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PROSTITUTION AND CRIMINALITY IN BUDAPEST DURING THE DUALIST ERA

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the relationship between prostitution and crime in Budapest during the Dualist era, based on prisoner registers, police reports, and contemporary statistics. The analysis shows that prostitutes were convicted primarily of property-related offences, especially theft, receiving stolen goods, and embezzlement, while violent crimes accounted for a relatively small proportion of cases. At the same time, numerous proceedings concerned administrative violations, such as clandestine prostitution, indecent behavior, or failure to comply with medical examinations. The study highlights the fact that the practices of the Morals Police – including raids, special registers, expulsions, and continuous surveillance – contributed to the criminalization and stigmatization of prostitutes. Social marginalization, economic vulnerability, and police corruption kept this group caught in a cycle of exclusion, recidivism, and dependence on the sex industry.

Keywords: prostitution, criminality, morality police, criminalization, social marginalization.

Introduction

Through social prejudice against prostitution and mechanisms of official surveillance, the general public came to assume a connection between prostitution and criminality¹. Although the criminological study of marginalized groups and women began only in the 1960s, theories linking the two phenomena had already emerged during the Dualist era. László Buza maintained that prostitution and crime were closely interconnected: some prostitutes became offenders, while others drifted into prostitution as a consequence of criminal acts². This idea can also be traced back to the influence of Cesare Lombroso³, who regarded prostitution as the typical manifestation of female criminality⁴. Although the explanatory power of these theses was later seriously called into question, their influence contributed to the predominance, in Dualist-era Budapest, of the classification of prostitutes as a deviant and criminal category⁵.

By contrast, the new school of criminology that emerged at the turn of the century regarded crime as a consequence of social and economic conditions⁶. Its Hungarian representatives – such as Rusztem Vámbéry⁷ and Imre Pauer⁸ – rejected the biological determination of criminality and instead sought its causes in social structures. Similarly, the statistical investigations by Sándor Konek and Béla Földes highlighted the complex effects of both external and internal factors.⁹ Several authors – including Kornél Tábori, Vladimir Székely, and police experts – also emphasized the interrelationship between prostitution

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¹ It was no coincidence that police detective Róbert Szathmáry asserted that “prostitution is a breeding ground for crime”. Szathmáry 1931: 6.

² Buza 1908: 23.

³ Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) olasz kriminológus és orvos volt, aki leginkább a született bűnöző elméletéről vált már a kortársak között is széles körben ismertté. Nézeteit sokan illették kritikával.

⁴ Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) was an Italian criminologist and physician who became widely known even among his contemporaries primarily for his theory of the born criminal. His views were subjected to extensive criticism.

Lombroso and Ferrero divided criminals into five categories – born, habitual, occasional, passionate, and insane criminals – and maintained that potential criminals could be identified by anthropological methods. They considered their deportation, life imprisonment, or treatment in hospitals and psychiatric institutions necessary and, ultimately, even proposed their extermination. Lombroso – Ferrero 2004: 180-190; 222. Király-Máthé-Mezey 2007: 349.

⁵ R. Zs. 1893: 232; Kármán 1913: 181-183; N. N. 1892a: 344.

⁶ Elemér Kármán, Hungary's first criminal pedagogue, founded the Institute of Criminal Pedagogy in 1915. In the course of its activities, the institute placed considerable emphasis on identifying the causes of offending. Stipta 2007: 443. Király-Máthé-Mezey 2007: 348.

⁷ Rusztem Vámbéry played an important role in introducing criminology into the Hungarian university curriculum through his work *Criminal Law (Büntetőjog)*, published in 1913 while he was a Privatdozent at the Royal Hungarian University. Vámbéry 1913: 5-8.

⁸ Pauer 1890: 54; V. S. 1896: 326. In an article published three years later, Pauer examined Lombroso's theories in relation to women and concluded that prostitution constituted the basis of female criminality. P. S. 1893: 405-408; 409-410; Kármán 1913: 183.

⁹ Erdős 2018: 6.

and crime¹⁰. In contemporary legal discourse, Gábor Kemény described prostitution as a “breeding ground” for crime¹¹.

International scholarship has drawn attention to the murders of prostitutes: Judith Walkowitz analyzed the London cases of Jack the Ripper, while Aaron Freundschuh examined the murder in Paris’s Rue Montaigne¹². In Hungary, the subject has been addressed by several authors and in connection with the murders of Verona Végh and Elza Mágnás, Mónika Máty and Roland Perényi examined the criminal dimension of prostitution. In her study, Réka Völgyi analyzed five murders of prostitutes, referring to the victims as the “martyrs of street corners”¹³. The present author, meanwhile, examined in his doctoral dissertation the distinctive group of prostitutes who committed criminal offences, contemporary efforts at prevention and reintegration, and the issue of trafficking in women¹⁴. These studies are important also because they attach faces and individual human fates to the history of prostitutes.

The general conclusion of the scholarship is that prostitution and criminality were closely connected; nevertheless, a prostitute cannot automatically be identified as a criminal offender¹⁵. Roland Perényi’s comprehensive synthesis, *A bűn nyomában* [In Pursuit of Crime], explores the diversity of crime during the Dualist era¹⁶. The present study therefore focuses on the structure of the offences committed by prostitutes involved in Budapest’s sex industry and on the measures taken by the police against these women. The analysis seeks to determine which offences were most commonly committed by prostitutes in Budapest during the Dualist era and how the capital’s morality police operated. Drawing primarily on prisoner registers and other secondary sources, I examine the means by which the authorities monitored and sanctioned members of this social group and how these practices contributed to their criminalization. My fundamental hypothesis is that criminal offending among prostitutes was primarily a consequence of social marginalization and existential vulnerability. Secondly, the operation of the capital’s morality police served not merely to maintain public order but also contributed to reinforcing social norms by rendering deviance visible and stigmatizing prostitutes.

