforced. . . what is striking . . . is the overall 'gentility' and similarity to the manner in which middle-class women might spend their evenings. The emphasis on gentility reflects how closely penitentiaries associated middle-class manners with reform. (1990: 78 and 84)

The highest posts in social apparatuses were often assigned to (male) father-figures, but the very nature of the project meant that (female) mother-figures had to be there, too. The incarcerating technologies—lock-hospital, penitentiary, prison—were conceived to provide a family structure for women thought to lack one.

[29] In all these ways and for all these reasons and more, work in the social sector, including that related to the reclamation of women labelled prostitutes, began to be considered not only appropriate and dignified work for respectable ladies but particularly suited to them. 'Social' work became not only a suitable job for a woman but the vehicle for creating a whole sphere of functions positioned as belonging naturally to women. These were paid occupations not seen as compromising received notions of femininity, something that had not existed before this period.

[30] There was now employment for women in charitable, educational and correctional institutions. New jobs included social investigator, district visitor, rent collector, sanitary inspector, poor-law guardian, fundraiser, public speaker, settlement house worker, missionary, superintendent, matron, hospital and penitentiary staff, probation officer, teacher, tract writer, campaign activist, clerical worker, nurse. These posts multiplied as the causes did: abolition of slavery, child labour laws, poor-law reform, compulsory schooling, sanitation and housing reform, child-saving, repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and the rescue of 'prostitutes.' Charity work was a way to get a foot in the door of the public world, and many women began as volunteers, defying ideas that their only place was the home. F.K Prochaska, historian of women's philanthropic work in the nineteenth century, has documented the significant numerical rise in numbers of women on charity subscription lists, in women's financial contributions to charities, in women's 'district visiting' to the poor, in women's participation on management committees and as managers and as volunteer helpers in a variety of sites from lying-in hospitals to village bazaars (1980).

[31] Later, there would be a move to professionalise, train and struggle for recognition, but at the beginning, amateurs were essential. In London alone, 279 charities were founded before 1850 and 144 more during the following *decade* (Humphreys 1997). In the city of Aberdeen, with a population of less than 70,000 in the 1840s, rescue organisations included local branches of the Association for the Promotion of Social Sciences, the British Ladies' Society for Promoting the Reformation of Female Prisoners and the Association for the Promotion of Social Purity, as well as the Aberdeen Association for Reclaiming Fallen Females and the Aberdeenshire Association of Ladies for the Rescue of Fallen Women (Mahood 1990: 116). The evolution of theories and the maturing of discourses meant the creation of new apparatuses, necessitating increasing numbers of workers.

The movement was diversifying and as the various societies expanded some of their homes became specialised and made pioneering efforts in social work. The Rescue Society ran a home for the fallen, another for invalids and a third for girls in danger. The Female Mission to the Fallen, which alone fielded lady missionaries to approach prostitutes in the streets and workhouses, helped attempted suicides and uniquely sponsored two homes for unmarried mothers and their babies. (Bristow 1977: 70)

New theories emerged within each rescue project, one example being the concept of prevention: 'The work of the

reformer is not with the outcast, the Magdalen, but with the causes that make outcasts—better save future generations than twenty fallen women' (quoted in Leach 1980: 295). Rose and Miller would call these new ideas 'problematics of government,' which include

the changing discursive fields within which the exercise of power is conceptualised, the moral justifications for particular ways of exercising power by diverse authorities, notions of the appropriate form, objects and limits of politics, and conceptions of the proper distribution of such tasks among secular, spiritual, military and familial sectors. (1992: 175)

These governmental technologies are played out in concrete, day-to-day practices.

### How 'Benevolence' Becomes Governmental Control

[32] The use of penitentiaries and other enclosed spaces for women designated as prostitutes and needing reform belongs to the new kind of discipline and punishment Foucault identified in prisons, asylums and other institutions from the eighteenth century forward, in which the goal was the transformation of the wrongdoer into an 'obedient subject,' rather than the punishment of the wrong act itself. To achieve this end, the reformer needs access to the wrongdoer in order to establish a relationship through coercion and constraint (Foucault 1978a). In the movement to transform working-class women who sold sex, middle-class women were designated as the proper agents of change. It is relevant to ask, then, how discourses of social 'helping' played out on the ground, in the day-to-day life of those who embodied the discourses in their work. Consider the posted 'Rules for the conduct of the women' in York Female Penitentiary at mid-century:

