

“THIS VILEST OF TRADES”

The League of Nations’ Anti-trafficking Inquiry of 1927

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the League of Nations’ official inquiry into the international question of trafficking, integral to their wider anti-trafficking campaign of the 1920’s. Through this, it assesses the consequences of employing external experts drafted from activist non-governmental organizations to conduct large-scale international research projects. In doing so it argues that the League’s official standards of unbiased data collection and knowledge production was somewhat compromised and that the leaders of the external research group used this official inquiry as a form of trojan horse to challenge and undermine the legitimacy of the system of regulated prostitution. Furthermore, this article unfolds how the research constructed new systems of knowledge about the nature of prostitution, that in turn positioned the system as a global threat with the potential to degenerate the future of humanity.

KEYWORDS: League of Nations, anti-trafficking, regulated prostitution, knowledge production, the interwar period



Introduction

During the last decades, the understanding of the League of Nations has undergone a significant transformation within the historiography of international history. This revisionist turn within the scholarship has sought to distance itself from earlier post-war accounts of the League's failed attempts at establishing lasting peace on the European continent (Pedersen 2007: 1091-92). In turn, this heterogeneous body of work has favoured interpretations that emphasised the League as an autonomous institution with its own agency rather than a space in which nation states struggle to maximise their own interest (Gram-Skjoldager, Ikonomou og Kahlert 2020: 215). The heightened scholarly focus on the League's agency and important work in combating the numerous social, economic and public health crises of the interwar period, was in many ways spearheaded by academic work focusing on the League's more specialised organs under the Secretariat. Taking my cue from this development within the research field I wish to focus on the League's specialised work with trafficking and prostitution, more specifically analysing the League's official transnational inquiry into the trafficking of women and children. The question of prostitution and trafficking featured prominently within interwar debates on women's rights, sexual morality, public health and race, and led to the strengthening of transnational cooperation between interest groups, founded on a wide range of ideologies such as feminism, social hygiene, Christianity, etc. These non-governmental interest groups problematised prostitution and trafficking on completely different grounds but sought the same solution; a complete abolition of state sanctioned, regulated prostitution (Pliley 2010: 105).

The state sanctioned system of regulated prostitution had its roots in nineteenth century health policies, a time before the existence of effective medical treatment of venereal disease. The system was a product of the period's optimism surrounding state regulation and was thought to protect the health of key societal sectors, such as the military and commercial navy. This legislation imposed strict regulations upon the women employed in the field of sex work, such as mandatory registration, medical checks, limited mobility, etc. (Levine 2003: 18-19). After the turn of the century the system came under increasing pressure from a wide range of non-governmental interest groups but were, however, still widespread throughout the world at the time of the League's campaign.

In this context, the newly formed League of Nations conducted an ambitious campaign aimed at rallying their member states around shared anti-trafficking solutions. Due to the nature of the League as a transnational actor, this fight was approached on a global level focusing on the act of trafficking rather than prostitution itself. One of the League's central ideals was to gather information and generate accurate knowledge that would contribute to creating a more rational foundation for the international debate on sensitive questions (Cloet 2019: iii). The Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Children (CTW) proposed a far-reaching investigation into the international aspects of sex work. This investigation was carried out by the research group called The Special Body of Experts (SBE). The group worked on an official mandate from the League of Nations Council but their work was funded by the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) and was conducted between 1924-1926 in more than a hundred cities throughout Europe and South America, culminating in the publication of two reports in 1927.