The Morality-Policing Activities of the Budapest Metropolitan Police

Within the Budapest Metropolitan Police, the Morality Police Office, commonly referred to as the prostitution division, was responsible for enforcing the regulations governing prostitution, protecting public morals, licensing and inspecting establishments of prostitution, and issuing certificates of good conduct¹⁷.

¹⁰ In 1908, the two authors published several volumes of reportage: *Sinful Budapest* (*Bűnös Budapest*), *The Secrets of the Thieving Underworld* (*A tolvajnép titkai*), *Immoral Budapest* (*Erkölcstelen Budapest*), and *The Wretched and the Scoundrels: Criminal Women* (*A nyomorultak, gazemberek. Bűnös nők*). Kornél Tábori also published his police reports in a book series entitled *Tales of the Lame Devil* (*Sánta ördög meséi*). Perényi 2009: 210. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the term “reporter” denoted a police correspondent.

¹¹ Kemény 1939: 3.

¹² The murders of the New York prostitutes Helen Jewett and Mary Rogers are also well documented. Jewett’s murderer set fire to both her and her room. The police succeeded in apprehending the perpetrator, but he was ultimately acquitted. Srebnick 1997. Mary Rogers was murdered on 28 July 1841. Her body was found in the Hudson River; according to the coroner’s report, she had been beaten and bound before being raped. Cohen 1998. The Hungarian press reported on the two cases only in 1931 and 1968: *The Butterfly of Broadway is Dead* (*Meghalt a Broadway pillangója*). *8 Órai Ujság* 1931. aug. 19. 7; *The Guardian Angel of the Safes* (*A páncélszekrények őrangyala*). *8 Órai Ujság* 1931. augusztus 19. 7; *Magyar Ifjúság* 1968. augusztus 8. 15.

¹³ Máty 2003; Perényi (szerk.) 2014: 5–8. In her study, Réka Völgyi set out to portray the prostitute as a victim, as well as the world of criminality associated with prostitution, through the cases of five murdered prostitutes: Anna Manicza, Ágost Gernedics, Mária Bjelobaba, Teréz Müller, and Johanna Schwarcz. She discussed the typology and frequency of the offences committed, the representation of the criminal image in the press, and the assumption of the role of victim. She examined the individual murders at the microhistorical level as case studies, drawing primarily on press sources. Völgyi 2020: 5–6.

¹⁴ Tóth 2025: 213–354.

¹⁵ During the Dualist era, the legal activity of prostitutes who had obtained registration cards was made possible by regulations enacted at the level of local government. Alongside them, however, there were also numerous so-called clandestine prostitutes, whose illegal activities posed a serious challenge to the police.

¹⁶ Perényi 2012.

¹⁷ A bejelentő-hivatalok felállítása. *Közbiztonság* 1911. 1. 16; Az állami rendőrség ügyintéző hatásköre. Magyar Belügyminiszter. 90.089/1919. B. M. sz. *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1920. 7. 158; Katona 1994: 48–50. In the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, the Budapest Metropolitan Police was regarded as the principal guardian of regulated prostitution. Following Act XXXVI of 1872 on the unification of Budapest, the institution of the metropolitan police was also reorganised, and its operation was regulated by Act XXI of 1881. Its jurisdiction extended over the entire inner and outer territory of Budapest and was later expanded to include the municipalities of Újpest, Rákospalota, Kispest, Pesterzsébet, and Csepel. The Budapest Metropolitan Police cooperated closely with the gendarmerie, the border police, and the police authorities of Fiume and other cities. Kozári 2005: 270; Pálosi 1927: 2. During Elek Thaisz’s tenure as chief of police (1873–1884), the Budapest Metropolitan Police was still divided into seven districts: N. N. 1933: 5; Botos 2015: 53. In all cases, I cite the legislation from the following online database: <https://net.jogtar.hu/ezer-ev-torvenyei>.

The regulations and other “police measures” concerning brothels and prostitutes precisely defined the duties of the police: conducting medical examinations, supervising public order within and around establishments associated with prostitution, and preventing indecent conduct in public places¹⁸. The police were also required to ensure that persons under the age of seventeen were not employed, that closing hours were observed, and that loud musical entertainment was prohibited. These rules, however, were often enforced only formally: brothels frequently continued to operate after closing time with the knowledge of the police. Prohibited forms of conduct included loitering in the streets, wearing indecent clothing, and soliciting men¹⁹. The authorities also vigorously prosecuted clandestine prostitution, the illegal operation of brothels, and cases of procuring²⁰.

Measures against prostitution in Budapest gained new momentum in the autumn of 1908, when the Morality Police Office moved into the police building on Ó Street, where it was able to perform its duties under more modern conditions²¹. Before a prostitute could be issued a registration card, the Administrative Department provided her with a certificate of good conduct; from the 1890s onwards, between 700 and 1,000 such documents were issued annually²². Although most of the corresponding card files have been lost, the surviving documents attest to the strict administrative control exercised over prostitution.

