

## **The 'Social Evil': Prostitution in Vancouver, 1900 - 1920<sup>1</sup>**

DEBORAH NILSEN

Prostitution has been a neglected area of research in Canadian social history. The reasons for this appear to be twofold. First, serious interest in women's history is only a recent phenomenon, and second, prostitution itself is a difficult subject to study. As a result, this field of research has been more the preserve of the sociologist or the criminologist working with contemporary surveys rather than that of the historian.

In the past, prostitution was seen primarily as a problem of law enforcement at both the national and local levels of concern. Legislators in Ottawa and the police in Vancouver were among the first to be praised, or blamed, when reformers and individual citizens viewed the extent of the "social evil". A major purpose of the present essay is to suggest why, in spite of strenuous legal measures and harsher law enforcement, prostitution persisted in Vancouver. Given the failure of repeated attempts at suppression in the city, it appears that reformist confidence in the law was misplaced and perhaps indicates a lack of understanding of prostitution as a form of female labour.

From 1906 until at least 1917, the existence of prostitution in Vancouver drew a consistently negative response from the local residents. They pressed authorities for its immediate removal either from their neighbours, their places of business, or from the city entirely. Unlike national reformers, citizens showed little sympathy for the "fallen woman". The prostitute was perceived not as a victim of the conniving procurer, but as a source of corruption to the young. Brothels and vice districts were not so much a locus for "white slavery", as a blight on the city and a detriment to property and business interests. The national council of women, an upper middleclass organization with a wide range of philanthropic interests, was removed from active prostitution, and advocated its control by moral education and a tough legal framework. Local concerns, however, derived from a more direct relationship to prostitution and local residents petitioned for a rigid and consistent pattern of law enforcement. Agitation at the national level for more stringent laws and local demands for strict law enforcement, were two sides of the same coin: although rooted in different perspectives on prostitution, both views illustrate a high degree of confidence in the law as a means to eradicate prostitution. It is suggested here that prostitution was linked to economic factors that did not respond to legal change or stepped-up police action against vice. More specifically, an understanding of the economic circumstances of female workers is crucial to any discussion of prostitution in Vancouver.

National reformist activities as reflected in the work of the National Council of Women, were dominated by moral considerations and a fear of what was thought to be an organized traffic in women, namely, the White Slave Traffic. It was believed that the unstable social conditions resulting from urban and industrial development indicated a *moral* breakdown in society. The idea of the "fallen woman" took on added force as women increasingly moved into employment outside of the home. Since sexual misconduct among women was believed to occur primarily under duress or as a result

of inherent physical weakness, women co-working with men were provided with ample opportunity for a “fall” from virtue.

The white slave theory further de-emphasized the relevance of a woman’s actual living conditions by directing attention to procuring as a major determinant of prostitution. It was noted of female factory hands that poor working conditions made them more apt, not to *choose* a career in prostitution, but to be duped by the procurer. A belief in the essential vulnerability of women precluded recognition of the fact that a woman may not have been duped at all, but may have acted on her own evaluation of her position and alternatives. The neglect of this possibility by reformers resulted in their demands for the legislative protection of female workers against sexual exploitation, rather than serious agitation to improve women’s position in the labour force.

The laws certainly did become more severe. Between the years 1869 and 1913, Canadian legislation concerning procurement went from a single statement in the Revised Statutes of Canada to a section of the *Criminal Code* that incorporated thirteen separate categories of offence.<sup>2</sup> In 1869, procuring involved the act of fraudulently obtaining a woman under the age of twenty-one for the purpose of “illicit carnal connection with any man other than the procurer”, and constituted a misdemeanor carrying a maximum penalty of two years in prison. However, by 1913 procuring was defined as the white slave trade, a nationwide conspiracy with international implications which aimed to turn young women into prostitutes by the use of fraud, persuasion, or drugs. This was an indictable offence; the penalty, a possible five years with whipping added on subsequent convictions.<sup>3</sup>

The brothel fits into the white slavery model as the victim’s ultimate destination. Just as the laws against procuring increased in severity, so did those against being the “Keeper” or the “Inmate” of a “Bawdy house”. In 1892, “Keeping” was an indictable offence subject to one year’s imprisonment.<sup>4</sup> Provisions against being an “Inmate”, “Frequenter”, and again, the “Keeper” of a brothel were contained in the vagrancy section of the criminal code (207) and were summary conviction offences liable to a \$50 fine or a maximum of six months, or both.<sup>5</sup> By 1913, however, tenants, occupiers and landlords could be prosecuted under summary jurisdiction if they allowed a premises to be used as a “disorderly house”.<sup>6</sup> Further, the offence of “being found in” a disorderly house was created. This summary conviction offence was a rather general category which could facilitate convictions by removing the need to make definitive charges.<sup>7</sup> In 1915 the laws were further toughened. Clauses of the vagrancy section relating to bawdy houses were repealed. Being the Inmate of a bawdy house was changed from a summary conviction to an indictable offence. And persons coming up for the third time on Keeper and Inmate charges were liable to imprisonment for not less than three and not more than twelve months.<sup>8</sup>

The law is a dead letter without enforcement. Groups like the National Council of women, in appealing to Ottawa for criminal legislation, were seeking the *tools* to make possible an all out drive against vice. They believed that tougher laws accompanied by moral reform were the only way to deal effectively with prostitution. In Vancouver, the weight of public opinion demanding tougher law enforcement provided the impetus to realize these aims.

## II

A study of the Board of Police Commissioners<sup>9</sup> papers for the period 1904 to 1912, reveals a series of changes in policy towards prostitution which are in turn reflected in the pattern of law enforcement pictured in Graph III. The peak years in terms of total arrests were 1906, 1907, and 1912. The intervening periods show a relative decline in arrests. This pattern indicates a police policy formulated largely in response to public pressure. The police actually preferred to *regulate* prostitution by tolerating it within a “restricted district”, although they staged a number of moral crackdowns during this period. This constant vacillation between regulation and suppression was ineffective in curbing the incidence of prostitution in Vancouver: by 1915, it was dispersed in a fairly uniform manner throughout the East End and existed in ad hoc locations over a wide area of the city.