The League's anti-trafficking work has received some scholarly attention from historians working with the League. Generally, these accounts tend to stress the role of the international women's rights movement of the period. Some of these works have focused on the important role of the international feminist organisations in shaping popular opinion and transnational anti-trafficking cooperation (Gorman 2008). Other works have focused on the debates within the League's CTW responsible for anti-trafficking work under the social section of the Secretariat. These works have tended to focus on the feminists working inside the League and analysed the competing discourses on sex work within the League's specialised organs (Garcia 2012; Pliley 2010). There seems to be a lack of research, however, focusing on the League's data collection and knowledge production in this field, and on how the League as an authoritative voice on transnational issues, portrayed the international "problem" of prostitution. These are the themes I want to address with this article. The official data collection and knowledge production of the League was conducted by the SBE, a group with strong financial and ideological ties to the American social hygiene movement. For all these reasons I want to assess *what knowledge this body of work produced, and how the ideological tendencies of the group affected the knowledge produced in these reports*. In doing so I wish to further understand the political nature of data collection as a discipline and nuance the understanding of

the League's role as a purveyor of unbiased, objective fact-based knowledge in the international political landscape of the interwar period.

Health, ideology and science in the interwar period

By examining how notions around science, health and sexual morality shaped the League's work, I want to use the League of Nations archive (LONA) to create a cultural history and add to the field of research concerned with social questions. In trying to understand the intimate links between scientific research, ideology and culture, I build on existing perspectives of knowledge production. These concepts illuminate how underlying norms and ideologies affect the production of knowledge, how scientific research never operates autonomously from the historical and cultural context in which it is conducted (Foucault 2013: 203), and how these new scientific breakthroughs reinforce and strengthen categorisations and hierarchisation through the establishment of scientifically based ideas of normality (Taylor 2014: 62). I am interested in understanding the close relationship between the research group, research field and findings. Hereby trying to illuminate the inseparable nature between the normative or cultural context in which the research was carried out, and the framing of the international "problem" and conceptualisation of prostitution. With this strategy I deconstruct the report, searching for inconsistencies between the League's initial motivations and standards of official inquiries, and the ideologically motivated conclusions of the research.

The interwar period saw a stark increase in state-sponsored initiatives in the realms of public health and social medicine through the establishment of health ministries and public campaigns promoting family values. These developments led to a heightened focus on protecting the bodies of the nation from influences deemed degenerating by the state, exemplified by the institutionalisation of the "delinquent" and "promiscuous", and mass sterilisation programs (Mazower 1998: 91). I am interested in understanding the links between science, hygiene and sexual morality in interwar discourse and research. In these fields, sexuality was politicised and made a public concern for the state, with health and sexuality becoming a benchmark of a strong societal foundation, and thus a potential threat to societal cohesion and order (Taylor 2014: 47). The state continued to counteract these perceived threats with a wide range of campaigns aimed at improving the overall morality in

society (Foucault 1994: 151). These campaigns produced taxonomies and hierarchies, structured around the formulation of norms, by which it was possible to judge or divide the population into virtuous/sinful, normal/abnormal, healthy/degenerate (Davidson 1994: 292-4).

This contextual backdrop helps illuminate the broader developments in the realm of science, public health and morality central to Interwar health and social policies within the nation state. With this backdrop, we can investigate these developments on a transnational or international level through the leagues data collection and large-scale research within the realms of public health and sexology, and showcase how the League's knowledge production produced norms around sex work and sexuality as a whole. In this article I aim to showcase how the League's normative knowledge production in this field made prostitution a degenerating force, not only within the nation states but as a global threat for the future of humanity, and how this to some degree was a product of a conscious strategy of the leading members of the research group.

The core of my analysis relies primarily on the Report of the Special Body of Experts on the Traffic in Women and Children published by the League in 1927. This body of work presents the international trafficking "problem", the most significant findings and conclusions made by the researchers and gives us a vital insight into how the knowledge of this international "problem" was constructed. Through the digitised archives of the League of Nations, held at the United Nations in Geneva, I have been able to access not only the final reports but also the drafts. Due to the unpublished nature of the drafts, they allow us to gain insights into the more explicit ideological tendencies of the group's work. In comparing the two texts we can follow the editorial process and see what areas of the research were toned down or left out in the final report, showing us what was thought to be appropriate and worthy of being published. This being said, it is important to note that there are limitations to how much we can conclude about the editorial selection of the dataset from the reports alone, without crossing over into the realm of speculation. In overcoming some of these limitations I have chosen to include a group of sources that can shed light on the publication context.