Some of the best members of the detective corps served in the Morality Police Office: in 1900, twenty-six of the corps’ 122 plain-clothes and uniformed detectives dealt with prostitution-related cases²³. District police chiefs were responsible for inspecting prostitutes and brothels and for closing down illegal establishments²⁴. As the capital grew rapidly, however, the size of the police force failed to keep pace, thereby hindering effective law enforcement. Reforms were required: between 1881 and 1914, the number of serving police personnel increased from 620 to 3,147, including 246 detectives²⁵. The professional competence of the police also improved, which was all the more necessary given the steep rise in the number of criminal offences.

Several ministers of the interior, including Gyula Szapáry, believed that the struggle against prostitution consumed an excessive amount of police resources and that the authorities should instead focus their attention on other matters. Nevertheless, successive chiefs of police sought to curb prostitution by introducing further regulations. In 1910, for example, Dezső Boda also placed female performers under the supervision of the morality police, as they were frequently suspected of using their professional activities as a cover for providing sexual services. Contemporary public opinion consequently regarded them as prostitutes and stigmatized them as immoral²⁶.

Even a brief overview of the operation of the morality police cannot omit police abuses and cases of corruption. Although the authorities attempted to conceal them, episodes preserved in the press and archival records shed light on the interconnection between prostitution and corruption²⁷. Prostitutes, the managers of brothels and coffee houses, and the proprietors of entertainment venues frequently secured the uninterrupted operation of their businesses by regularly bribing public officials. Linka Leskovits’ testimony from 1866, for example, exposed the functioning of this system: prostitutes paid the coffee houses, which used part of the sums collected to bribe police patrols²⁸. A similar practice was suggested by the case of the Aranyperc coffee house in Buda, where the proprietor organized prostitution while the police turned a blind eye to the activity²⁹.

¹⁸ *Szabályok* 1867; *Szabályrendelet* 1885; *Szabályrendelet* 1909; *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1897: 280; BFL IV.1303f. 1861.X.642. *Rendszabályok a bordélyházat, bíró nők számára*; BFL IV.1303f. 1861.X.642. *Rendszabályok a kéjhölgy számára*; BFL IV.1303f. 1861.X.642. *Rendszabályok a ker. biztosok számára*; BFL IV.1303f. 1861.X.642. *Másolat 47/el.*

¹⁹ *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1897: 276. The same procedure was followed in other parts of Europe. Wimshurst 2014: 111.

²⁰ *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1897: 253; 276. *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1898: 194. Czaga et al. (szerk.) 1995: 304; Anka 2010: 56.

²¹ *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1908. 65.1352. In 1940, the Morality Police Department moved to new headquarters at 41 Szövetség Street in Budapest’s District VII. Haraszthy 1947: 2.

²² *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1897: 200; *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1898: 148.

²³ Their numbers remained unchanged into the 1920s. A közigazgatási bizottság ülése 1923. április 9–én. *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1923. 20. 972.

²⁴ *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1897: 193. BFL IV.1303f. 1861.X.642. *Rendszabályok a bordélyházat, bíró nők számára* 1861.

²⁵ Vörös 1984: 12–14; Vörös 1997: 175.

²⁶ Új rend a mulatókban. *Népszava* 1912. 303. 7; Boda az erkölcs–csősz. *Népszava* 1908. 302. 6.

²⁷ Császtvay 2000: 212; BFL VII.5.c. 1919.03835. A. bp. kir. büntető törvényszék. *A magyar állam nevében!* Budapest. 1925. nov. 25.

²⁸ BFL VI.1.b. 21416.1876. *Jegyzőkönyv. Felvételzett Budapest főváros rendőri főkapitányi hivatalánál 1876. évi április hó 8-án.*

²⁹ BFL VI.1.b. 15821.1876. *Határozat.* Budapest, Thaisz Elek. 1876. április 6. In another case, in 1866, coffee-house proprietors paid police officers 10 forints to ensure that their prostitution-related activities were not disrupted. BFL IV.1303f. 1865.1429.1866.573. *Nagyméltóságú főtárnok mester B. Senyey Pál. Nagyméltóságú Főtárnokmester. Pest. 1866. március 28*; BFL IV.1303f. 1865.1429.1866–573. *A nagyméltóságú m. k. főtárnok–mester úrnak Pest. 1866. március 29.*

The Budapest Metropolitan Police attempted to deal with cases of corruption internally, but the press periodically brought them to public attention. In 1910, for example, a prostitute filed a complaint against a police official identified as Károly V., who, in exchange for bribes, postponed or waived punishments and failed to carry out expulsions. The investigation established that several hundred crowns had been paid in bribes, and, following the case, the officer “voluntarily” resigned from the force³⁰. In 1913, proceedings were initiated against a police officer named Sebestyén for regularly collecting “protection money” from prostitutes³¹. Although these cases do not provide a complete picture of corruption, they clearly demonstrate that police officers responsible for prostitution-related matters were by no means immune to the phenomenon.

The exact number of corrupt police officers is unknown, but it is certain that only some of them supplemented their income with bribes, which came not only from prostitutes but also from the managers of brothels and coffee houses. Such payments frequently ensured that operating licenses were issued more rapidly. Károly Vörös interpreted the phenomenon as a symptom of the transformation of the human body into a commodity³². Although these cases are known primarily from press reports, they accurately reflect the close relationship between police corruption and prostitution.

The greatest public controversy surrounded the career of Elek Thaisz (1820–1892)³³. Appointed police chief in 1869, he may have developed closer connections with prostitution through his marriage, although historiography has not yet adequately clarified either the role played by his wife in prostitution or Thaisz’s own involvement in it. It is nevertheless a fact that the press repeatedly accused the chief of police of accepting bribes. Kálmán Mikszáth also criticized him, comparing him to a “Turkish pasha” and a “corporal of irregular constables”³⁴. During the 1880s, police corruption was also discussed in parliamentary debates and interpellations, although the minister of the interior promised only an internal investigation³⁵. It can also be clearly established that the centralization of the issuance of prostitution registration cards and operating licenses effectively placed control of the capital’s sex industry in the hands of the chief of police³⁶. The centralization of decision-making does not, however, automatically imply an abuse of power, although it does give rise to suspicion. The question has yet to be conclusively resolved.

