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Prostitution in Genoa, Naples, Palermo and Rome

Nicoletta Policek

University of Cumbria, UK

and

Michela Turno

Independent scholar

Historical overview

The four cities in question encompass the articulation of the “problem” of female prostitution in Italy, set against the backdrop of varied legislative frameworks influenced to a lesser or greater extent by the moralizing hold of the Catholic church. Over the centuries, the church’s stance on prostitution has been one of moral condemnation of women involved in the trade. Despite differences in dealing with prostitution, the end result remained the same: ways of thinking about prostitution ranged from acceptance of prostitution as an inexorable evil, to condemnation of those profiting from it, and encouragement for the prostitute to repent. Notwithstanding the approach adopted, prostitution was perceived as a growing threat in Italy.

In Naples, for instance, prostitution seemed to have become a conspicuous feature of the city since the late sixteenth century in conjunction with the city’s demographic growth when under Spanish control. One of the largest cities in Europe and the most populated metropolis in Italy, in the 1640s Naples was said to have 30,000 prostitutes out of 300,000 inhabitants. Although that number was obviously exaggerated, contemporary government sources and foreign travellers reported being struck by seeing prostitutes crowding even the best streets of the city. Moreover, the presence of numerous women’s secular and religious institutions, refuges for repentant prostitutes and asylums for poor, unruly girls was an additional indication of the high incidence of the phenomenon.

Apparently less evident, in Palermo prostitution was also thought to be a widespread activity. The city, long-time residence of the Spanish viceroys, lost its role of capital when the kingdoms of Naples and Sicily were united after the Restoration thus forming the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Until then, the two capitals had dealt independently with their “fallen women” adopting, however, similar legislative approaches and showing an increasing lack of interest in the matter over time. As in Naples, the extreme poverty of a large part of the population of Palermo and the seduction and moral corruption of innocent girls were considered two of the main causes of prostitution. Nevertheless, Palermo counted only a very few institutions that could offer overnight shelter to homeless prostitutes or protection for repentant women.

Prostitution was not a rare occurrence even in the urban landscape of Rome, where the trade was officially prohibited. As Sweet (2012) reports, the tacit encouragement of the “carnal commerce” by the papacy as a means of raising revenue was frequently cited by eighteenth-century travellers. Capital of the Papal States and second largest city in Italy, in 1850 Rome was said to have nearly 3,500

women involved in prostitution out of 200,000 inhabitants. In the same period, apparently almost 2,650 prostitutes amongst a population of 130,000 inhabitants worked in Genoa. The city, once one of the most important Mediterranean commercial harbours, had lost its relative independence in 1814 when it was annexed to the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. Although these data cannot be considered a realistic representation of the sex trade in the four cities, they surely testify to the degree of anxiety caused by prostitution among contemporary observers.

Despite all those concerns and alarming reports, attempts made to control commercial sex in the four cities did not have great success. Yet the crucial turning point occurred with Italian unification and the extension of the Cavour regulation on prostitution to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, to the Papal States in 1861 and then to Rome in 1870. Institutionalization of state brothels, compulsory health check-ups and restrictions on the freedom of prostitutes formed the basis of a regulatory system which lasted until 1958.

Societal reaction and legal situation

Repression and tolerance characterized the attitude of and action taken by the Neapolitan governors towards prostitution. In 1736, the Catholic priest, Gennaro Maria Sarnelli, launched his campaign against commercial sex. While he believed that widespread female poverty was one of the main causes of prostitution, he recommended separating respectable families from the prostitutes and the extirpation of pimps and procurers from the city of Naples. As result of Sarnelli's intense preaching, prostitutes were evicted from the most representative areas of the city and relocated into peripheral zones, such as Saint Antonio Abate, while owners were deterred from renting rooms in the forbidden neighbourhoods. Despite all those efforts, no substantial results were obtained.