When the Board of Police Commissioners first met on February 17, 1904, the segregation of prostitutes into a particular area was an established fact in Vancouver. Dupont Street was generally recognized, and tolerated, as the city’s restricted district.<sup>10</sup> Intense public reaction against prostitution in 1906 motivated police action during this period. Besides the publicity being given to prostitution in the press, organized residents of Vancouver were presenting petitions and sending letters to the Board of Police Commissioners protesting immoral conditions in the city. Throughout 1906 and 1907, the Board received six petitions and an address by H.H. Stevens, Secretary of the Vancouver Moral Reform Association. The Police Commissioners heard loud and clear that brothels and prostitutes were an affront to moral sensibilities, a public nuisance, a detriment to children and a threat to property and business interests.

The earliest petition on record is that of the Vancouver Board of School Trustees, received in May of 1906.<sup>11</sup> They justified their action by stating that the growth in Vancouver’s school population had prompted them to do their duty and “aid in every way within their power to give school children the very best moral environment possible”. Prostitutes, they said, “were a standing menace to the moral well being of our boys and girls, especially those who attend the Strathcona and Central Schools”. In view of this they requested that the Police Commission “take immediate steps to have all women of bad repute removed from the street known as Dupont Street”. The Police Commissioners responded to the Board of School Trustees’ protest by stating that the problem had already been dealt with, yet public indignation was not in fact alleviated by the conviction of twenty-one Dupont Street prostitutes in May.<sup>12</sup> Discontent was further stimulated by the *Province*’s front page story concerning a planned relocation of the city’s restricted district.

The occupants of the houses on Dupont Street will invade Canton and Shanghai Streets and probably the lower end of Carrall Street in the Chinese quarter... The new district lies west of Carrall Street between the street and the railway tracks.<sup>13</sup>

Soon to follow were petitions from the East End Improvement and Protection Association, the Vancouver Property Owners Association, the Vancouver Moral Reform Association and the residents of Mount Pleasant, all protesting the alleged movement of prostitutes from Dupont Street to Park Lane (in the Mt. Pleasant area). In August, a group of merchants from Shanghai and Canton Streets reiterated the *Province*’s story

by signing a petition informing the authorities that women from Dupont Street were planning a move to their area. These groups were reacting to what they saw as a calculated effort on the part of the authorities to *relocate* brothels in an area entirely unsuitable for such a purpose.

Central to their argument was the increasingly public and commercial nature of these areas. Members of the East End Improvement and Protection Association stated that business growth was pushing prostitutes out of the Dupont Street area and that the same thing would happen in Park Lane: "The public nature of the area would make the existence of the restricted district therein intolerable".<sup>14</sup> Members of the Vancouver Property Owners Association warned that "it cannot be too clearly emphasized that the locality of Park Lane being used for such purposes would be outrageous to public decency". Also, the public nature of the area was again mentioned as an important reason to keep it free of prostitution; Park Lane was near to a "main thoroughfare and tram car line". In view of these factors, it was "incomprehensible that such a thing would be permitted".<sup>15</sup> Although the petition from Chinatown stressed the detrimental effect of visible prostitution on the young, the petitioners identified themselves as merchants, indicating that business interests were also a concern.<sup>16</sup>

The Police Commissioners responded to these situations differently. The residents of Mount Pleasant were assured that the police had no intention of allowing the women to locate in Park Lane.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the petition from the residents of Shanghai and Canton Streets was ignored, "Chief Chisholm reporting that the police could not interfere until the law had been violated".<sup>18</sup> The day after this petition was received,<sup>19</sup> the Board resolved that the police were to institute proceedings against the owners or occupiers of brothels and on August 13, 1906, the owners of all houses on Dupont Street were given thirty days to put a stop to their activities.<sup>20</sup> It appears that the preference was for a gradual rather than an immediate reversal of the former policy of tolerance.

However, by the end of October the brothels were back in operation. Sergeant Fulton, on Night Duty in the area, was reported to the Police Commissioners for "gross neglect of duty" in failing to report the return of about fifty women to Dupont Street. Not only were the brothels running "full blast", but a number of women were taking their customers to the Great Northern Hotel nearby, in order, it appears, to circumvent the sanction imposed on the use of their dwellings for prostitution.<sup>21</sup> During the two days after these conditions had come to light, sixty-one women were arrested.<sup>22</sup> The fact that all but two of the charges were withdrawn suggests that this action was meant as a warning and perhaps as a public display in line with the Board's resolution of August, 1906. Whatever the motive, this strategy was clearly not designed to eliminate prostitution. It is possible that the police were simply trying to facilitate the exit of prostitutes from Dupont Street. Although the police may not have directed the subsequent movement of prostitutes to Shanghai and Canton Streets, they did not prevent it.<sup>23</sup> The Police Commission was informed of the following by a resident taking friends on a tour of Chinatown:

I never conceived for a moment that the streets were filled by Houses of ill repute and a lot of brazen women plying their trade.<sup>24</sup>

However, the fact that the women were permitted to locate in this area was not a signal that their work as prostitutes would be tolerated. Three large scale crackdowns in Chinatown were to follow in which the police employed increasingly stricter measures of law enforcement. This shift in policy is reflected in the volume of arrests for 1907 (see Graphs). In late May of 1907, 136 women were arrested, and, of this number, 110 were convicted and fined.<sup>25</sup> In the action taken five months later, the authorities were more determined to deter prostitution in the area: the fines set by the Court for the sixty women arrested and convicted were over thirty percent higher than those set in May.<sup>26</sup> But higher fines did nothing to discourage prostitution on Shanghai and Canton Streets, and in January of 1908, seventy-one women were convicted on prostitution related charges; all were sentenced to six months in prison.<sup>27</sup>

The result of this “lids on”<sup>28</sup> police policy in Chinatown does not appear to have been a wholesale exodus of prostitutes out of Vancouver. In fact, after the January crackdown, the Court records show that brothels were beginning to appear, or at least to be more visible, in an increased variety of locations throughout the city. Arrests show that prostitutes were locating as far west as Granville and as far east as Hawks Street.<sup>29</sup> The police employed strict measures in dealing with the inhabitants of brothels in most of these areas, revealing a tendency to restrict prostitutes to the East End. Although one woman convicted for keeping a brothel in a room on Pender Street was fined a minimal \$25, those convicted from West Hastings and Westminster Avenue were sentenced to prison terms for periods ranging from one to three months.