From the Detection of Prostitutes to Arrest

As discussed above, the morality police were responsible for detecting prostitution-related offences, investigating their underlying motives, and apprehending the perpetrators. Preventive policing measures did not yet exist at the time, although raids were used to identify individuals who violated the regulations, including clandestine prostitutes³⁷. The size of the police force did not permit continuous surveillance, and investigations therefore remained intermittent. Although these operations generated numerous complaints and attracted criticism in the press, an annual average of 250 prostitutes operating illegally were arrested between 1909 and 1914³⁸.

The press, particularly newspapers associated with the labor movement, repeatedly condemned police excesses and arbitrary conduct, emphasizing that innocent women were also publicly humiliated after being accused of prostitution. The police could become suspicious merely based on a woman’s outward appearance, such as dyed hair or a painted face. Such police arbitrariness was also illustrated by the case of Katalin Grünwald, in which Minister of the Interior Gyula Szapáry acquitted a woman who had been wrongfully convicted³⁹. Similar scandals were caused by cases reported in *Népszava*, in

³⁰ Erkölcrendészet, amellyel zsarolni lehet. *Népszava* 1910. 299. 5.

³¹ Fotografiák a pesti rendőrségről. *Népszava* 1913. 222. 10.

³² Vörös 1997. 172.

³³ Viktor Tátrai summarized his career in a relevant study published in 2023, thereby obviating the need for a detailed account here. It is sufficient to note that one recurring element in the career of Thaisz, who was subjected to considerable criticism during the period, was the allegation of corruption arising from his purported involvement in prostitution. Tátrai’s research demonstrated that these accusations could not be substantiated. In his interpretation, they were primarily connected to Thaisz’s marriage, which transgressed contemporary social norms. Tátrai 2023: 23. Lásd még: Tábori 1909: 45; Tarr 1976: 66.

³⁴ A főkapitány. *Országos Hírlap* 1898. 15. 1–2.

³⁵ *Képviselőházi napló* 1881: 254, 311, 366; *Képviselőházi napló* 1885: 70–73.

³⁶ Forrai 2003: 436–437.

³⁷ Gellért 1929: 5; FővKözl 1916: 395; A razziák és az összekötözött emberek. *Népszava* 1926. 47. 10.

³⁸ Madzsar 1928: 586.

³⁹ In his report, Elek Thaisz continued to maintain that Katalin Grünwald had been recorded by the police authorities as a “work-shy and sexually immoral woman.” MNL OL K 150 1874.III.5.28131. *Budapesti főkapitány Grünwald Katalin és budai lakosnőnek*

which police officers assaulted prostitutes or detained innocent passers-by⁴⁰. Although these sources may occasionally have exaggerated, the possibility that such abuses genuinely occurred cannot be excluded.

Street patrols changed shifts every four hours and followed predetermined routes while monitoring prostitutes, beggars, vagrants, and urban groups engaged in various occupations. The police operated a network of informants that included porters, coachmen, and employees of hospitality establishments⁴¹. The information obtained through this network contributed to proceedings against prostitution. The police classified and categorized prostitutes, who were regarded as deviant elements by virtue of their very existence, much like beggars or those deemed unwilling to work, since pauperization was frequently equated with immorality and criminality⁴².

The identification of offenders was facilitated by distinctive physical marks and tattoos, which the police regarded as symbols of a criminal existence⁴³. Among the cases documented in the nearly 1,500 prisoner registers examined for this study, 158 prostitutes had permanent scars or physical deformities, providing evidence of the violence and deprivation of everyday life (Table 1). Most permanent injuries resulted from cuts, blows, or gunshot wounds. For example, an entry from 1920 recorded that the imprisoned person had been shot through the left hand⁴⁴. Such injuries occurred on almost every part of the body⁴⁵. In other cases, traces of medical intervention were recorded. A third category consisted of physical changes caused by illness, including blindness and scarring resulting from smallpox. The category of “unknown origin” included general descriptions such as “scar” or references to burn injuries⁴⁶. Although no general conclusions can be drawn from these records, they vividly illustrate the environment and everyday dangers confronted by prostitutes. Permanent injuries and bodily marks alike were traces of fear and vulnerability, highlighting the precarious nature of prostitutes’ daily lives.

Table 1. *Distinctive physical marks of prostitutes serving sentences of detention or imprisonment, by principal part of the human body, 1874–1920*

Category	Head		Neck		Torso		Chest		Abdomen		Upper limbs		Lower limbs		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Assault	25	33.33	6	22.22	2	100.00	4	66.67	1	50.00	21		3	37.50	62	39.24
Medical intervention	2	2.67	2	7.41			1	16.67	1	50.00			1	12.50	7	4.43
Illness	3	4.00													3	1.90
Of unknown origin	45	60.00	19	70.37			1	16.67			17		4	50.00	86	54.43
Total	75	100.00	27	100.00	2	100.00	6	100.00	2	100.00	38	100.00	8	100.00	158	100.00

Source: BFL VII.101.d; BFL VII.102.a; BFL VII.103; BFL VII.104.a; BFL VII.106.