A similar ineffectual policy was adopted in Palermo. In 1712 an ordinance was passed banning prostitutes from loitering in the Vucciria market, *Ballarò* Square, Cassaro Street and the Marina after 1 a.m. and men from coupling with wandering whores in the night. In 1713, soldiers were forbidden either to visit prostitutes in their houses or to receive them in the military quarters. In 1793, the last known ordinance issued by a Sicilian viceroy ordered the eviction of both vagrants and prostitutes from the city. Later on new attempts were made to deal with the rising fear of moral disorder and syphilitic contagion by applying some form of regulation based on the French model imported during the Napoleonic occupation. In 1823, the municipal government of Palermo introduced licences tolerating brothels. In 1841, the *Regolamento del costume pubblico* (Regulation of Public Morals, first enacted in Naples in 1839) ordered the medical examination of all prostitutes within the city. The following years were marked by a legislative void that remained substantially unchallenged until the unification of Italy in 1860 when the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies ceased to exist.

Between 1600 and 1700 the most significant innovation both in Genoa and in Rome was the creation of designated areas where street prostitutes were tolerated and where brothel owners could advertise their businesses. In the city centre of Genoa those areas were circumscribed within the perimeter of small paved roads in the Caruggi district, close to the harbour, and along the west banks of the Tiber River in Rome. That line of attack stipulated a clear demarcation with a spatial and moral division between those who were acting as controllers of public morality and

those who were subject to control and, as a consequence, living on the margins of society. To further assure that prostitutes were kept away from respectable society, prostitutes were repeatedly forced to be hospitalized in institutions, known as Hospitals for Incurable Diseases. They were managed by Christian charity organizations and were under the supervision of the local municipal police. Massobrio (2002) highlights how the municipalities of Genoa and Rome had made plans to open such institutions. In both cities, as in many other Italian cities, the role of Ettore Vernazza was pivotal in the organization of such hospitals between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

After founding one in Genoa, under the auspices of the Fraternity of Divine Love, a religious congregation of orthodox conservative Christians, Vernazza turned his expertise to Rome, reconstructing the ancient and dilapidated hospital of Saint James in Augusta. The hospitals were designed to accommodate those who were considered incurable patients, who were mainly suffering from venereal diseases, particularly syphilis, that in those years had begun to spread in Europe.

When considering the regulation of prostitution in Italy during a period which spans several centuries — from 1400s until 1800s — it is worth highlighting that prostitution and venereal diseases were regarded as connected phenomena and deemed to be the result of inappropriate and immoral behaviour of the women engaged in the trade. In fact, women prostitutes were deemed a moral threat that needed to be assuaged, and a population in need of “saving”. Men, on the other hand, were seen as naturally promiscuous but vulnerable to diseases because of the malevolent immorality of women prostitutes. That double-standard approach was hence evident on both counts: in the eighteenth century the bourgeoisie in Genoa and Rome policed itself via the promotion of self-restraint supported at distance by the Catholic moral majority. In the nineteenth century it turned its attention to the sexual behaviour of the working classes, with the moral condemnation of “sexual deviants” focusing on women prostitutes, in particular street prostitutes. That resulted in an increased number of street prostitutes being arrested both in Genoa and in Rome. Once released from police custody, however, women in Genoa were able to remain in the city, often managing to switch from working the street, where they could be attacked and/or robbed by potential customers and passers-by, to the safer (and secluded) environment of brothels, whereas, in Rome, women who had engaged in prostitution in the past were forced to leave the city and move to different locations, as accounted for by local municipal sources relating to the period prior to the unification of Italy.

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw, both in Genoa and Rome, the establishment of more lock hospitals and penitentiaries for women found to have a sexual infection. Combating venereal disease was not, however, the only reason for their establishment; instead of simply concentrating on the physical health of prostitutes, the focus of the new institutions was the surveillance and regulation of the women’s sexual behaviour by imposing strict rules of conduct. Such rules ranged from preventing women from socializing with the external world to almost forcing them to provide cheap manual labour in exchange for shelter. In Genoa, the Hospital for Incurable Diseases, popularly called the Ospedaletto, stood in the neighbourhood of Portoria, beside the Hospital of Pammatone. Until its closure in the 1930s, it hosted a monthly average of 50 prostitutes deemed to be in need of medical assistance and shelter. In Rome, women were detained in several hospitals in the city, according to the area in which they lived. The majority of prostitutes working in Rome, however, were detained at the hospital of San Gallicano —statistics of admissions show

that until 1937 650 prostitutes per year were admitted on average with a significant increase at the beginning of the First World War. The rationale behind the internment of prostitutes was not only limited to the medical aspect of syphilitic infection, but called attention to the social problem of prostitution, as a source for the spread of the disease.

