

***Review of The dancing girls of Lahore: Selling love and saving dreams in Pakistan's ancient pleasure district by Louise Brown, London, Harper Perennial, 2009.***

**Treena Orchard**

*The Dancing Girls of Lahore* by Louise Brown provides a richly detailed and insightful account of the lives of several Pakistani *kanjar* (traditional caste of entertainers, including prostitutes) women as they shift under the weight of new socio-economic and political conditions that are restructuring the traditional system of prostitution that has been their life blood for centuries. Positioned as a documentation of the change and the disappearance of an era, this book does infinitely more as it operates almost like a dual biography of *Heera Mandi* (the Diamond Market) and the key players living there who invited Brown into their lives. Taken from her diary and recorded over the course of four years, the chapters unfold according to the seasons of her fieldwork and in many ways trace the arc of the life cycle of not only the newly emerging system of prostitution and the neighborhoods in which it takes place, but also the lives of the different women, men, and children who make up the world of the Diamond Market. The many topical vignettes that are featured in the chapters provide the reader with insight into the diverse and complicated personal and geographic terrains within *Heera Mandi* as well as some of the humorous and often colorful slices of life that make up daily living within the walls of Lahore's ancient pleasure district.

The pages of this book introduce readers to women of all sorts, men of all sorts (including the *khusras*, transgendered prostitutes), the small group of local men who are addicted to licit and illicit substances, Tariq the sweeper, the newly arrived Bangladeshi villagers, Iqbal the painter, and the lively and fastidiously followed festivals and religious activities that punctuate the Muslim calendar. However, it is Maha who takes center stage and

Brown documents, with much feeling, close observation, and emotional engagement, the challenges she faces as she tries to support her family through a system of prostitution that is increasingly being controlled by factors beyond her control. A strong yet also complex and vulnerable woman, Maha's many struggles, with financial survival, the sorrows and jealousy in her relationship with her "husband", addiction, and the very constraining nature of her life as an aging prostitute in a system with diminished value, encapsulate and speak to the role of modernity in reconfiguring *kanjar* realities and social status. Careful to not reproduce polemic constructions of a lost "golden age" being replaced by a contemporary system devoid of cultural and economic meanings, Brown does a very good job connecting the forces that combine to reshape traditional forms of prostitution in this setting, including the loss of official forms of patronage, the rise of other kinds of entertainment (i.e., cinema, Internet pornography, and foreign dancing tours), and the reconfiguration of global market economies, that of the Persian Gulf in particular.

A sociologist, Brown provides us with a rich, descriptive account of fundamental aspects of society, social institutions, and social relationships within *Heera Mandi*, and it is the culturally contextualized presentation of gender that stands out as an especially effective vehicle through which the lives of her participants and friends can be best understood. She opens with a discussion of the forms of prostitution and temple and/or religious servitude that pre-date (and in some places still exist) the contemporary *kanjar* system(s), including the Hindu-based *devadasi* tradition, *nautch* or dancing girls, and the *tawaif* or courtesan. At the heart of these phenomena, and what binds the hard but very meaningful lives of women in the Diamond Market together today, is the management of gender, sexuality, class or caste, and the inequities embedded within largely male-dominated societies which in many critical ways become embodied through the reproduction of generations of women and girls who will always be prostitutes. Importantly, this is something that the author

struggles with. Reflecting upon one of Maha's daughter's entry into the trade she says, "...Nena is thrilled-and I'm confused. I thought I was coming to *Heera Mandi* to document a terrible trade, and yet Nena is seemingly not being dragged into prostitution: at 14 she's embracing her family's business with enthusiasm" (pg. 214). Her admission speaks to the contested position that prostitution, and the painfully unequal workings of gender in this context, continue to occupy and signify, even within the mind of a woman who understands these issues well. It also speaks to the limited opportunities afforded to girls and women within this social group, most of whom experience multiple, competing feelings and motivations about prostitution and what they have little choice but to continue to do in order to support their families.

In her closing portrait of Maha, Brown reflects with much wonderment upon her friend's unending belief in and pursuit of love, something that she sees as unrealistic because, in this setting, where women are "playthings" (pg. 285), love can never last. However, throughout the book she demonstrates that women are infinitely more than playthings, making this description appear somewhat inappropriate, as is her depiction of love never lasting in this particular community because the author herself has experienced this and readily discusses her own divorce. There are other examples where the author expresses disdain for some of the practices and beliefs circulating in *Heera Mandi*, including referring to Maha's belief in black magic as "idiocy" (pg. 225) and the "stupid myth" of describing defloration as an opening of virgins upon entry into the trade (pg. 228). Although isolated and very minor slips, the neo-colonial judgments within these descriptors point to cross-cultural understandings that, perhaps given the emotive and political complexity of what she examines, do not necessarily always converge.