Individuals arrested for minor offences were recorded by the police in a “black book”⁴⁷. Detention generally took place in communal rooms, where prostitutes were confined together with members of other

panaszos folyamodványa tárgyában. 1874; MNL OL K 150 1874.III.5.28131. *Nagyméltóságú m. kir. Belügyminisztérium!* Budapest 1874. szeptember. 22.

⁴⁰ Részeg detektívek betyárkodása. *Népszava* 1912. 158. 7; Mellerné–Miskolczy 1907: 136–137.

⁴¹ Gellért 1927: 23.

⁴² Perényi 2012: 72–73, 76, 78, 80.

⁴³ N. N. 1892b: 384; N. N. 1930: 17. Photographic records were introduced in 1887, while fingerprinting was adopted from the beginning of the twentieth century. The collections of the forensic museum – most of which were destroyed during the Second World War – also attached particular significance to crimes involving prostitutes. *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1897: 147; Tábori 1909: 23; Katona 1994: 121; Ernyes 1994: 159–160, 192. Perényi 2012: 58, 70.

⁴⁴ BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1920.7304.

⁴⁵ BFL VII.104.a. fogoly.1905.771. BFL VII.104.a. fogoly.1910.567.

⁴⁶ BFL VII.104.a. fogoly.1905.755.

⁴⁷ Krecsányi 1911: 36.

lower social strata, while defendants involved in more serious cases were placed in solitary cells. District police headquarters could detain suspects for a maximum of twenty-four hours, while the Budapest Metropolitan Police Headquarters could hold them for up to three days; this period could be extended only with the authorization of a prosecutor or judge. The maximum duration of pre-trial detention was set at fifteen days⁴⁸. During interrogations, many women gave false names or attempted to mitigate their situation by recounting stories intended to arouse sympathy. Taken together, the sources demonstrate that prostitutes were constant targets of police surveillance and that legal proceedings and social stigmatization continually operated hand in hand.

Criminal Adjudication and Penal Enforcement

The Budapest Metropolitan Police also exercised judicial authority: petty-offence cases were handled by district police headquarters and specialized police courts. The Police Juvenile Court, established in 1908, dealt primarily with cases involving underage prostitutes, procurers, and other vulnerable children⁴⁹. The authority cooperated closely with the municipal guardianship authority and patronage organizations. The predominance of prostitution-related cases among those heard by the court was evident: in 1915, 467 girls were brought before it, 409 of whom were demonstrably engaged in prostitution. Between 1916 and 1919, several hundred juveniles were similarly brought before the court, the majority of whom were also suffering from venereal diseases. Police reports from this period emphasised the effects of wartime conditions: relations between soldiers and prostitutes recruited from among young female domestic servants and women in other occupations were regarded as the principal cause of “clandestine prostitution”⁵⁰.

The Central Police Criminal Court for Public Security and the Morality Police Criminal Court, both established in 1911, adjudicated cases involving violations of prostitution regulations. The morality police court heard several thousand cases annually, primarily those concerning prostitutes and brothel keepers⁵¹. The Experimental Criminological Department (Kísérleti Kriminológiai Osztály, KKO), established during the Hungarian Soviet Republic, sought to investigate the social and psychological dimensions of crime⁵². Its members regarded prostitution as a consequence of capitalism and advocated its eradication.

A double standard was applied to women in judicial and police practice: they could expect more lenient punishment for certain offences, but harsher penalties for dishonoring the family, committing adultery, or engaging in clandestine prostitution⁵³. In addition to imprisonment⁵⁴ and fines⁵⁵, expulsion was a common sanction imposed on clandestine prostitutes who were not legally resident in “Budapest. Each year, it affected several thousand people, including approximately two thousand juveniles⁵⁶. The police regularly resorted to this measure in cases of “clandestine prostitution,” “procuring women,” or violations of brothel regulations. Those awaiting expulsion were accommodated in the police barracks on Mosonyi

⁴⁸ By the end of the nineteenth century, a clothing-disinfection oven had also been installed in the police building to improve sanitary conditions. *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1897: 147, 188–189; Katona 1994: 121; Herke 2002: 46–52; Stipta 2007: 446, 448.

⁴⁹ Pekáry 1911: 523.

⁵⁰ *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1916: 275, 269; *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1917: 263, 281; *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1918: 143; *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1921: 284, 297, 320.

⁵¹ According to the minutes of the Administrative Committee’s meeting in June 1911, the Morality Police Criminal Court adjudicated cases involving petty offences committed through failure to comply with the regulations concerning prostitutes, that is, the “brothel regulations”. *FővKözl* 1911: 1752; Pekáry 1911: 42, 523; *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1912: 213–214; Ernyes 1994: 73.

⁵² The history of the institution is examined in detail in Lászlófi–Nagy–Trädler 2017; Erdős 2018.

⁵³ Sík 1976: 195; Galloni 1993: 5–9.

⁵⁴ In addition to houses of detention and prisons, workhouses had also been used since the eighteenth century, where inmates were compelled to perform forced labor. Act V of 1875 clarified the penal system. This gave rise to the forms of custodial punishment known during the Dualist era: the penitentiary (fegyház; inmate: fegyenc), the prison (börtön; inmate: rab), the house of detention (fogház; inmate: fogoly), and the state prison (államfogház; inmate: államfogoly). The latter was used for perpetrators of serious political offences. For criminal offences, offenders could be sentenced to between two and fifteen years, or to life imprisonment, in a penitentiary, or to between six and ten years in prison; for misdemeanours, they could receive detention ranging from one day to five years. Király–Máthé–Mezey 2007: 355, 360, 367; Lőrincz–Nagy 1997: 27.