In 1861, the newborn state of Italy extended to the annexed territories the Cavour regulation on prostitution, which echoed similar measures already taken in Europe. The state assumed control over prostitution which was legalized but confined preferably into licensed brothels, fixing the prices according to the class of the houses and the percentage of the owners' profit. It also allowed women to work as isolated prostitutes in their own premises or in rented rooms. It introduced the registration of prostitutes, fixing of the age limit of enlistment at 16, compulsory biweekly vaginal examinations in the health offices or in the brothels and forced hospitalization in the so-called *sifilicomi*. The Cavour regulation severely limited the freedom of brothel inmates who, for instance, were expected not to leave or change their premises, and not to move to another city without police permission.

The system was placed under the control of the *polizia dei costumi* (morality police) who were in charge of surveillance of both legal and clandestine prostitution. The police were far from popular as they abused their power in particular over low-class women who were subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrest, and forced registration for suspected prostitution. According to the regulationists, such a great restriction of freedom was justified by the risks of venereal contagion, the need to secure safe, sexual relief for men, and to separate prostitution from criminality and prostitutes from honest women.

Italian abolitionists, who included parliamentarians and female emancipationists from the Mazzinian left, soon raised their voices against the regulation system. They gained the support of Giuseppe Mazzini, Garibaldi and the international leader of abolitionism, Josephine Butler. Anna Maria Mozzoni, the most prominent among the emancipationists, led the Milanese branch of the International Abolitionist Federation founded by Butler in the 1870s. Abolitionists believed that the Cavour regulation crystallized women's inequality and the double standard, and stressed that the male sex drive was not a natural instinct. That is to say, prostitution was not a necessity. Abolitionism achieved only partial success in 1888 when the Cavour legislation was replaced with a new, less oppressive law, the Crispi regulation. The system of brothels remained unchallenged and, although official registration of individuals as prostitutes was forbidden, madams were required to provide personal information about those who worked on their premises. The age limit of enlistment was raised to 21. Furthermore, isolated prostitutes could be arrested only for violations of the penal code. The most innovative aspect of the regulation was the abolition of the health offices, the *sifilicomi*, the compulsory health check-up and the forced hospitalization of prostitutes.

After the fall of Francesco Crispi, in 1891, the new Prime Minister, Giovanni Nicotera, introduced a new set of measures that took his name, the Nicotera regulation. The general principles of the Crispi statute were maintained. Isolated prostitutes could, however, be charged with infecting costumers or breaking the law of prostitution. In addition, prostitutes who refused examination and those who were found infected could be forcibly hospitalized. Later on, in 1905, the Nicotera law was partially modified with the enactment of the Health Regulation, which promoted a free,

anonymous and non-coercive cure for anyone affected by venereal disease. Italian physicians, above all the director general of public health, Rocco Santoliquido, were now convinced that prophylaxis was more effective than police repression. Pragmatism, rather than concerns with civil rights, lay behind the Health Regulation.

Under the Nicotera law prostitution in Italy became fully legal in privately owned premises with the result that both Genoa and especially Rome could boast a considerable number of brothels. In 1897 the superintendent of Rome wrote a report which showed that in conjunction with the increase in the number of legal brothels, Rome had at least 400 brothels that had not yet been identified and regularized. Two years later, the provincial medical officer of Rome confirmed that situation by saying that city officials were aware of an increasing number of illegal premises. Policing prostitution became more and more problematic as the number of women involved in prostitution steadily increased. The police set up a special task force based in every municipal headquarters with the remit of tackling street prostitution and regulating brothels. The Directorate of Public Security in 1897 reported that Rome had 20 agents solely dedicated to that task, and Genoa had three.