However, prostitution on Shore Street was somewhat of a special case over the years. Even though public protests received by the Police Commissioners in early 1907 mentioned prostitution on Shore as well as on Shanghai and Canton Streets,<sup>30</sup> the first arrest at a Shore Street brothel did not occur until late August of that year. The number of brothels on Shore Street was low compared to the number found in Chinatown,<sup>31</sup> yet this situation could have made it relatively easy to take action against prostitution and thereby soothe the public sentiment. But Police Commissioner Jeffs was voted down when he moved that decisive action be taken against brothels in this area.<sup>32</sup> The majority of Police Commissioners were not prepared to initiate arrests. The authorities employed only regulatory measures, such as fines against the women, and by 1910 Shore Street had become the restricted district in Vancouver. According to one resident who communicated to the Board:

Allow me to draw your special attention to the fact that on lower Harris (commonly called Shore) Street, just west of Westminster Avenue, there are seven houses of prostitution all showing red lights... The Police must know about this because every night hundreds of men may be seen going to and from these houses.<sup>33</sup>

When the Police Commissioners began to receive specific complaints about prostitution on Shore Street in early 1910, they did not respond by instructing the police to employ stricter measures in the area. After discussion of the matter, Chief Constable Chamberlain was instructed “to have the landladies remove the red lights from in front of their houses and to continue prosecuting these places for selling liquor without a license”.<sup>34</sup> It was not until the Board and the Chief of Police were threatened both with

prosecution for failing to enforce the law and the possibility that moving pictures of conditions in Vancouver would be shown in Seattle, that they decided to do something about prostitution on Shore Street.<sup>35</sup> These threats came from Mr. Bird, Attorney for the Western Canada Amusement Association, which had just built a large theatre on the corner of Main and Shore Streets. In a letter to the Board, Mr. Bird likened the “swarms of men” around the houses on Shore Street to a group on their way to a baseball match:

The trade was so brisk that other women had to be sent for... At one time there were as many as fifty men waiting to gain admittance to these houses.<sup>36</sup>

In response the Police Commissioners held three special meetings to discuss the matter. On August 1, 1911, they agreed to instruct Chief Constable Chamberlain to give the women on Shore Street three months to vacate their premises.<sup>37</sup> No wonder the Police Commissioners required three meetings to decide how to deal with prostitution in this area. They were being asked to suppress the restricted district at a time when prostitution was becoming increasingly visible throughout the entire city. The police had been unsuccessful in controlling the widespread location of prostitution. From January to August, 1911, arrests were made on more than fifteen streets throughout Mount Pleasant and the East and West Ends of the city. Moreover, the police were hampered in their activities by insufficient jail space, thus rendering them unable to employ measures of law enforcement that could deter prostitutes from working over a wide area of the city.<sup>38</sup> In view of the dispersal of prostitution and the lack of jail space, the immediate suppression of brothels on Shore Street would have aggravated an already tense situation. In giving the women three months to move, the Police Commissioners seem to have been trying to prevent a hasty relocation of prostitutes that would have taxed the resources of the police department and perhaps created a public outcry.

The subsequent concentration of brothels on Alexander Street may not have been a design of the Police Commissioners, but they did not, at least initially, look unfavourably upon this situation. They held firmly to their position of tolerance towards Alexander Street and in 1912, for the first time, the Police Commissioners publicly refused to act. At a very lively session with reform groups on May 31, 1912, the Board gave a clear and uncompromising statement of their policy on prostitution in Vancouver:

The delegation was given to understand that it was not the intention of the Board to at once close up the houses on Alexander Street, but it was their intention to devote their efforts at the present time to the cleaning up of the residential and rooming house district, and then to take up the matter of Alexander Street.<sup>39</sup>

In August of 1912, with public pressure unabated and with an assurance from the Chief Constable that action against prostitution in residential and business sections of the city had brought good results, the Police Commissioners finally turned their attention to the restricted district. They resolved to instruct the police to enforce the law in all parts of the city, and four days later the police initiated an attempt to close brothels on Alexander Street.<sup>40</sup> The arrest of 104 women from August 31 to September 4, accounts for the sharp increase in the volume of arrests for 1912 pictured in Graphs I and III.<sup>41</sup>

Except for one woman who received a suspended sentence, all of those arrested were convicted and sentenced to six months in prison. However, even an action of this magnitude had no lasting effect and the Police Commissioners (after some disagreement) later resumed their former policy of tolerance. Board Chairman Mayor Findlay, stated that given “the present circumstances surrounding the question...a segregated area under absolute control, was probably the best way and means of handling the matter”.<sup>42</sup> As it was set away from areas frequently by the public, the pressing problem was not the restricted district. Police energy and a visible display of police concern was needed in residential and commercial areas where local residents were more liable to complain.

Alexander Street, Vancouver’s last restricted district, was finally closed without discussion in 1913.<sup>43</sup> Mr. A. Rae, a police officer in Vancouver during this period, has suggested that the closure of Alexander Street was in fulfillment of a campaign promise made by Mayor Baxter in the 1913 civic election.<sup>44</sup> Indeed he did make a public commitment to this effect at a meeting of the Women’s Forum in January, 1913, declaring that “as long as he was Mayor Vancouver would be a clean city morally”.<sup>45</sup> The closing of Alexander Street in aid of Vancouver’s moral well-being was more symbolic than real. The decentralization of prostitution had been established in 1912, and by 1914 prostitution existed over a wide area of the East End. Chief Constable McLennan could say, in 1915, that the restricted district had been kept closed for a year, but he would have been well aware that this did not mean the end of prostitution in Vancouver.<sup>46</sup>

The resiliency of prostitution in the face of tough police action is indisputable. Crackdowns in Chinatown (1907) and on Alexander Street (1912), certainly illustrate that the possibility of fines or imprisonment did not *deter* prostitution let alone eliminate it. Along with the dispersal of prostitutes in the city came changes in the structure of prostitution.<sup>47</sup> Soliciting arrests began to increase after 1912. Decentralization would have made prostitution, including streetwalking, more visible in the city, and further, repeated police action against brothels could have caused more women to take up soliciting. In addition, Mayor Baxter’s campaign promise of 1913 may have been realized in police action against visible prostitution, since one month after the election, in February, 1913, soliciting charges began to increase.<sup>48</sup> Since the incidence of prostitution cannot be related to indifferent law enforcement, other factors were at work to ensure the existence of prostitution in Vancouver; namely, limited employment opportunities for women.