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***Review of What's money got to do with it? Risky behavior in commercial sex work in Managua, Nicaragua by Alys Willman, Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2009.***

**Chimaraoke O. Izugbara**

Before reading Alys Willman's six-chapter *What's money got to do with it?*, it is easy to dismiss new publications on risk-taking among sex workers as unlikely to offer anything novel on the topic. But this trim volume, intended as a thick analysis and commentary on risk-taking among sex workers in Managua, Nicaragua, is an opportune reprimand to this inclination. Willman does not really attempt to shift attention from matters of disease, victimization, and violence, which she rightly admits remain the mantra in contemporary sex work literature. However, she does offer a grounded unpacking of and deeper probe at the centrality of economic motivations in the everyday indignities and vulnerabilities which female erotic laborers face in a context where prostitution is decriminalized. This is particularly important because it adds to a fairly stout body of research on risk-taking among sex workers, the vast majority of which is based upon data gathered from contexts where prostitution is illegal.

The book utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data collected with a range of methods including surveys, extended interviews, and observations among sex workers to tackle two central questions: How do sex workers make decisions about risks to their health, safety, and economic wellbeing? And how do workplace conditions shape the risks sex workers take, and the compensations they can demand or get for taking risk? For Willman, existing answers to these queries ignore the structural constraints and power dynamics in sex work and pay little or no mind to the dissimilar contexts in which sex workers ply and operate. For these reasons, she casts doubts upon existing assumptions that risk-taking among sex workers is a function of rational choice, utility

maximization, and misjudgment or miscalculation of future preferences and needs.

Willman makes the point that risk-taking among sex workers reflects the contradictions of power, consent, and constraints in decision-making; the segmentations and networks that characterize sex work; as well as sex workers' negotiations with the myriad systems of privilege, opportunities and disadvantage that surround their particular type of work. Based on data from her research, she shows that while health risks are a major concern for sex workers, the risk of violence weighs more heavily in decision-making, such that they more often take risks to their health than to their immediate physical well-being. Essentially, the sex workers she studied were more eager to prevent physical violence than infections. However, although sex workers worry about getting physically hurt, it is economic pressures rather than the premiums they get for having potentially harmful sex that lead them to take risks. Willman further contends that the tradeoffs that motivate risk-taking among are also often a longer-term risk of disease and the loss of immediate income. For the sex workers in her study therefore, it was largely a choice between disease and hunger, or as a Nigerian sex worker once told me "violence and hunger kill fast, but AIDS only kills after many years". While those familiar with the literature on risk-taking among sex workers may find nothing vividly profound about these findings, I am deeply persuaded that they will be comforted by Willman's authoritative deployment of different data sources to weave a compelling account of the linkages between risk-taking and contexts, power, opportunities, and economic desperation among Nicaraguan sex workers.

Willman's exploration of the theme of risk and reward in sex work in Chapter 5 acknowledges and demonstrates segmentations in the sex work market and how these divisions present sex workers with risks as well as opportunities for averting them. Her model of the labor market divides sex work sites into: the Managed Upscale segment, where formal managers regulate the transactions, the

Freelance Connected segment, where sex workers operate in informal networks without managers, and the Low-end Freelance segment, where sex workers negotiate their own transactions, but must pay a share of their earnings to room owners. In many respects, this model is clearly problematic. While assuming the fixity of both workplaces and the women who operate in them, it glosses over the ease with which sex workers' in a society where sex work is lawful can particularly traverse different worksites. Yet using these models of the sex work market in Managua, she ably supports her thesis on the uneven distribution of rewards, hazards, and opportunities for averting risks across workplaces. Willman's data suggest that in segments where earnings and premiums are high, sex workers showed less likelihood to take risks. In the different sex work sites which she identified, diverse network dynamics were also present and had implications for sex workers' safety and health. Formal networks characterized the Managed upscale segment and tended to protect business profits rather than the sex workers. But in the Freelance connected and Low-end freelance segments were informal networks, which focused more on the protection of sex workers. *What's money got to do with it?* concludes with a simple message for policymakers: money has everything to do with sex work and the risks it entails.

In many respects, *What's Money got to do with it?* is an interesting book. But it also has a number of obvious flaws. Besides a few typographical errors that I stumbled upon, I found that a certain level of ethnographic thinness pervades the book. This, clearly, comes from the author's heavy reliance on what sex workers told her rather than what she observed about them. Given that Willman only spent approximately five days observing in the field, this is expected. There is also the surprising absence of the voices and views of the men who purchase sex workers' services and who patronize different segments of Nicaragua's sex markets. All male clients do not present sex workers with the same levels and types of risks. The lack of a sustained sense of who these male clients are and why they operate in or prefer particular segments of the

prostitution market leaves one wondering whether Nicaraguan commercial sex worksites, can, by themselves, be risky without the men who visit them in search of erotic services. Also lingering in the book is a lack of clarity about what the next research steps should be.

Although a long list of recommendations is offered for policymakers, there are no suggestions for future research from the study. The author should have zeroed in on her findings to suggest topical areas and themes for moving forward academic inquiry on money, segmentation, networks, and risk-taking in sex work. These limitations notwithstanding, I am persuaded that there is a legitimate place for *What's money got to do with it?* in the libraries of scholars, policy-makers, and indeed all those who have something to do with sex work or who are keen to learn more about it.

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