Like their British colleagues, Italian abolitionists campaigned against the so-called white slavery that had become an international issue at the end of the nineteenth century, despite the lack of satisfying evidence to support the extent of the trade. Italian Catholics joined the anti-slave crusade in the name of redeeming prostitutes and preventing girls and young women from falling into immoral life or prey to procurers. As a result of the joint efforts of feminist, abolitionist and Catholic organizations, the government of Italy took an official position by signing two international agreements in 1904 and 1910 for the suppression of traffic in women and children. Moreover, the new network of committees and institutions devoted to rescue and redemption, such as for instance the *Asilo Mariuccia* in Milan, gained more visibility and the director of public security welcomed their potential role to combat white trade slavery.

Italian colonialism and, later on, the First World War brought about a modification of the policy on prostitution, revitalizing both regulation and repressive attitudes. Military hierarchies frequently expressed concerns about the spread of venereal disease among soldiers on the war front or in the training camps. In order to guarantee the effectiveness of military units, different measures were taken by government decree and by the army authorities from the creation of brothels for soldiers and officers, to the reintroduction of the compulsory medical treatment of women found infected. With the advent of the war, more and more women entered the trade especially after brothels specifically targeting soldiers flourished both in Genoa and Rome. Army doctors took care to keep all brothels operating under their jurisdiction under strict sanitary control: observing very high standards of hygiene, rooms were kept clean and sanitized at all times, and women were constantly scrutinized and forced to undergo regular health checks. Furthermore, prostitutes had to carry an identity card bearing their name. They also had to leave a hefty percentage of their earnings to the madams who were running the brothels. Madams then had to pay a fee to the army as well as to the local municipality to maintain their licence. Then there was often a small fee to be paid to corrupt police officers.

The new measures promulgated during the fascist dictatorship not only reasserted most of the pre-existing rules, but also introduced surveillance over those women who worked outside the authorized

brothels. The Regulations of 1923, for instance, strongly emphasized the sanitization of prostitution with the legal duty of regular medical examinations of prostitutes — irrespective of their place of work — and the drafting of a public record. Women had to consent to be examined, their refusal legitimized their arrest and compulsory internment in lock hospitals. All prostitutes, including the isolated ones, were obliged to carry a document recording their periodic health examinations. Although prostitution was tolerated, the police could arrest a woman suspected of having a venereal disease, for refusing a medical examination, for clandestine prostitution or merely for suspicious behaviour.

As they were institutionalized in brothels and trapped for life by criminal and sanitary records, women had few opportunities for leaving prostitution. At the same time, however, and despite all efforts, none of the measures taken were able to weaken or deal with clandestine prostitutes. It was only in 1958 that the Italian Parliament abolished the draconian measures, officially closing all brothels by approving law 75/58 on the abolition of the regulation of prostitution and combating the prostitution of others, sponsored by the socialist senator, Angelina Merlin. Italy was not alone in formulating new legislation to control prostitution, but it was one of the last of the modern European nations to deregulate it.

Organization of the trade

The system of licensed brothels, established in 1860, did not prevent the exploitation and ill-treatment of the women who ended up working in the houses. According to the law, prostitutes kept one fourth of the money paid by each client, but madams often overcharged for clothes and toilet articles, thus creating a debt-bond trap for some of their employees. In those cases, police could intervene against brothel managers. Registered prostitutes, however, looked for every opportunity to go underground in order to escape the harshness of the law and, at the same time, to gain direct control over their own earnings. They thus joined the “army” of women who were believed to practise prostitution eluding all forms of control.

Clandestine prostitution caused great anxiety among the general public and the government. While the police kept a close watch on the activities of registered prostitutes, they seemed, however, to struggle in their battle against the irregulars. The percentage of coerced registrations of alleged prostitutes, for instance, was significantly high in Naples and Palermo where clandestine prostitution was considered to be a widespread phenomenon. Neapolitan unregistered prostitutes appeared to be concentrated in the highly populated city centre where they could easily disappear in the maze of streets. They worked in illegal brothels, as streetwalkers, or as itinerant prostitutes moving from one neighbourhood to the other. Some seemed to work occasionally in certain houses without staying overnight. Irregular prostitution was perceived to have been on the rise between the 1890s and the First World War in conjunction with the worsening economic situation.