### III

Since women were expected either to marry or to remain with their families there was no apparent reason to allow them a central, self-sustaining role as workers in the economy. Further, the idea that a woman’s ultimate place was in the home defined the occupational training she could properly receive, and also determined her wage rate. It was held that women’s paid employment should in some way relate to their “natural” field of competency, that of homemaking.<sup>49</sup> However, this attitude merely rationalized the circular pattern evident in the predominant occupations open to female labour. Women were channeled into service jobs, those that closely resembled housework, or they were performing tasks, like those related to needlework, that had once been done

in the home.<sup>50</sup> These employments, peripheral to a production-intensive economy, were characterized further by low wages. A woman's earnings were seen as "a secondary source of family income".<sup>51</sup> Although the restrictions on female labour relaxed somewhat with the needs of an expanding Canadian economy, women continued to be employed in low paying and low status jobs.<sup>52</sup> Given the situation of limited employment opportunities and insufficient wages, a life outside marriage or away from home was extremely difficult.<sup>53</sup>

The marginal position of women in the labour force is one of the facts essential to an explanation of female prostitution. However, the effects of social dislocation in a society relatively new to urbanization are also important considerations. The bonds of family, community and religion become tenuous with the needs of increased industrialization and an urban, factory mode of production. The unstable nature of traditional social/moral relations may have relaxed, for some, the sanctions on illicit forms of behaviour. Under these circumstances, prostitution may have been an accepted alternative to unemployment. These qualifications do not dilute the impact of economic pressure. They merely locate it within a broader social context which, it is hoped, will be clarified in further research.

Female labour in Vancouver was restricted from the start to occupations of a low paying and expendable nature. This situation was aggravated by the depressed economic conditions and oversupply labour market prevalent during much of the period between 1912 and 1917. Typical employment for female workers was not specific to this city, since other studies on prostitution outline jobs similar to those found in Vancouver.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, these studies indicate that an inability to subsist through legitimate channels was instrumental in motivating women to sell their sexual services to supplement or to obtain their income. Closest to the present study of Vancouver is Lori Rotenberg's analysis of prostitution in Toronto at the turn of the century.<sup>55</sup> Although she states that a lack of data on the class backgrounds of Toronto prostitutes restricted the extent of her inquiry, Rotenberg was still able to establish a connection between inadequate employment opportunities and prostitution. An analysis of five hundred and seventy-seven social profiles of Vancouver prostitutes for the years October, 1912 to 1917, provides evidence to suggest that, as in Toronto, a link existed in this city between women's economic need and prostitution.

The social profiles for Vancouver prostitutes used in this study were derived from a Vancouver City Jail *Prisoner's Record*.<sup>56</sup> Persons arrested were detained in city jail pending their court appearance, during which time photographs and vital statistics were obtained. Entered in the record are nine categories of information: name, alias, birth-place, occupation, personal characteristics (age, height, weight, eye and hair colour), location and date of arrest, charge, disposition and record of arrests. The occupational category is problematic in that one cannot tell if a woman was employed, at the time of her arrest, in the occupation listed in the *Prisoner's Record*. For the purposes of this study, a listing of "Prostitute" will be taken to mean that the woman was working at prostitution full time. However, the "Waitress" with an extensive record *also* could have been a professional; on the other hand, she could have been working as a prostitute part time to supplement her income or to support herself through periods of unemployment. Despite this limitation, the occupations listed in the record are highly suggestive.

The range of employments mentioned under police questioning comments upon the women's socio-economic status and upon the circumstances that may have preceded their work as prostitutes. Previous research into the occupational backgrounds of prostitutes has established a clear pattern of employment; namely, domestic service, such as housekeeper, and operative work, such as seamstress or factory hand. Table I gives a breakdown of occupations listed in the *Prisoner's Record* for women arrested on prostitution related charges in Vancouver. Consistent with the findings of other studies, this breakdown shows that most women are represented in the categories of domestic service, operative and service work. This situation can be seen to reflect the marginal position of women on the labour force. The former occupations of most prostitutes illustrate the lack of employment opportunities available to female labour.

Domestic service accounts for 50.9 percent of the women for whom occupational information is available. This can be explained in terms of working conditions and job opportunities. Employment as a servant was not plagued by the main problem facing female labour, lack of subsistence wage, since room and board were an assured part of the job. However, women workers were reluctant to enter service except in times of extreme need. Helena Gutteridge, the Vancouver Correspondent to the *Labour Gazette* of 1916, named long hours and lack of leisure time as reasons why women avoided domestic work when other work was available.<sup>57</sup> According to Genevieve Leslie in her study of domestic service in Canada, these conditions were aggravated by the crowded and unhealthy environment in which many domestics were expected to live.<sup>58</sup> Not only was the domestic economically exploited, she could be sexually exploited by her employer as well. Rottenberg and Leslie both agree that many domestics were sexually exploited while in service.<sup>59</sup> A woman may have reasoned that since her sexual services were clearly of value, her present situation differed from prostitution only in being more laborious.

In times of economic depression, working conditions only worsened. The skilled servant, or housekeeper, would have difficulty finding other employment in times of crisis. General "domestics" were likewise affected since women once employed elsewhere would seek service work during slack periods in their regular trade. In fact, from 1913 to 1915 domestic servants, especially the skilled, had serious difficulties finding employment. Leslie states that in Canada the crisis in domestic service began with the depression accompanying World War I.<sup>60</sup> However, in Vancouver problems were mounting in 1913. A general belt tightening in response to a "financial depression" decreased the demand for servants while their numbers were inflated by unemployed workers from other occupations. This situation did not improve until late 1915.