The American connections

The CTW consisted of a wide range of non-governmental interest groups, who aided the League with everything from expertise to the funding of the League's research. This organizational structure was in no way extraordinary, but widespread within the social section of the Secretariat, and was in many ways the product of a lack of institutional support and underfunding (Pedersen 2007: 1111). It was within this committee that the idea of a large-scale inquiry into trafficking was conceived. During this time, the League reinforced their legal tools for combating and preventing international criminal activity (Garzia 2012: 98) and the anti-trafficking campaign supported them in establishing the right to carry out on-site investigations within the member states (Pedersen 2007: 1110).

The USA did not join the League of Nations and therefore was not officially involved in this international cooperation; however, American interest groups had a profound influence on this inquiry. The chief architect behind this global investigation was the committee's unofficial US delegate, Grace Abbott. In a plea to the League Council, she proposed her visions and motivations for such a large-scale endeavour: "(...) *an intelligent basis for a sound programme for international co-operation for the suppression of the traffic*".¹ In order to reach this potential, she argues for the deployment of professional experts in obtaining the facts and refuting exaggerations and denials of this global problem². The argument put forward by Abbott aligns with the League's use of experts. At the time it was believed that the League could avoid partiality and nationalist bias by using outside experts because these would secure the acquisition of impartial knowledge and thus aid the Council and the Assembly when deciding on sensitive matters (Cloet 2019: 1).

Abbott had close ties to the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) and the inquiry was made possible by their contributions. ASHA put forward 75.000 USD thereby funding the whole operation³. Head of ASHA, Dr. William F. Snow, was appointed by the Council to oversee the SBE.

¹ League of Nations Archive, Geneva, R636/12/27338/647, 21.03.1923, *Memorandum recommending an investigation through the Secretariat of the League, in order to ascertain certain facts regarding this traffic*, 1-2.

² LONA, R636/12/27338/647, 21.03.1923, *Memorandum recommending an investigation through the Secretariat of the League, in order to ascertain certain facts regarding this traffic*, 1-2.

³ League of Nations, *Report of the Special Body of Experts on Traffic in Women and Children - part 1*, (Geneva: Publications of the league of nations, 17.02.1927), 5.

He in turn appointed his colleague, Bascom Johnson, a lawyer in charge of ASHA's legal affairs, to oversee the fieldwork conducted by the research group (Knepper 2016: 143). This shows the symbiosis between official League inquiries and politically motivated interest groups. This wasn't a dim lit conspiracy; these ties were well-established and written into the official report, and this practice characterised every aspect of the League's work (Pedersen 2007: 1092). This aside, it is hard to imagine that the ideological and activist nature of ASHA and its members did not affect the way this problem was framed and presented. In her plea, Abbott clearly states that this organisation is politically motivated "*in the abolition of prostitution*"⁴. This perspective creates a foundation for understanding the cultural and political background of the leading researchers, and the way they understood this international "problem" and the solutions they put forward. The dynamic of American non-governmental interest groups exerting American influence and interests through "non-political" and technical arenas such as anti-trafficking, can in many ways be understood in a wider context of the exercising of North American soft power during the time of political isolationism (Giannuli 1998: 48; Tournès 2022).

The Report of the Special Body of Experts

At the time of the research, ideas about innocent, young, white women being kidnapped and trafficked into prostitution were widespread in popular culture (Knepper 2016: 139). The report clearly states that it wished to challenge and refute these prevalent notions about the nature of trafficking:

The very publication of such rumours without any attempt to verify their accuracy tends to divert public attention from the real facts of the situation⁵

The research landscape is divided on the question of the League's anti-trafficking efforts' eurocentrism. Some scholars have emphasized the League's efforts to distance themselves from the earlier so-called "white slavery" campaigns by adopting the more inclusive term "trafficking" as an

⁴ LONA, R636/12/27338/647, 1923, Memorandum recommending an investigation through the Secretariat of the League, in order to ascertain certain facts regarding this traffic, 2.