With the unification of Italy after 1860, upon issuance of a specific licence by the local municipality, the opening of brothels was regulated *de facto* by the state. In that sense, the four cities did not display any substantial disparities except for the number of women involved in prostitution. The regulation of the opening of brothels was divided into two categories — those in which the prostitutes had a fixed abode and those in which they only worked — and into three classes of taxation payable to the state

according to the number of women employed in a brothel. With regard to the organization of brothels, the majority of Italian cities shared the same structure. The price of access divided the brothels into three different classes: the brothels to which access was granted by paying 5 lire or more (so-called luxury homes, rather numerous in Rome and virtually non-existent in Genoa), those in which the sum to be paid was between 2 and 5 lire, and finally those in which the price was less than 2 lire — defined as poor social housing.

The application of the law created a vacuum leading to the arbitrary discretion of the police who exhibited a more tolerant approach in Genoa than in Rome with regard to the arrest of women “under the suspicion of prostitution”. A more lenient approach was also displayed by the police in Genoa when dealing with women willing to stop prostituting themselves. Police records of the time — late 1800s until the 1920s — show that a great number of women in Rome claimed that police officers were still abusing and harassing them once they had stopped working in brothels, often blackmailing them and/or asking for sexual favours. In Rome, historical accounts give testimony to a double standard employed by many bishops, cardinals and highly respected members of the Catholic church, publicly condemning prostitution, but privately sponsoring and, often visiting, high-class brothels. Rome, according to Canosa (1989), boasted a number of high-class brothels where well-educated women entertained middle-class customers, the clergy and the aristocracy. Canosa also reports the presence of outdoor sex workers on the banks of the river Tiber, who entertained travellers and merchants for much less money.

The trade was organized in such a way that those who wanted to open a brothel were subject to strict rules: they were required to contact the municipal authority and the local police at least eight days prior to the opening in order to declare the whereabouts of the brothel and the number of rooms, as well as the list and particulars of the prostitutes and of all other persons “engaged in the service of the brothel”. The geographical policing of prostitution was reflected in the subtle interference of the police in Genoa, who allowed brothels to be scattered anywhere in the city centre, if considered as high-class premises, and in the district of Caruggi if brothels were catering for sailors and merchants. In Rome stricter rules applied with regard to brothels that were too near to the Vatican City and the city centre. There the local municipality and the police insistently and powerfully asked madams to provide a detailed written statement certifying that the premises chosen were not located near a convent or a school.

The number of licensed brothels remained generally stable, only to gradually decline at the turn of the nineteenth century. Naples and Palermo, in particular, saw the opening of new houses, half of which were registered by order of the police. Naples counted about 88 tolerated brothels that employed, on average, 15 women. Following a national trend, however, the total number of employees decreased to about six while that of the houses had dropped to 48 by 1941. In general, the inmates frequently asked for permission to change their residence, a sign of their resistance to institutionalization and a way to loosen the police’s grip on them. Although commercial sex was thought to be mainly a women’s affair, it appears that the state was not the only one interested in the trade: the Neapolitan Camorra and Sicilian Mafia had their own revenue from collecting *pizzo* (extortion) and managing rings of prostitution. Later on, in the 1920s, the authorities suspected that the periodic movement of prostitutes was arranged by a specific organization for the exploitation of women. To date, however, no archival materials have surfaced to confirm that suspicion.

Demography and causes of prostitution

Archival sources do not offer consistent and satisfactory information about women working in prostitution in the four cities between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a consequence of the abolition of registration, very little information is available after 1888. Gibson (1986) provides, however, a general description of the social profile of the women involved in prostitution based on national data mainly produced under the Cavour regulation. In 1875, 82 per cent of all registered prostitutes were single and had frequently lost one or both parents and, as a consequence, economic and emotional support. Of those 52 per cent were 21 to 30 years old; 27 per cent were 16 to 20; 17 per cent were 31 to 40; 3 per cent were over 41 years of age. Naples and Palermo were an exception, as the group of women under 21 was significantly larger than in other cities. In the 1890s, some sources estimated that one half of all prostitutes in Sicily were under the age of 21. Hospital records pertaining to the city of Rome reveal that the average age of women legally employed in brothels between 1899 and 1910 was 25 years, and the range was from 21 to 47 years. The average length of time the women worked in the same brothel was five years, varying between one and 12 years.