⁵⁵ Some argued that fines should not be imposed on prostitutes. First, mitigating circumstances did not apply in the majority of petty-offence cases; second, “to punish with a fine a woman who earns money through prostitution by means of her body is appropriate neither in relation to the woman concerned nor from a higher ethical perspective”. According to the anonymous author writing in the pages of *Közbiztonság*, the state should not deprive the prostitute of her “wretched earnings”. A kihágási bíraskodás köréből. *Közbiztonság* 1911. 33. 418.

⁵⁶ Bartha 2017: 114; Szántó–Tábori 2005: 257.

Street, often for several weeks⁵⁷. The procedure – in which they were escorted out of the city in long lines, either on foot or by cart – was regarded as inhumane and was criticized by contemporaries as an uncivilized practice. During the Hungarian Soviet Republic, underage prostitutes were no longer expelled but were instead transferred to reform institutions⁵⁸.

While prostitution continued to gain ground, the aim of the police was not its complete eradication but the prevention of violations of the law and public scandals. Through regular raids, they sought to prevent both abuses connected with the sex industry and clandestine prostitution. Those who violated the regulations were arrested and expelled. The Budapest Metropolitan Police remained under constant pressure: the Lord Mayor, the Minister of the Interior, the press, and the general public all demanded the closure of brothels and the removal of prostitutes. The authorities therefore developed a form of *modus vivendi* that combined restriction with concession. As Chief of Police János Török put it, “the severity applied against registered prostitutes must not be carried too far”⁵⁹, because, at least in his view, this would lead to a decline in the number of prostitutes operating legally and an increase in the number of clandestine prostitutes working illegally and often remaining invisible to the police. This principle shaped a policing practice that sought to regulate prostitution while balancing on the boundary between criminality and legitimacy.

The Structure of Offences Committed by Prostitutes

To investigate offending among prostitutes, I drew on an examination of more than 1,500 prisoner registers held in the Budapest City Archives⁶⁰. The resulting database contains 1,619 records and, after duplicate entries had been removed, 1,361 identifiable individuals. Although the documents cover only a proportion of prostitutes who committed offences, they span a relatively long period – from the 1870s to the 1930s – and thus provide a more nuanced picture than the statistics compiled during the period. As György Auer observed in 1913, the data published at the time were generally secondary and aggregated, and therefore failed to provide a clear picture of the operation of the morality police⁶¹. Hungarian and international scholarship has likewise emphasized that criminal statistics reflect policing policies rather than crime itself, which makes the detailed information contained in the prisoner registers particularly valuable⁶².

According to the database, nearly 87 per cent of the unlawful acts committed by prostitutes were classified as felonies⁶³, 2 per cent as misdemeanors⁶⁴, and 11 per cent as petty offences (Table 2). The most serious cases therefore predominated. The overwhelming majority of convictions – nearly 70 per cent – were for theft, giving rise to the category of the “prostitute thief.” Closely related offences included receiving stolen goods (7 per cent) and embezzlement (3 per cent); together, these three offences accounted for 80 per cent of the entire database. Among the remaining cases, socially dangerous idleness, fraud, vagrancy, and petty offences against property and public security merit particular mention, as these were also regarded in public discourse as offences specific to prostitutes. Other unlawful acts accounted for only a small proportion of cases. Trafficking in women nevertheless deserves particular attention because, although deficiencies in the legal framework meant that it was rarely brought before the courts, it contributed fundamentally to the maintenance and expansion of the sex industry. Its social harm far exceeded its statistical incidence.

⁵⁷ *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1897: 194; A csavargó kapitányságon. *Közbiztonság* 1911. 20. 257–259; Katona 1994: 129.

⁵⁸ *Rendőrségi jelentés* 1899: 193; Révai 1902: 241–242; Új gyermekbíróság. *Néptanítók Lapja* 1919. 18–19. 14; A közrendészeti bizottság ülése. 1926. február 26-án. *Fővárosi Közlöny* 1926. 9. 452–457; Czebe 1929: 1277–1278; Czaga et al. (szerk.) 1995: 235; Bartha 2017: 75.

⁵⁹ BFL IV.1407b. 1889.I.1973. A főváros tekintetes Tanácsának Budapestén. Török János s.k. kir. tan. főkapitány. Bp. 1890. jan. 24.

⁶⁰ Most of the prisoner registers dating from the period between 1872 and 1933 (73.03 per cent) originate from the years 1890–1919, although a substantial proportion also survives from the period 1920–1929 (17.22 per cent). A smaller share of the records was produced between 1872 and 1889 (6.72 per cent), while the date of creation is unknown for 3.03 per cent. BFL VII.101.d; BFL VII.102.a; BFL VII.103; BFL VII.104.a; BFL VII.106.

⁶¹ Auer 1914: 309; Pálosi 1927: 87. Measuring offences committed by women was generally considered a difficult task.

⁶² Perényi 2006; Settle 2013: 236.

⁶³ The criminal offences committed by prostitutes were as follows: fraud, violence against public authority, *lèse-majesté*, theft, receiving stolen goods, embezzlement, grievous and minor bodily harm, forgery of documents, extortion, robbery, and homicide.

⁶⁴ This category included complicity as an accessory, prostitution, unnatural sexual acts, unauthorized return, disorderly conduct, offences against family status, procuring, trafficking in girls, failure to appear, breach of guard duty, escape, and aiding an escape.