⁵ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 9.

important step in deracializing international anti-trafficking efforts (Leppänen 2007: 531; Legg 2012: 648). However, this body of research focuses on the works of the CTW and the League's anti-trafficking efforts as a whole. When looking at this specific report and the make-up of the research group (SBE) it is clear that the majority of the researchers were drafted from Europe and North America and that the leading members of this group were affiliated with activist interest groups with strong Anglo-Saxon notions on sexual morality and explicit interests in the abolition of state-sanctioned prostitution. Even though the report covered the trafficking in both European and South American territories the group only had one representative native to South America, Dr. Paulina Luisi, who, as I'll show later, ended up discrediting the report's findings and conclusions.

The SBE clearly saw themselves in opposition to the aforementioned narratives and saw their fact-based research as the antidote. By doing this they aligned themselves with the overall ethos of the League, where the role of expert knowledge would create an objective foundation for the debates on transnational problems. By utilising the gravitas of "scientifically" based wording, they were able to create new systems of knowledge about the nature of prostitution and establish new "truths" or conceptions of this field, by placing themselves in opposition to these popular narratives or "*rumours*". The ideological bias or tendency of the researchers is quite explicit and appears all throughout the source material and clearly influenced how the knowledge around the transnational aspects of prostitution were framed and conceptualised. This tendency within the text is clearly showcased in what can only be described as a trigger warning:

The proper examination of a social evil of this description, which is naturally repellent to decent-minded people, must involve reference to many drab and sordid details and even to practices which are shocking in their depravity.⁶

This warning to the readers shows us how the researchers engaged and negotiated with the sexual morality of the time, and their attitude towards sex workers. It is clear that there is no effort made to come across as objective, and no formal separation between the researchers' normative bias and the research field. The objective of uncovering the "truth" is interwoven with a moralistic discourse,

⁶ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 6.

here showcased in the normative wording. It is quite apparent that this strong bias affected the way in which the data was presented. When looking at the draft it becomes clear that details were left out of the final report. This could point to the fact that they were wary to cross into the realm of sensationalism, or that a report sanctioned by the League had to conform to certain standards⁷. Examples of this editing process can be seen in the omission of very explicit descriptions of the type of services provided within the field of sex work. These descriptions were changed from the specific, for example “*sodomy*”⁸, to more general wording such as “*various forms of perversion*”⁹.

The scientific gaze

The scientific methodology and terminology used in the production of this body of knowledge allowed the authors to showcase how localised centres of “vice” could have a corrupting influence on the global community as a whole by illustrating how these complex networks enabled the transnational movement of body and capital. In the draft, they described the work as sociological and scientific in nature¹⁰. These terms do not appear in the final report but there is no doubt that the investigation was influenced by ideas from the fields of sociology and economics. The data collected is both qualitative and quantitative in nature, ranging from statistics to interviews, field observations and visual representations (maps of trafficking routes). The information in the reports was obtained through collaborations with governments, voluntary organisations and most notably representatives of the so-called underworld. As mentioned earlier, this was part of a wider campaign establishing the right of the League to interrogate governments and carry out on-site investigations. The most controversial method was the deployment of undercover agents infiltrating the criminal trafficking networks. They did this, in their own words, to uncover “*what was going on behind the scenes*”¹¹, defending their methods by stressing the need to expose the factual reality of the problem, and refute any questioning of the validity of the information obtained through criminals¹².

⁷ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 6.

⁸ League of Nations Archive, Geneva, S148-A-3A-1, 1927, *Traffic in women and children - Special Body of Experts - Draft*, 25.

⁹ Report of the Special Body of Experts,, part 1,14.

