
*Reviewed by Jeanne Armstrong*

Melissa Hope Ditmore, the author of this historical guide is also the author of the *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*. While the two works are similar, there are several differences between this shorter handbook and the two volume encyclopedia. The encyclopedia’s coverage is international while the historical guide specifically concentrates on prostitution and sex work in America. The encyclopedia has multiple entries arranged in alphabetical order while the historical guide is organized into nine chapters: Venues; Personnel; Legal Frameworks; Morality, Money, and Prostitution Prior to the Criminalization of Prostitution; Red Light, Green Light; The Wild West; Immigration Law and State Legislation of Morality to ‘Protect’ Women; 21st-Century Campaigns and Laws against Trafficking in Persons; and From Prostitutes to Sex Workers: a Movement for Rights. As the title states, this historical guides on prostitution and sex work is organized chronologically by beginning with a discussion of prostitution before criminalization; then describing the purpose of red light districts; and culminating with 21st-century campaigns and laws and the sex workers rights movement.

While the author’s two volume encyclopedia is a more comprehensive resource on the topic of prostitution and sex work, the guide has much historical information specific to the situation in America, which is not included in the two volume work. In addition both resources have appendices on historical accounts, documents by sex workers, and legal documents, but the
documents in these sections differ between the two resources. The two volume encyclopedia also has a section on poems and lyrics, which is not included in the historical guide.

In her introduction to the historical guide, Melissa Hope Ditmore explains the book’s organization. The first two chapters address the places “in which prostitution has historically occurred in the United States and the people involved, not limited to prostitutes, sex workers and their patrons” but also ancillary personnel such as managers and others (p. xxvi). Then the other chapters cover issues that have chronological boundaries, such as legislation. The chapter on venues discusses the street, cribs (rooms that a prostitute could rent), theaters, dancehalls, brothels, call girl agencies and the Internet. The online options now provide an opportunity for sex workers to ensure their security and for their patrons to remain invisible. The chapter on personnel covers clients, management (madams and pimps), and support staff such as security, drivers, receptionists, advertisers, attorneys and bondsmen.

Chapter 3 on legal frameworks examines the various approaches to regulation of sex work, for example, decriminalization, legalization and prohibition. The chapter on “Morality, Money, and Prostitution Prior to the Criminalization of Prostitution” provides an historical overview of brothels, public responses, criminalization and punishment. The chapter on red light districts discusses historical trends in the practice of prostitution, for example the creation of these districts in order to segregate areas of prostitution from “respectable” family neighborhoods. This chapter also describes the Storyville district of New Orleans and prostitution locales near military bases. The chapter on the wild west considers the role of race and ethnicity in the treatment of prostitutes in frontier areas of the United States.
Chapter 7 addresses efforts to regulate or restrict prostitution through the passage of immigration laws and morality legislation such as the Mann Act. Chapter 8 gives an overview of recent campaigns and laws against “trafficking in persons,” and explains the divisions among feminists over advocating for abolishment of sex work versus questioning whether reform movements might be harmful to the women involved in sex work. Ditmore also mentions that feminists who do not always recognize sex workers’ autonomy may assume sex workers do not understand that systemic oppression of women and repression of sexuality engenders the necessity of sex workers’ services. In this chapter, the author considers the trade in sex tourism and sex trafficking, which can endanger women.

The final chapter, “From Prostitutes to Sex Workers: A Movement for Rights,” provides examples of activism among sex workers from the 1942 Honolulu hookers’ strike” to the genesis of activism by sex workers in groups such as PONY (Prostitutes of New York) and (COYOTE) Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics. Some recent projects include a focus on combating HIV/AIDS; founding the St. James Infirmary, which offers health services to sex workers in San Francisco; and the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center, New York City.

In addition to the appendices and bibliography of print sources, the historical guide has a section on online resources about prostitution in the United States. The section on online resources includes texts; audio resources; video resources; organization websites; blogs; research reports; and some Google books. The guide also has an index; and a timeline from 1722, publication of The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders to 2009, when Rhode Island criminalized indoor prostitution.
The guide has occasional errata, for example a sentence on p. 65 reads, “This was not allowed all prostitutes before the court and may have been based on the woman’s record of dependability for paying off her outstanding debts,” which suggests an omitted world or two. However, despite such minor errors, the historical guide could be a useful supplement to the earlier *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work* since the historical guide covers the issue in America while the encyclopedia has an international focus.

[Jeanne Armstrong is professor at Western Washington University and is the librarian liaison for several departments and programs, including Women Studies.]