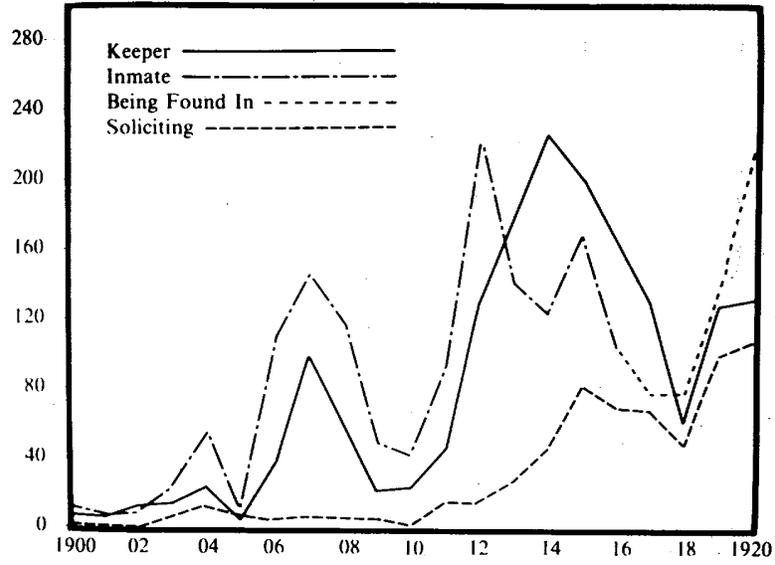
From 1913 to 1914, the need for female labour in Vancouver declined an average of 22 percent.<sup>61</sup> Women whose husbands were unemployed joined the work force, and with the rest sought positions as domestic servants.<sup>62</sup> This action on the part of female workers coincided with that of prospective employers who were cutting down on their staff.<sup>63</sup> This tendency to "do without" accelerated. In the last two months of 1913 and the first month of 1914 the number of homes requesting domestic help dropped to 30 per cent of the figure for the corresponding period of a year earlier.<sup>64</sup> Skilled domestics were hardest hit by the crisis in the labour market. When an employer cut down on domestic staff, the skilled help was the first to go. It is significant

to note that during the worst period of the economic crisis, 1913 to 1915, housekeepers and housemaids account for 63.1 percent of the servants listed in the *Prisoner's Record*. This is a full percentage point above the average for the period of 1912 to 1917 as a whole. It is possible that these women reflect, in part, the hardships faced by skilled domestics during this period.

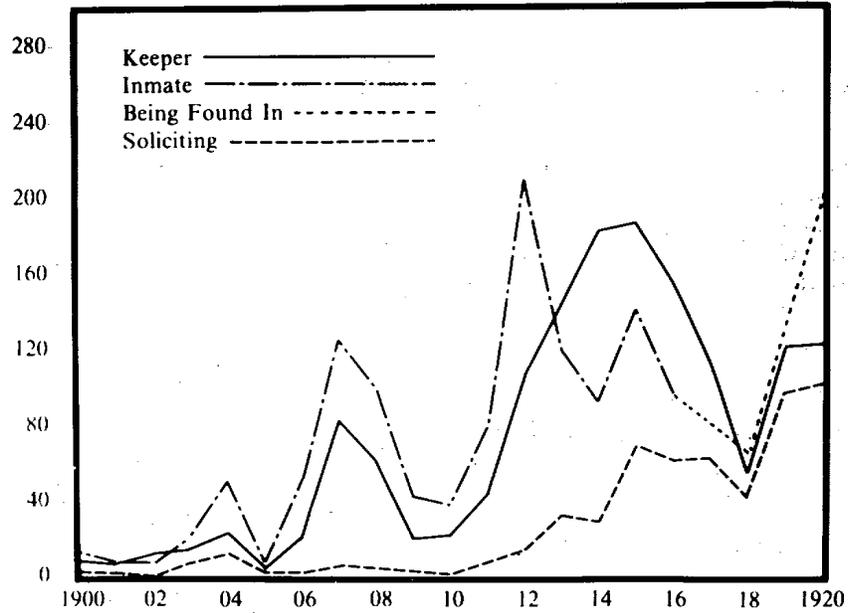
The plight of women workers in general at this time is reflected in the remaining occupations listed for prostitutes in Vancouver. Staff and wage reductions, short time, business closures and seasonal fluctuations in trade, affected the employments of "Clerical", "Service" and "Industrial". Stenographers and retail clerks were laid off as firms cut staff "owing to the general depression in business".<sup>65</sup> In February, 1914, the *Labour Gazette* reported that the demand for "retail employees, stenographers, and bookkeepers", was 25 percent lower than the previous year.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, wages were driven down, sometimes by as much as 30 per cent.<sup>67</sup> The decline in restaurant and hotel businesses affected the service occupations of waitress and chambermaid. Further, it was believed that Chinese labour aggravated this situation. As a result, in the 1915 the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council and the Women's Employment League petitioned the Licensing Board to require that hotels employ only white help.<sup>68</sup> The needle trades suffered even at times when jobs should have been plentiful. In February, 1914, the *Labour Gazette* reported that 65 percent of tailoresses, milliners and dressmakers were unemployed or on short term. Taking the slack season into account, trade was down 20 percent from the previous year.<sup>69</sup> This level of job insecurity would have been extremely unsettling to women who needed to support themselves and others. Working for reduced wages or on short time would not provide women with enough money to live through provides of unemployment and alternate legitimate occupations were not easily obtained. According to the *Labour Gazette*, during November and December of 1915, 1,132 women registered with the Women's Employment League and, of this number, only 405 were placed in occupations.<sup>70</sup>

Although the occupations listed in Table 1 do not conclusively prove a connection between economic need and prostitution, it is significant that contemporaries suspected this to be the case. In November of 1915, the *Labour Gazette* reported that "a committee of three was appointed to investigate the relationship between unemployment, low wages and prostitution".<sup>71</sup> There is no subsequent mention of this committee in the *Labour Gazette*. That little was done illustrates, perhaps, that contemporaries had only a superficial grasp of the implications surrounding the conditions of female labour. Given the economic circumstances in Vancouver, prostitution was one of the few alternatives open to women workers. The *Court Calendars* reflect a fairly constant demand for prostitutes throughout this period. Even though the financial depression may have affected a woman's earnings, prostitution was an occupation that did not pose the lingering threat of unemployment.