- I. The directions and orders of the Matron shall at all times be promptly obeyed.
- II. The women shall preserve a decent deportment, and a becoming silence, especially while at work. Reproaches for past irregularities, railing, and all angry expressions, are strictly forbidden; and if repeated after admonition from the Matron, shall be reported to the committee, and punished at their discretion.
- III. Lying, swearing, dishonesty, repeated disobedience, and gross misbehaviour, shall be punished by the Committee with expulsion, unless circumstances should induce them to mitigate the punishment.
- IV. No woman shall leave her employment without the Matron's permission.
- V. The father, mother, or other near relation, (being known to be such,) may be permitted to see and converse with any of the women, at the discretion and in the presence of the Matron, between the hours of eleven and twelve in the morning, and two and three in the afternoon (Sundays excepted.)—But no such person, whether male or female, shall be admitted into the wards.
- VI. No letter shall be conveyed to or from the house, without the inspection of the Matron.  
(Reproduced in Finnegan 1979: 173)

Many people were required to labour inside institutions with such rules. [x] While much of the work was straightforward maintenance (cleaning floors, preparing food), it must be remembered that those interned had not chosen to be there. The paid jobs of many employees were of a policing nature, to prevent escapes and to control inmates. Locking the door on people who want to get out; submitting people to dress codes; separating people from their friends; saying no; closing doors; shutting out the pleas of those being controlled; observing visits; forcing people to do laundry; reading them 'improving' texts; and teaching one kind of domestic economy to people who already know another all became *forms of employment*.

[33] In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault described some reform efforts as 'a procedure for requalifying individuals as juridical subjects,' but such was not the aim of the reformers of 'prostitutes.' Instead, the project aimed to make them into docile domestic servants or wives—not the autonomous subjects helpers were *themselves* struggling to become. From being seen as unrespectable and pitiable in the mid-nineteenth century, educated women who worked for a living had become respected and essential to the British labour force by 1914 (Holcombe 1977). The creation and opening up of the social sector to women played a large part in this change.

### **Conclusion: The Contradictions of 'Helping'**

[34] That middle-class women's jobs should have been dedicated to condemning and attempting to eradicate so many working-class women's livelihoods is a central irony (and, from a contemporary perspective, contradiction) of this story. Selling sex was targeted as especially evil, but a whole range of non-domestic jobs were seen as lamentable, and working women exhorted to return to the home. Thus precisely at the moment when bourgeois women formulated their desire for emancipation to participate in a culture of individual work, they joined campaigns and regimes aimed at repressing and limiting opportunities for less privileged women (Summers 1979). Moreover, the only job reformers truly approved for women they reformed was domestic service: a self-serving rationale for the bourgeois servant-employing class.

[35] The paradox is that the identity they constructed, who needed saving from her fate, already enjoyed, as a working-class woman, much of what the middle-class woman desired: a looser concept of marriage, more access to public spaces, the right to enjoy common pleasures and more varied and flexible jobs (Wilson 1991; Agustín 2004a). All research shows that the people constructed as 'prostitutes' were nothing more than poorer women taking up the one employment opportunity that offered independence and better money than could be found anywhere else, often as a part-time or stop-gap measure. Several together often lived in lodging-houses indistinguishable from those lived in by other working-class people and run by a landlady (not a 'madam'). Their neighbours and lovers did not exclude them from normal social life. They may have had severe problems, but they still lived within the community and were not looking to be rescued (Parent-Duchâtelet 1836; Mayhew 1865; Walkowitz 1980). Moreover, selling sex also brought significant advantages, as earning more money meant being able to have rooms of their own, better clothes and access to the centre of comfortable sociality for the working class, the pub (Walkowitz 1977: 76). These advantages were disqualified, however, in a discourse that made bourgeois domesticity as a way of life a goal to be sought after for everyone, even if it meant becoming servant.

[36] The reformer's refusal to accept the worker's expressed desire to be left alone and to remain in the sex trade has to be recognised as convenient; after all, without subjects to rescue, she could be out of a job. Of course, our contemporary value on hearing the subject's own 'voice' did not exist at this time. Reformers, who believed they knew best because of their class and gender, considered their efforts to be intrinsically different and better than the policeman's or the judge's. But like the work of the policeman and the judge, theirs depended on defining others as mistaken, misled or deviant, and not listening to poorer women's own versions of their lives assured that helpers would always have the upper hand.

[37] By the late nineteenth century the construction of 'prostitution' as a phenomenon and 'prostitute' as an identity had isolated these women from their communities and endowed them with a stigmatising label from which there was little escape. Moreover, the period's prime projects relating to women—the abolition of 'prostitution,' the eradication of poverty, the attempt to keep poorer women at home, the change to a regime of chastity rather than promiscuity—did not succeed on their own terms. [xi] Yet histories of philanthropic movements show that the benefits of social work for those construed as helpers, in terms of experience and satisfaction, are rarely disputable. Thus the main effect of this designation of women needing to be saved was the construction of a benevolent figure required to help them. As Mitchell Dean said, 'the domain of effects in the real cannot be read off the programmes of government themselves' (2002: 120). [xii]

[38] There was, of course, resistance to reformers' practices: women who escaped from penitentiaries and who refused to dress 'respectably' or pay attention to domestic bourgeois discourse. Nevertheless, the damage done was real, since the stigmatising discourse remained, as did the apparatuses of social interference that had been invented and burgeoned because of them. The use of the term 'prostitute' to signify a supposedly separable negative identity, and projects aimed at helping them not only still exist today, they proliferate.