¹⁰ LONA, S148-A-3A-1, 1927, *Traffic in women and children - Special Body of Experts - Draft*, 131.

¹¹ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 6.

¹² Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 6.

The sociological influence on the conceptualization of this field is very clear. Most notably is the use of detailed network analysis and field observations, describing the inner workings of the trafficking rings in play. They conclude that no evidence was found to support any ideas about a coherent international conspiracy behind the transnational trafficking in women, but state that these operations were carried out by loosely related autonomous, local groups or “clubs”¹³. The sociological influence is clear in the descriptions of specific clubs taken from the field notes of the investigators, in which detailed analysis depicts the different aspects of the trades and shows how logistics, capital, spaces, criminals and corrupt officials are working together in complex networks¹⁴.

Another important scientific influence in the knowledge produced, are key ideas from the field of economics. In this section I wish to illuminate how notions of a capitalist self-regulating economy influenced the way in which international traffic was understood and presented by the authors. They described international traffic as a business like any other, governed by the iron laws of supply and demand¹⁵. With the concept of a global, self-regulating economy, they were able to construct links between local surges in the market and the transnational “problem”. A good example of this can be found in the report’s description of so-called temporary markets. The report defines these temporary markets as an artificial surge in the number of males due to festivities, sporting events, tourist attractions or military presence¹⁶. An example of the problematisation of these markets is the description of the relationship between the USA and the Mexican town of Tia Juana.

The racing season is said to attract over a hundred thousand visitors a day, the majority of whom are American. By the side of legitimate attractions has grown up an organised centre of vice which panders to the worst sexual excesses (...)¹⁷

The report concludes that these temporary and local markets have a direct effect on the stimulation of international traffic¹⁸. Economic ideas about a global market allows the authors to problematize

¹³ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 24.

¹⁴ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 24-25.

¹⁵ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 9.

¹⁶ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 43.

¹⁷ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 13-14.

¹⁸ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 43.

local centres of “vice”. With this logic, Tia Juana’s “immoral” industries cannot be isolated but feed into a worldwide system of the supply and demand of vice. During the research the USA was in the middle of the prohibition era, which is an important context. Using the example of Tia Juana, they are able to argue that a local industry can have a corrupting influence on an international level, stimulating the international trafficking of sex workers to this centre and thus giving Americans access to activities deemed immoral and illegal by their own government.

Constructing villains and victims

The report produced knowledge regarding the power relations within the field of sex work by creating a strong binary between innocent sex workers and villainous traffickers. Furthermore, this construction channelled the heavy weight of this global problem on the shoulders of immoral individuals, hardwired for delinquency. The report states that trafficking should be understood as a degenerating force on the societal foundation:

The traffic as it exists would not appear by any means to be only a traffic in prostitutes, but a traffic in prostitutes is an evil which on all grounds of health or morals and in the interest of the future of the race, must be uprooted.¹⁹

This shows the intersection between health, morality and politics in the report, and must be understood through the broader scientific context of the time. The emergence of social medicine, with its essential idea that public health could be significantly improved, not through medicine alone but through political reforms altering the social circumstances within society. This realization brought a better and more holistic understanding of public health, but it also led to the politicization of these international questions (Gorman 2017: 204). In the quote the authors express the belief that prostitution was a degenerating force with the potential to corrode the fabric of society. Through this lens, the problem of international prostitution is elevated to a question of protecting the purity of the global society on the grounds of morality and health. The weight of this “evil” is cemented through the individuals partaking in this global trade.

¹⁹ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 19.

In describing the power relations between the sex workers and the procurers, the report creates a strong binary of villains and victims, producing archetypal characters at each end of this construct. The traffickers play the part of procuring and transporting women into this global network and are described as:

(...) pests of society are real parasites who live on the body as well as on the soul of their host.²⁰

This group works autonomously with loose ties of camaraderie to other parts of the network. In the quotation we see again this metaphor of society as a collective entity and how these individuals' prey on both the soul (morality) and the body (health) of the host (society). Again, we have two intertwined discourses; a descriptive scientific gaze that aims to understand and categorise the different cogwheels of this international "problem", and a moralistic one that produces knowledge about these actors as inherently immoral, degenerating parasites. Another central group of actors described in the report are the so-called *souteneurs* (French for *pimp*). This group takes control of the business of prostitution after a woman has been trafficked to a new location.