Table 2. *Felonies, petty offences, and misdemeanors committed by prostitutes, by type, 1872–1933*

Categories	N	%
Theft	709	69.31%
Receiving stolen goods	72	7.04%
Embezzlement	30	2.93%
Fraud	23	2.25%
Bodily harm	10	0.98%
Extortion	10	0.98%
Violence against public authority	9	0.88%
Robbery	7	0.68%
Forgery of documents	4	0.39%
Lèse-majesté	3	0.29%
Homicide	3	0.29%
Criminal offences, total	890	87.00%
Socially dangerous idleness	38	3.71%
Vagrancy	14	1.37%
Petty offence against public security	14	1.37%
Petty offence against property	13	1.27%
Unidentifiable petty offence	11	1.08%
Petty offence against public decency	8	0.78%
Insult	5	0.49%
Fighting; petty offence against public order	2	0.20%
Excise offence	1	0.10%
Defamation	1	0.10%
Price gouging	1	0.10%
Petty offences, total	108	10.56%
Prostitution	7	0.68%
Unauthorized return	3	0.29%
Procuring	3	0.29%
Unauthorized return	2	0.20%
Complicity as an accessory	2	0.20%
Aiding an escape	2	0.20%
Disorderly conduct	1	0.10%
Offence against family status	1	0.10%
Trafficking in girls	1	0.10%
Failure to appear	1	0.10%
Breach of guard duty	1	0.10%
Escape	1	0.10%
Other offences, total	25	2.44%
Total	1023	100.00%

Source: BFL VII.101.d; BFL VII.102.a; BFL VII.103; BFL VII.104.a; BFL VII.106.

Since the prisoner registers do not cover all offences committed by prostitutes and relate only to a smaller group of “prostitutes”. I supplemented the analysis with Ervin Pálosi’s data for the period between 1909 and 1925 (Table 3). Pálosi presented unlawful acts by type, revealing that in the majority of cases – 67.01 per cent, or 81,958 instances – proceedings were initiated for indecent conduct. The police regarded the mere presence of prostitutes as a provocation, and it is therefore unsurprising that this was the most frequent charge. Clandestine prostitution ranked second, accounting for 13.53 per cent of all unlawful acts, or 16,545 cases. Raids against clandestine prostitution became particularly frequent during the First World War and in the 1920s, especially in 1916 and 1924. This was followed by failure to undergo a medical examination (7.59 per cent, 9,278 cases) and violations of registration regulations (4.36 per cent, 5,335 cases).

Every other form of unlawful conduct committed by prostitutes accounted for a negligible proportion of cases – less than one per cent. This included vagrancy, theft, receiving stolen goods, unauthorized return following expulsion, embezzlement, and violations of hotel regulations, all of which were closely connected to the lives of prostitutes. A comparison between Pálosi’s data and those contained in the prisoner registers reveals a conspicuous difference. The prisoner registers are dominated to a far greater extent by offences such as theft, which was particularly closely associated with prostitutes during the period: alongside murders of prostitutes, the press highlighted “prostitute thieves,” while police chronicles likewise primarily perpetuated their image.

The offences reported by Pálosi and those recorded in the prisoner registers also present different pictures because the former published data on all unlawful acts, including offences committed by brothel keepers, whereas the prisoner registers contain only data on prostitutes sentenced to imprisonment or detention. Although both sets of data have their limitations, they nevertheless make it possible to form a picture of offences associated with prostitution and committed by prostitutes, brothel keepers, and others.

Table 3. *Distribution of felonies, petty offences, and misdemeanors committed by prostitutes, by type of violation, 1909–1925*

Category	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	Total
Theft		27	49	55	47	39	87	55	44	32	21	90	42	73	60	29	59	809
Trafficking in girls	82	48	42	23	8	3											3	209
Procuring girls		25	42	77	22	33	41	36	16	10	8	7	3	11	8	10	16	365
Seduction of women		3	10	18				1							1			33
Vagrancy	121	39	65	73	54	55	287	123	5	14	43	51	72	64	37	50	42	1195
Rape	3				9		3	6									21	42
Clandestine prostitution	285	126	95	515	337	786	1247	2308	953	978	770	922	949	1080	1953	2201	1040	16545
Operating a clandestine brothel		14	11	65			25	28	9	20	6	26	34	39	22		39	338
Violation of brothel regulations				51	11	8	266	81		5	2		5	5		18		452
Unauthorized return	24	6	11	17	6	34	43	23	16		2	1	4	9	8	28	53	285
Embezzlement				19	3	1	6											29
Unnatural sexual acts	2		31	10			6	3	1									53
Receiving stolen goods				16	9			3	1			8		1	4			42
Failure to undergo a medical examination		82	184	103	334	484	1285	1231	1096	975	428	415	328	483	628	618	604	9278
Violation of registration regulations				26	8	3	46	7	1	5229	1	3	7		2	2		5335
Violation of hotel regulations				45	8	6	50	1		8	1			5	1	12	4	141
Failure to provide identification			65	205	39		228	6										543
Indecent conduct	10927	9384		5014	6354	5339	4462	2352	3242	2945	2263	4521	7000	59999	6998	2531	2627	81958
Other				39	376	426	378	245	358	365	249	321	279	396	534	413	297	4676
Total	11444	9754	605	6371	7625	7217	8460	6509	5742	10581	3794	6365	8723	8165	10256	5912	4805	122328

Source: Pálosi 1927: 92.