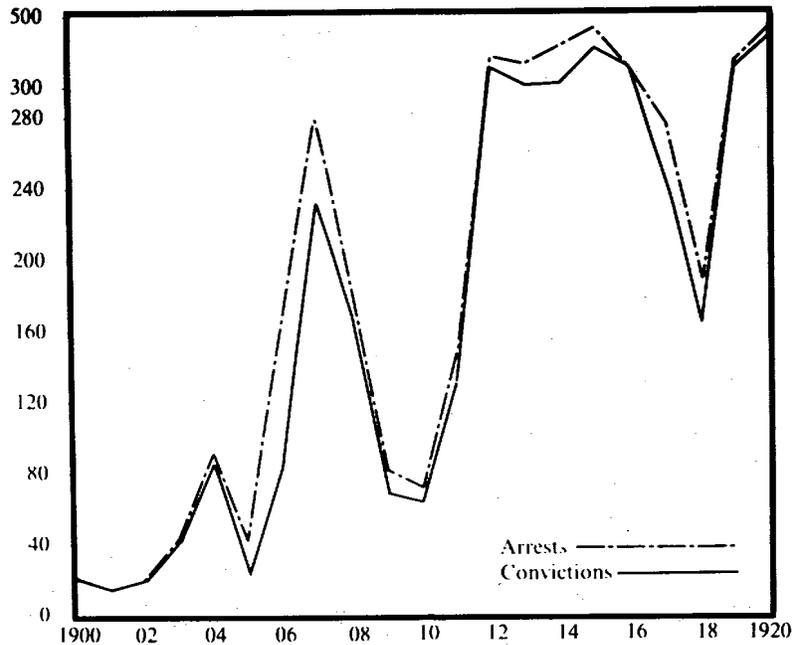
*Total Arrests (Female) 1900 - 1920.*



*Convictions (Female) 1900 - 1920*



Arrests and Convictions, 1900 - 1920



Partial Occupational Breakdown, 1912 - 1917

**TABLE I**  
**Vancouver Prostitutes**  
**Occupational Breakdown, 1912 - 1917**

Occupation <sup>1</sup>	Number	Percentage of 577, or Total Prostitutes	Percentage of 324, or Total No. Stated Occupations*
Domestic	165	28.5	50.9
Clerical	27	4.6	8.3
Service (Personal)	95	16.4	29.3
Industrial	25	4.3	7.7
Other	12	2.0	3.7
Prostitute <sup>2</sup>	225	38.9	—
None Given	28	4.8	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>577</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>1</sup> See Table II, for more detailed breakdowns.  
<sup>2</sup> The occupation "Prostitute" is taken as a category separate from "legitimate" occupations and so is not included—numerically or percentage-wise—in the latter category.  
\* "Legitimate" occupations

SOURCE: Vancouver City Gaol, *Prisoner's Record #1 - 2388, Local - 1, 1912 - 1917, (CAV).*

Complete Occupational Breakdown, 1912 - 1917

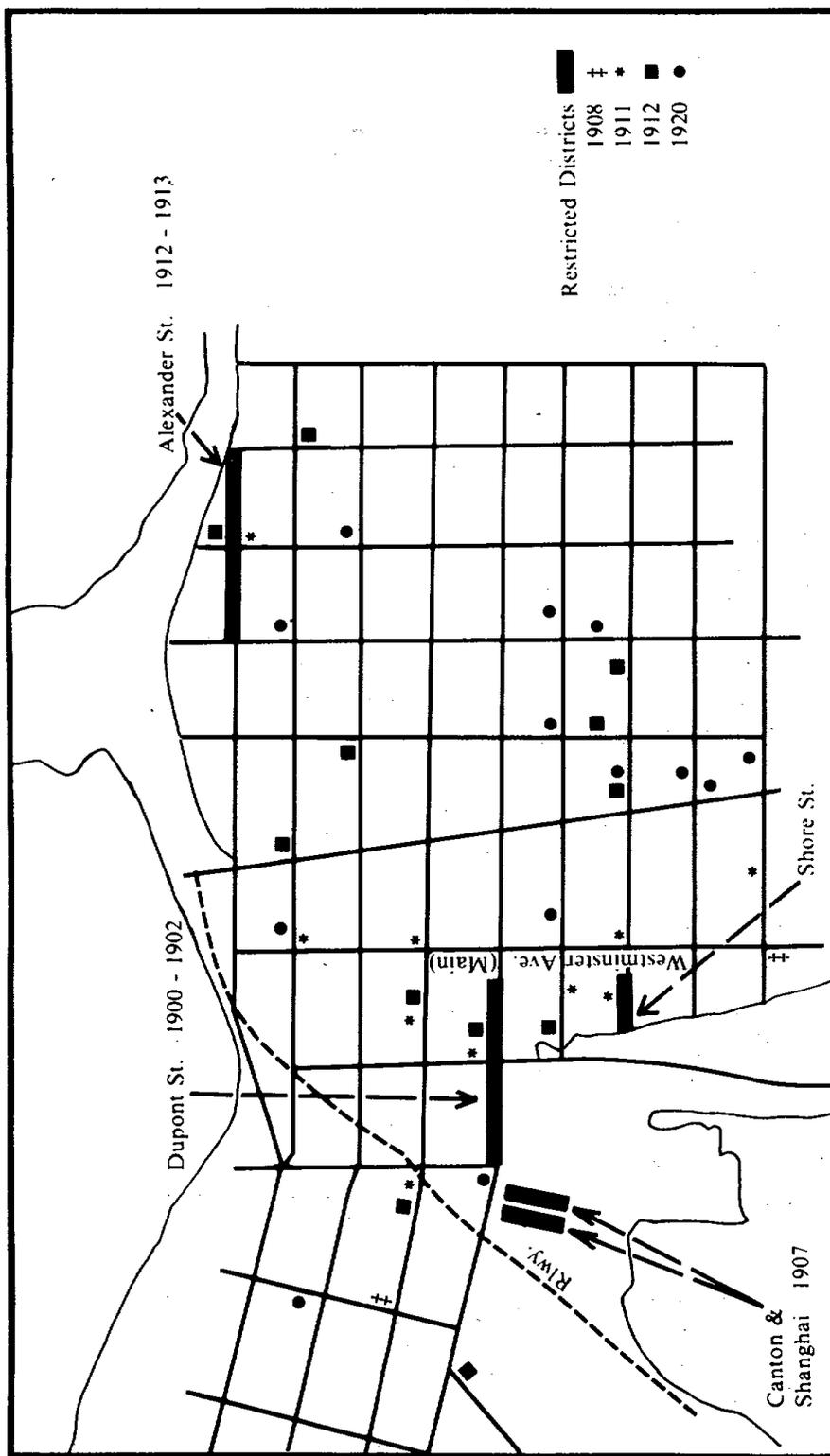
TABLE II

**Vancouver Prostitutes  
Complete Occupational Breakdowns, 1912 - 1917**

Occupation	Number	Occupation	Number
<b>Domestic</b>		<b>Service (Personal)</b>	
Housewife/Wife/Marr.	25	Cook	6
Domestic Servant	7	Laundry Worker	7
Housekeeper	101	Manicurist	5
Housemaid	17	Chambermaid	17
Housework	15	Boarding House keeper	5
Total	165	Hairdresser	3
		Card Reader	1
		Milliner	3
		Bust Developing	2
<b>Clerical</b>		Waitress	46
Telephone Girl	1	Total	95
Stenographer	8		
Cashier	6	<b>Industrial</b>	
Clerk	7	Dressmaker	19
Cigar Stand Clk.	1	Packer	2
Fruit Store	1	Seamstress	2
Shooting Gallery Clk	1	Labourer	2
Shop Girl	2	Total	25
Total	27		
<b>Other</b>			
Entertainment	6		
Police Matron	1		
Collector	1		
Teacher	1		
Nurse	2		
Dentlemaid	1		
Total	12		