Once a foreign girl is taken to a distant country (...) the power of the *souteneur* is proportionately increased and she is accordingly a better subject for intimidation than local girls. Herein lies the studied cruelty and slavery which inevitably follows international traffic.²¹

This presents the unequal and exploitative power dynamic between the sex worker and the *souteneur*. The text makes use of the concept of slavery to emphasize this dehumanizing and asymmetrical dynamic. Another interesting aspect is the idea that these techniques for maintaining the exploitative power balance is a product of a well thought out methodology, a form of "*studied cruelty*", adding to the idea that the intermediaries of sex work are inherently inhumane. The *souteneurs* are also described as being "*low-down rascals*" engaged in "*any disreputable line of business*"²². I do not consider the categories produced in the report mere fabrications or complete constructions in a social constructivist sense. In the report there are countless examples of extreme cruelty that points to actual experiences and tragedies of the lives of sex workers. The point that I

²⁰ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 9.

²¹ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1,15.

²² Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 28.

am attempting to make however, is that the language used signifies a deterministic understanding of the criminalized intermediaries of sex work. There is little to no desire to understand the underlying causes of what led to these careers in crime, and through this the souteneurs, traffickers and madams are reduced to mere archetypal villains deprived of their humanity. They are described as deviants, judged not by their acts, but by their character (Taylor 2014: 44). Despite their initial motivation to challenge existing popular narratives surrounding innocent, young women being forced into prostitution, the report reproduced ideas about the exploitative power relations within the field of sex work and deprived the women involved in this line of work of any agency. Finally, the knowledge produced in this report can only be thought to have furthered the stigmatization of these women through the excessive use of strong moralistic language, condemning the field and their acts as a whole (Garcia 2012: 128).

Regulated prostitution

The system of regulated prostitution had its roots in 19th century health policies and was, at the time of the report, widespread throughout South America, Europe and its colonial territories. Even though Britain had abolished the system in the UK they still made use of this regulation in their colonies. The arguments for this system's legitimacy were manifold, ranging from military necessity, public decency to maintaining colonial hierarchies (Levine 2003: 20). I argue that the authors used an official inquiry on trafficking, as a form of trojan horse, to problematize prostitution itself. The report tied the stimulation of global trafficking to nations with relaxed attitudes towards prostitution. Throughout the report the authors challenge a range of state-held arguments in favour of regulated prostitution. These arguments range from the idea that prostitution is an inevitable force within societies and that regulation helps maintain the greatest amount of public order and decency²³, to the most influential argument; that regulated prostitution was the best weapon in the fight against venereal diseases, in a time where effective treatments were limited²⁴.

²³ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 40.

²⁴ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 40.

The authors claim they didn't want to discuss the merits of this system²⁵. This seems like nothing more than a thinly veiled rhetorical strategy, and in doing so they guard themselves against possible criticism from member states, practising regulated prostitution within their sovereign territories. When consulting the draft of the report this inherent tendency becomes clear. In the draft the researchers clearly state that they hope that a scientific inquiry such as this will not only strengthen the collective international will to understand and combat the transnational traffic, but that the report would challenge the idea of regulated prostitution altogether²⁶. One could argue that the above-mentioned agenda did not fit with the initial reasoning for the League-sanctioned inquiry, that being an investigation of the trafficking question and not a moralistic critique of prostitution itself. Another explanation for this choice is that the report could be interpreted as a partisan contribution, aimed at converting member states to the Anglo-Saxon-inspired system of prohibition.