[39] Writing of the nineteenth century, Lynda Nead called the prostitute image a myth that did not describe actually existing people but rather *constituted* a new group (1988: 94). The labelling thus has a performative aspect, decreeing certain women to *be* prostitutes in the way doctors decree babies to be boys or girls at birth. This performativity continues in the work of later and contemporary scholars who use these terms even when they themselves are engaged in their deconstruction. It must be understood that every time the terms are used, the stigma is reproduced, and the lives of the actual women involved made more difficult. Substituting 'sex worker' as a more respectable term may appease some who feel identified with the job, but does not solve the problem of vast numbers of people who use commercial sex as an occasional or periodic livelihood strategy without feeling any sense of profession or identity connected with it, among them many migrant women. As happened two hundred years ago, in the present no other aspect of these women's lives is considered as important as this one, neither their condition as mother or supporter of family nor their personal desires to get ahead or see the world. And also as in the past, the drive to rescue women from their fate is often met with their desire to be left to get on with what they are trying to do. So the original relationship between two groups of women continues today, and although there is little evidence that the projects accomplish what they set out to, the governmental relationship is rarely questioned. My hope is that an understanding of how it began will make it visible and questionable in the present.

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## Endnotes

[i] Julia Varela has called prostitution 'the most modern profession' (1995).

[ii] See Abrams (1988) on Germany; Corbin (1978), Benabou (1987) and Harsin (1985) on France; Gibson (1986) on Italy; Vázquez García (1998) on Spain; Mahood (1990) on Scotland and Walkowitz (1980) on England.

[iii] It should be noted that, despite their own arguments that 'prostitution' and 'prostitutes' did not constitute separable categories in the times and places studied, these 20th century scholars use the term, as though it described something we now know better about or as though the categories had become separable since the eras studied. Since they have not so become, these scholars' impositions of the terms constitute part of the governmental project referred to in this article.

[iv] Tony Henderson bases this evaluation on what working-class people said about themselves and their communities.

[v] The competing images were never perfectly distinct from one another but rather alternated, the woman involved at one moment representing gay pleasure, at the next the power to contaminate or the damaged subject—a tendency that still exists.

[vi] William R. Greg called redundant those women who were not fortunate enough to marry, 'who in place of completing, sweetening and embellishing the existence of others are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own' (Greg 1876: 276). Common themes of paintings of the time showed 'the reduced gentleman's daughter,' 'the poor teacher,' the 'fortune hunter,' 'the seamstress,' 'the fallen woman' (Roberts 1972).

The surplus of middle-class women is usually ascribed to the emigration of men, the differences in mortality rates of men and women and the tendency of middle-class men to marry later than women.

[vii] Some thought that any paid occupation for women was tainted, certainly nursing was (Holcombe 1973: 69).

[viii] At mid-century, this message was heard in Australia: 'If Her Majesty's Government be really desirous of seeing a well-conducted community spring up in these Colonies, the social wants of the people must be considered. If the paternal Government wish to entitle itself to that honoured appellation, it must look to the materials it may send as a nucleus for the formation of a good and great people. For all the clergy you can despatch, all the schoolmasters you can appoint, all the churches you can build, and all the books you can export, will never do much good without what a gentleman in that Colony very appropriately called 'God's police'—wives and little children—good and virtuous women.' (Chisholm 1847, quoted in Summers 1975: 300)

[ix] Anthony Platt, in a study of women who devoted themselves to the saving of children, asserts that 'philanthropic labor filled a vacuum' in the lives of bourgeois women (1969: 98).

[x] In 1860 there were about 65 such homes in Britain, accommodating about 1300 women (Bristow 1977: 70).

[xi] One historian has characterised the failure of these projects as 'Nothing had been done for the women who were exploited by prostitution' (Mort 1987: 113).

[xii] Of course, one can argue that individuals were helped: 'On its own terms . . . [rescue work] was far from failing. As the Church Penitentiary Association pointed out in 1862, 'the Mission of the Association is to rescue individual souls; and if, out of the number who annually leave the Penitentiaries, between two hundred and three hundred are permanently rescued, who can dare to say that little is done?' (Bristow 1977: 70).

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