SOURCE: Vancouver City Gaol, *Prisoner's Record #1 - 2388, Local - 1.*

Prostitution in Vancouver, 1900 - 1920



## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This article was condensed from: Deborah L. Nilesen, "The Social Evil: Prostitution in Vancouver, 1900 - 1920", B.A., History, Honours Essay, 1976 (Special Collections, University of British Columbia Library).
- <sup>2</sup> Dominion of Canada, *The Criminal Code*, 1913, sec. 216: By 49 Vict., ch. 157, sec. 7; 55 - 56 Vict., ch. 29, sec. 185; 8 - 9 Edw. VII, ch. 9. Derived from Great Britain, Laws, Statutes, et., *Criminal Law Amendment Act*, 1885, 48 - 49, Vict. ch. 69.
- <sup>3</sup> In 1920, offenders were liable to a ten year prison term. By 10 - 11 Geo. V, ch. 43, sec. 8.
- <sup>4</sup> C.C.C., 1892, sec. 198, (I); now sec. 228; by 8 - 9 Edw. VII, ch. 9.
- <sup>5</sup> C.C.C., 1892, sec. 207 (j),(K).
- <sup>6</sup> C.C.C., 1913, sec. 228A: By 8 - 9 Edw. VII, ch. 13, sec. 11.
- <sup>7</sup> By 8 - 9 Edw. VII, c. 13.
- <sup>8</sup> By Geo. V. ch. 12, ss. 6, 7, 15.
- <sup>9</sup> The Board of Police Commissioners consisted of the Mayor, one City Council member and one person from the community, the latter two were appointed by the provincial government.
- <sup>10</sup> See map. Prostitution was probably concentrated on Dupont Street from 1900 to 1904 as well: during these years only six charges were brought to Court from other locations. Vancouver Police Court *Calendar*, May, December, 1901; July, October, 1902; May, 1903.
- <sup>11</sup> The Vancouver Board of Police Commissioners, *Incoming Correspondence, June 1906 to April 1908*, May 28, 1906.
- <sup>12</sup> The Vancouver Board of Police Commissioners, Meeting *Minutes, February 17, 1904 to December 1, 1908*, June 8, 1906; *Calendar*, May, 1906.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Vancouver Province*, June 2, 1906, p. 1.
- <sup>14</sup> *Correspondence, June, 1906 to April, 1908*. June 15, 1906.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, June 15, 1906.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, August 6, 1906.
- <sup>17</sup> *Minutes, February 17, 1904 to December 1, 1908*. July 4, 1906.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, September 7, 1906.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, August 7, 1906.
- <sup>20</sup> *Correspondence, June, 1906 to April, 1908*. September 4, 1906.
- <sup>21</sup> A number of women who moved to residences on Shanghai and Canton Streets also worked out of the Great Northern Hotel; *Ibid.*, October 29, 1907.
- <sup>22</sup> *Calendar*, October, 1906.
- <sup>23</sup> See map.
- <sup>24</sup> *Correspondence, June, 1906 to April, 1908*. February 13, 1907.
- <sup>25</sup> *Calendar*, May, 1907.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, November 1907.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, January 1908.
- <sup>28</sup> "lids on" refers to a police strategy aimed at the suppression of prostitution, whereas "lids off" refers to a more tolerant, regulatory police policy.
- <sup>29</sup> See map.
- <sup>30</sup> *Correspondence, June 1906 to April 1908*. February 19, 1907 and March 5, 1907.
- <sup>31</sup> According to the record of arrests for 1907, there were at least twelve "brothels" on Shore Street and at least 105 on Shanghai and Canton Streets. It should be noted that as little as two women can fit the legal description of a "brothel"; one woman is charged as the "Keeper" and the other as the "Inmate". The figures quoted above more realistically show that there were far more prostitutes working in Chinatown than on Shore Street.
- <sup>32</sup> *Minutes, February 17, 1904 to December 1, 1908*, November 5, 1907.
- <sup>33</sup> *Correspondence, April 11, 1908 to April 1, 1911*, October 15, 1909.
- <sup>34</sup> *Minutes, February 10, 1909 to June 4, 1912*. February 2, 1910.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, May 11, 1911.
- <sup>36</sup> *Correspondence, April 1, 1911 to December 31, 1912*, April 12, 1911.
- <sup>37</sup> *Minutes, February 10, 1909 to June 4, 1912*, August 1, 1911; this meeting was labelled "PRIVATE".
- <sup>38</sup> *Correspondence, April 1, 1911 to December 31, 1912*, April 12, 1911.
- <sup>39</sup> *Minutes, February 10, 1909 to June 4, 1912*, May 31, 1912. At this meeting the Chief Constable was instructed to appoint one of his staff to the position of Morality Office for the city.