Even though the motivation was edited out of the official report, the knowledge produced is still inherently biased. The report ties together local regulated prostitution and the global problem of trafficking²⁷. Throughout the report this point is stressed continuously and even concluded to be the primary reason for the stimulus in international trafficking, making this local regulation the primary cause of this global "problem"²⁸.

The report presents a range of counterarguments against local regulated prostitution. Firstly, an argument is made solely against prostitution with no relation to the international trafficking question. They argue that regulated prostitution does not only cater to the inevitable number of "*abnormal minds*" in a given populous, but that it is a corrupting factor in itself, leading healthy young men into depraved and immoral practices²⁹. According to this logic these vice districts act as a kind of motor, spreading unwanted character traits to a wider and previously unsoiled audience, degenerating the potential of future generations. The report concludes with a plea to the governments relying on regulated prostitution for the prevention of the spread of venereal diseases:

²⁵ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 40.

²⁶ LONA, S148-A-3A-1, 1927, *Traffic in women and children - Special Body of Experts - Draft*, 129-31.

²⁷ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 40

²⁸ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 14.

²⁹ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 14.

(...) to consider the possibility of abandoning a system which is fraught with such dangers from the point of view of international traffic.³⁰

This quote shows how the authors saw their potential influence in persuading governments to move away from this system. This indicates that this League-sanctioned inquiry was used to challenge the institution of prostitution itself through a form of activism disguised as an inquiry initiated to serve the collective interests of the international community.

The aftermath

In this final section of this article, I wish to investigate both the internal and external criticism of the report's findings in the immediate aftermath of its publication. In doing so I wish to further the understanding of the consequences of the League's use of outside experts in delivering an unbiased, fact-based foundation for international debates. The report received widespread attention following its publication and broke the records for sales of any publications made by the League³¹.

There was a fight both at the external and internal level of the League to stamp out criticism of the report's conclusions and give an official sanctioning of its integrity. Internally, an official complaint made by the only South American member of the SBE, Dr. Paulina Luisi, directly to the Secretary-General of the Secretariat, Sir Eric Drummond. I have not been able to locate this document within the archive, but I have come across several sources referencing this formal complaint, one of these being a letter from the Head of the SBE, Dr. William F. Snow, to Drummond, in which Snow tries to discredit Luisi's claims and argues that:

we do not have any evidence to support the view that the enquiry has been either insufficient or superficial for the use we have made of our information.³²

³⁰ Report of the Special Body of Experts, part 1, 48.

³¹ Rachel E. Crowdy, "The Humanitarian Activities of the League of Nations" *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (May, 1927): 156.

³² LONA, R673/12/63426/28269, 05.12.1927, *Reply from the Chairman of the Special Body of Experts to the Secretary-General*, 2.

In an attempt to stop the circulation of the critical memorandum the Head of the Social Section under the League's Secretariat, Dame Rachel Crowdy, methodically discredits Dr. Luisi's claims and concludes the following:

I cannot help feeling that if the memorandum on her point of view is circulated to the South American Committee, it may give the impression that the Secretariat - which I imagine should take no part in such a matter - is trying to discredit a report which the Council has thought fit to accept and publish and which was prepared by Experts nominated by the Council³³

Crowdy clearly tried to avoid the potential crisis of the Secretariat coming across as divided, by using the force of the organisational hierarchy to sanction the validity of the report's conclusions. She invokes the authority of the Council and argues that the report's findings were not only sanctioned but also the will of this leading organ. In doing so she also gives the highest institutional seal of approval to the body of research carried out by external experts. These two examples from internal affairs clearly illuminate how key actors involved in this inquiry, tried to protect the validity of the report in the eyes of their organisational superiors, but also how they sought to silence critical voices, hereby making the Secretariat appear undivided, by rallying up institutional support for the report's findings.