The large majority of all registered prostitutes came from the lower classes and from the worst paid occupations, such as domestic service and the garment trade. Gibson highlights how “combining part-time prostitution with regular employment to supplement an insufficient income became increasingly common as the nineteenth century came to a close and clandestine prostitution grew at the expense of the tolerated brothels”. That was the case in Naples where, according to Snowden (1995), wages were the lowest among Italian cities and “in 1884 ... three-quarters of the women of the Lower City lacked any occupation — a rate that was approximately double that of men”. The illiteracy rate was high among Italian women, but even higher among prostitutes in Palermo and Naples in particular, where the percentage was respectively 100 per cent and 95 per cent.

The mobility of prostitutes was generally high: 50 per cent of all registered women resided in the province of their birth (that percentage included those who had moved from the countryside to larger centres); 45 per cent came from other Italian provinces, while 5 per cent were foreign. According to Gibson, only 15 per cent of women involved in prostitution in Genoa originated from the province with a percentage of 77 coming from elsewhere in Italy and only 8 per cent being foreign prostitutes. In Rome, by comparison, 49 per cent of women came from areas nearby against a percentage of 47 from other Italian provinces. In Rome, the percentage of foreign prostitutes was around 4 per cent. Palermo appeared to be an exception: in 1875, 75 per cent of registered prostitutes were from the city and its province. Overseas migration of young Italian prostitutes, in particular to Mediterranean Africa, had been registered since the second half of the nineteenth century, while the 1920s saw a slow increase in the number of foreign prostitutes.

Fiume (1986) states that under the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, Sicilian prostitution was mainly an occasional and clandestine event. Women saw it as a means of supplementing their low income. It was associated with their main activities, such as spinning, making socks, working as a laundress, seller or servant. Those who opted for a more regular practice moved to the capital, or bigger centres, thus trying to preserve their anonymity and family bonds by going underground. Required to provide information to the central government between 1826 and 1827, many local

municipalities found themselves unable to quantify the real extent of the phenomenon. Some of them replied that no prostitutes lived within their territories. Very different data, however, came to light 60 years later. In 1881, Palermo, the fifth most populated city in Italy, counted 932 regulated prostitutes. At the turn of the century, that number had dropped to 320 per 60 brothels.

Valenzi (2000) estimates that the number of registered prostitutes in Naples ranged from between 1,000 and 2,000 in the second half of the nineteenth century. In December 1877, the former capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies housed about 1,802 prostitutes, 781 of whom worked in isolation. The majority had formerly been employed as garment traders, housewives and servants, while a smaller percentage were laundresses or farm and textile workers. Sources confirm the national trend for Naples, where 50 per cent of the prostitutes were from the city and its province, 46 per cent from Sicily, Puglia and other southern communes, 3 per cent from central and northern Italy, and 1 per cent was foreign. Clandestine prostitution and licensed brothels seemed to be concentrated in the neighbourhood adjacent to the military and commercial port, San Giuseppe-Porto, where the poorest and the youngest prostitutes wandered around looking for clients. Contemporary observers reported that a high number of them were between 11 and 16 years old, although no figures are available to show the real extent of the phenomenon.

Despite sensationalist press reports and the international crusade against the white slave trade, no conclusive evidence has been found that supports the existence of such a regular traffic in women in Italy or in other countries. This does not exclude the fact that a number of women and young girls were forced or tricked into prostitution by family members, friends or acquaintances who acted as procurers. The state of research and the lack of available sources are such that it is impossible to establish the extent of the problem. Piecing together and analysing the scattered and fragmentary information available in ministerial archives, police and trial records, however, might be helpful in reconstructing some of the many aspects that are still unknown.

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