- 
- <sup>40</sup> *Correspondence, January 1, 1912 to January 1, 1913, August 27, 1912.*
- <sup>41</sup> *Calendar, August, September, 1912; 1912 showed the highest number of arrests and convictions of any year to that date.*
- <sup>42</sup> *Minutes, June 12, 1912 to November 17, 1920. December 31, 1912.*
- <sup>43</sup> *Correspondence, January 1, 1913 to May 31, 1914, January 17, 1914. Minutes, June 12, 1912 to November 17, 1920, January 5, 1915.*
- <sup>44</sup> A. Rae, interview held in Vancouver, February 28, 1976. Mr. Rae was an officer of the Vancouver Police Force from 1912 to 1946. He retired as Chief Inspector of the Morality Squad.
- <sup>45</sup> *Province, January 7, 1913, p. 5*
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>47</sup> For a full account of the changes in the structure of prostitution in Vancouver, see Nilsen, *op. cit.* ch. IV.
- <sup>48</sup> In the six months prior to February, 1913, three women were arrested on soliciting charges. During the six months after this date, twenty-six women were so arrested; *Calendar, August, 1912 to July, 1913.*
- <sup>49</sup> Ceta Ramkhalawansingh. "Women during the Great War" in *Women at Work, Ontario 1850 - 1930*, eds. Janice Action, Penny Goldsmith and Bonnie Shepard (Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974), p. 289.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- <sup>51</sup> Lori Rotenberg, "The Wayward Worker: Toronto's Prostitute at the Turn of the Century" in *Women at Work, op. cit.*, p. 47.
- <sup>52</sup> Ramkhalawansingh, *op. cit.* p. 302.
- <sup>53</sup> Rotenberg, *op. cit.* p. 63.
- <sup>54</sup> William Tate, *Madgalenism. An Enquiry into the Extent, Causes and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: P. Richard, 1940); Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work and Those That Will Not Work*, vol. IV (London: Griffith, Bohn and Company, 1862); William Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects Throughout the World* (New York: Medical Publishing Company, 1897); Abraham Flexner, *Prostitution in Europe* (New York: Century Co., 1914); Eric M. Sigsworth and T.J. Wyke, "A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease" in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972); Ronal Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); Eroc Trudgill, "Prostitution and Paterfamilias" in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, vol. II, eds. H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973); Harry Benjamin and R.E.L. Masters, *Prostitution and Morality: A definitive report on the prostitute in contemporary society and an analysis of the causes and effects of the suppression of prostitution* (London: Souvenir Press, 1965); Charles Winick and Paul Kinsie, *The Lovely Commerce: Prostitution in the United States* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971).
- <sup>55</sup> Rotenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
- <sup>56</sup> *Prisoner's Record #1 - 2388, Local -1, October 7, 1912 to November 9, 1917. CAV.*
- <sup>57</sup> Department of Labour, *The Labour Gazette: The Journal of the Department of Labour*, vol. XVI, May, 1916, p. 1191.
- <sup>58</sup> Genevieve Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880 - 1920" in *Women at Work, op. cit.* p. 85.
- <sup>59</sup> Rotenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 41; Leslie, *ibid.*, p. 85.
- <sup>60</sup> Leslie, *ibid.*, p. 90.
- <sup>61</sup> *Gazette XIV, June 1913, p. 42.*
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, March 1914, p. 1051.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, January, 1914, p. 789.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, February, 1914, p. 900.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, August, 1913, p. 152. For more detailed occupational breakdowns and biographical information, see Nilsen, *op. cit.*, ch. IV and Appendix.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, February, 1914, pp. 900, 901.
- <sup>67</sup> *Gazette XV, October, 1914, p. 469.*
- <sup>68</sup> *Gazette XVI, April, 1915, p. 1184.*
- <sup>69</sup> *Gazette XIV February, 1914, pp. 900, 901.*
- <sup>70</sup> *Gazette XV, February, 1915, p. 927.*
- <sup>71</sup> *Gazette XVI, November, 1915, p. 570.*

---

## Bibliography

- Benjamin, Harry and R.E.L. Masters. *Prostitution and Morality: A definitive reports on the prostitute in contemporary society and an analysis of the causes and effects of the suppression of prostitution*. London: Souvenir Press, 1965.
- Criminal Code*, R.S.C. 1892, c. C.-29  
- R.S.C. 1913, c. C.-13  
- R.S.C. 1915, c. C.-12.  
- R.S.C. 1920, c. C.-43.
- Department of Labour. *The Labour Gazette: The Journal of the Department of Labour*, vols. XIV - XVI.
- Flexner, Abraham. *Prostitution in Europe*. New York: Century Co., 1914.
- Laws, Statutes, etc. *The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885*. 48 & 49 Vict., ch. 69. Great Britain.  
- *The Disorderly Houses Act, 1751*. 25 Geo. 2, ch. 36. Great Britain.
- Leslie, Genevieve. "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880 - 1920" in *Women at Work, Ontario 1850 - 1930*, eds. Janice Action et al. Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974, pp. 71 - 125.
- Mayhew, Henry. *London Labour and the London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Condition and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Cannot Work, and Those That Will Not Work*. 4 vols. London: Griffith, Bohn and Co., 1862.
- The National Council of Women of Canada. *Yearbook*. Ottawa: National Council of Women of Canada, 1900 - 1920.
- Pearsall, Ronald. *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.
- Rae, Andrew. Interview, February 28, 1976.
- Ramkhalawansingh, Ceta. "Women during the Great War" in *Women at Work, Ontario 1850 - 1930*, eds. Janice Action et al. Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974, pp. 261 - 307.
- Revised Statutes of Canada. Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885*, 49 Vict., ch. 157.  
- *Offences Against the Person Act, 1869*, 32 - 32 Vict., ch. 157.
- Rotenberg, Lori. "The Wayward Worker: Toronto's Prostitute at the Turn of the Century" in *Women at Work, Ontario 1850 - 1930*, eds. Janice Action et al. Toronto: Canadian Women's Educational Press, 1974, pp. 33 - 69.
- Sanger, William. *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes and Effects Throughout the World*. New York: Medical Publishing Co., 1897.
- Sigsworth, Eric M. and T.J. Wyke. "A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease" in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972, pp. 79 - 99.
- Tait, William. *Magdalenism. An Enquiry into the Extent, Causes and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh*. Edinburgh: P. Rickard, 1840.
- Trudgill, Eric. "Prostitution and Paterfamilias" in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, 2 vols., eds. H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, pp. 693 - 706.
- Vancouver Board of Police Commissioners. *Incoming Correspondence*, June, 1906 - January 6, 1919. CAV.  
- Meeting Minutes. February 17, 1904 - November 17, 1920. CAV.
- Vancouver City Gaol. *Prisoner's Record #1 - 2388, Local -1*, October 7, 1912 - November 9, 1917. CAV.  
*The Vancouver Daily Province*, May 26, June 2, 7, 1906; January 7, 1913; October 11, 1918.
- Vancouver Police Court. *Calendars*, 1900 - 1920.
- Winick, Charles and Paul Kinsie. *The Lively Commerce: Prostitution in the United States*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1917.
- Woodsworth. J.S. *My Neighbour: A Study of City Conditions, A Plea for Social Service*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Toronto: Frederick Clarke Stephenson, 1913.