As mentioned earlier this battle was not only fought internally but also in the public sphere through external lines of communication. The New York Times published an article describing the South American delegates' claims that the report:

gave a rough whitewashing to the Anglo-Saxon countries while the Latins came in for a bitter and unjust criticism.³⁴

Another line of criticism came from the, at the time, famous and influential French investigative journalist Albert Londres. Through his work "The Road to Buenos Ayres" (1928) he denounced the report as being riddled with false information. Londres did not believe that abolition was a proper tool in combating the problems surrounding prostitution, because this approach did not

³³LONA, S513/20/7, 14.12.1927. *Memo de Dame Rachel Crowdy, Dr. Luisi et la Comité d'Experts*, 3.

³⁴"White Slave Report Revisited for the League", *New York Times*, 27 December 1927, p. 27.

acknowledge and engage with the root causes of the problem, these being first and foremost poverty, according to him (Knepper 2016: 144) In an article written just after the first part of the report was published, Crowdy alludes to the extensive treatment of the report by the press. In this initial article she defends the integrity of the report categorically:

Their conclusions are founded on fact. What the experts have said in their Report they have substantiated.³⁵

In a later article of hers regarding the report, she nuanced her categorical stance. In the text she alludes to some of the more ideological aspects of the research, claiming:

Even if one does not enter into the moral or hygienic side of the question, it is easy to realize how terrible this evil is.³⁶

Crowdy is not denouncing the factual basis of the report but acknowledges a moralistic and social hygienic layer in the text. Bringing in these sources, I am not trying to evaluate the factual integrity of the report's findings as this is neither possible nor within the scope and theme of this article. I've engaged with these sources because they, in relation to the overall examination of the report, give a nuanced perspective on the League's use of inquiries. Despite these critical voices, the scale of the inquiry was unprecedented and gave the League a "scientific" basis for swaying nation states towards the abolition of state sanctioned prostitution. The findings and conclusions of the report aided the League in passing influential anti-trafficking conventions which laid the groundwork for later international anti-trafficking efforts led by the UN (Metzger 2007: 73-74). As I have described earlier, the ideal behind these official inquiries was to give an unbiased foundation on transnational questions where the member states were divided. When examining this specific inquiry, this idealised objective seems to have been somewhat compromised. This should serve as an important example of the symbiotic relationship between the League and non-governmental interest groups,

³⁵ Crowdy, "The Humanitarian Activities of the League of Nations", 157.

³⁶ Dame Rachel Crowdy, "The League of Nations: Its Social and Humanitarian Work" *The American Journal of Nursing*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Apr., 1928): 351-352.

and the pragmatic compromise of conducting large-scale transnational research with limited funds and in areas that lay outside what was perceived as being the core objectives of the organisation.

Conclusion

Researchers always operate within a specific historical and cultural context. The leaders of this investigation and the majority of the investigators conducting the field work, were drafted from activist interest groups with very specific notions of the intersections between politics and morality. Their report constructed new systems of knowledge about the hierarchical power relations within the field of sex work and in doing so produced a strong reductionist categorisation of the different actors involved in this work, placing part of the blame for this international “problem” in the hands of abnormal-minded criminals hardwired for delinquency.

Furthermore, it made prostitution into a corrupting force with the potential of degenerating the health of humanity. The analysis of their knowledge production shows how this worldview acted as a prism, through which this problem was interpreted, and solutions were proposed. It is not possible, within the scope of this article, to make categorical conclusions about whether this process was without a doubt intentional, but the source material indicates that this process was, to some degree, a product of a conscious strategy by the leaders of this investigation. Looking at the wide-ranging criticisms it becomes clear that the inherent bias of the research group clashed with continental European (French) and South American notions of sexual morality and understandings of the phenomenon of prostitution within society. This should serve as an example of the inherent difficulty of the Secretariat in embodying their formal ideals of impartiality of their research, working in the interests of the collective international community. By appointing outside experts with activist motivations and strong Anglo-Saxon notions of morality, the inquiry became limited in its understanding of the wide-ranging customs and cultural attitudes towards sex work that characterized the international community.



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