The prisoner registers also make it possible to examine prostitutes who committed offences according to age group (Table 4). According to the data, a substantial proportion of the offenders – nearly 40 per cent – were minors, although young adults, particularly those in their early twenties, also committed offences in large numbers. Minors sought to support themselves primarily through minor thefts, whereas socially dangerous idleness and, to a lesser extent, receiving stolen goods and fraud appeared among those of working age. A discernible shift occurred around the age of twenty-five: minor thefts began to recede and were replaced by more serious offences, including receiving stolen goods, fraud, and embezzlement. Although the sample under examination does not permit general conclusions, it clearly indicates that, as they grew older, these women became increasingly closely connected to criminal forms of behavior. They thus became prisoners not only of the sex industry but also of criminality.

Table 4. Age distribution of prostitutes who committed offences, according to the prisoner registers, 1872–1933

Age group	N	%
10-14	17	2,77
15-19	224	36,54
20-24	227	37,03
25-29	98	15,99
30-34	36	5,87
35-39	11	1,79
Total	613	100,00

Source: BFL VII.101.d; BFL VII.102.a; BFL VII.103; BFL VII.104.a; BFL VII.106.

According to the court judgments, the sentences imposed on the prostitutes recorded in the prisoner registers depended on the seriousness of the offence and were consistent with the severity of sentences imposed on other offenders. In less serious cases, they received detention of a few days or one week, whereas in more serious cases they were imprisoned for several months. In criminal cases, 48 per cent of sentences were no longer than one month, 24 per cent ranged from two to five months, and 22 per cent lasted between six months and one year (Table 5). Sentences exceeding one year accounted for approximately 5 per cent of cases and were imposed primarily for fraud, theft, receiving stolen goods, embezzlement, grievous bodily harm, or murder. In cases involving petty offences, more than 65 per cent of sentences were shorter than one month, nearly 30 per cent lasted between two and five months, and only approximately 5 per cent ranged from six months to one year. In the case of other unlawful acts, sentences lasting between six months and one year together already exceeded 18 per cent; these were imposed primarily for trafficking in women, complicity as an accessory, and prostitution.

Table 5. Length of sentences imposed on prostitutes who committed offences, by type of felony, petty offence, and misdemeanor, 1872–1933

Offence / Length of sentence imposed	7 days	2 weeks	3 weeks	4 weeks	1 month	2 months	3 months	4 months	5 months	6 months	6 months - 1 year	1- 5 years	2 years	2,5 years	3 years	4 years	Total
Fraud	5	3				5	1	2			4					1	21
Violence against public authority	2	1			2	2	2										9
Lèse-majesté					1			1					1				3
Theft	118	73	33	14	72	71	48	41	6	59	96	11	24	5	1	2	674
Receiving stolen goods	15	6	2	1	11	5	5	3		10	8						66
Embezzlement	15	6			1		1	2			3						28
Grievous bodily harm	2	1				1	3	1			1						9
Minor bodily harm	2	1															3
Forgery of documents		1	1					1			1						4
Extortion	6	2								1							9
Robbery	1	2			1		2										6

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Attempted homicide			1														1
Murder						1	1			1	1						4
Felonies, total	166	96	37	15	88	85	63	51	6	71	114	11	25	5	1	3	837
Price gouging							1										1
Insult	6																6
Vagrancy	4	3	4		1	2		1		1							16
Petty offence against public security	5	5	1			2											13
Petty offence against public decency	1	2	1						1		1						6
Socially dangerous idleness	2	7	7	1	5	4	7	1	1	3							38
Petty offence against property	11	1															12
Excise offence (tobacco monopoly)	1																1
Fighting; petty offence against public order								1									1
Unidentifiable petty offence	1	1					2										4
Petty offences, total	31	19	13	1	6	8	10	3	2	4	1						98
Complicity as an accessory										2							2
Prostitution	3	1			1						1						6
Unnatural sexual acts	1				2												3
Unauthorized return	1				1												2
Disorderly conduct			1														1
Offence against family status	1																1
Procuring						1		1									2
Trafficking in girls										1							1
Failure to appear	1																1
Breach of guard duty		1															1
Aiding an escape						2											2
Other offences, total	7	2	1	0	4	3	0	1	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	22
All offences	204	117	51	16	98	96	73	55	8	78	116	11	25	5	1	3	957

Source: BFL VII.101.d; BFL VII.102.a; BFL VII.103; BFL VII.104.a; BFL VII.106.

The prisoner registers occasionally also recorded the conduct of prostitutes in prison, particularly in the case of repeat offenders. Most of these entries painted a negative picture: the women were described as “not morally reformed”, “indifferent to her punishment”, or “disorderly”⁶⁵. This suggests that perceptions of certain prostitutes within the prison walls did not differ from those prevailing in the outside world. Alongside disorderly prostitutes, there must also have been women about whom no such entries were made because their guards may have regarded them as exemplary prisoners. The sources provide glimpses into the lives of several recidivist prostitutes. Antónia Neumann was repeatedly imprisoned for multiple thefts, receiving stolen goods, and embezzlement, with sentences ranging from several weeks to ten months⁶⁶. Several years elapsed between her convictions. The data clearly indicate that she followed a similar pattern of offending both at the age of twenty-four and after the age of thirty. Róza Novometzki (née Ács) had a similar history: she was repeatedly convicted of theft from a young age, and her life was shaped throughout by prostitution and criminality. She operated primarily in Jászberény and Budapest⁶⁷. Malvin Balog, born in Miskolc in 1888 and known as Peregi after her marriage, was repeatedly imprisoned for theft during both her twenties and her thirties⁶⁸. Her trajectory likewise demonstrates that recidivist prostitutes had no genuine means of escaping this cycle.

⁶⁵ BFL VII.101.d. rab.I.4691; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1901.482; BFL VII.101.d. rab.I.3907.

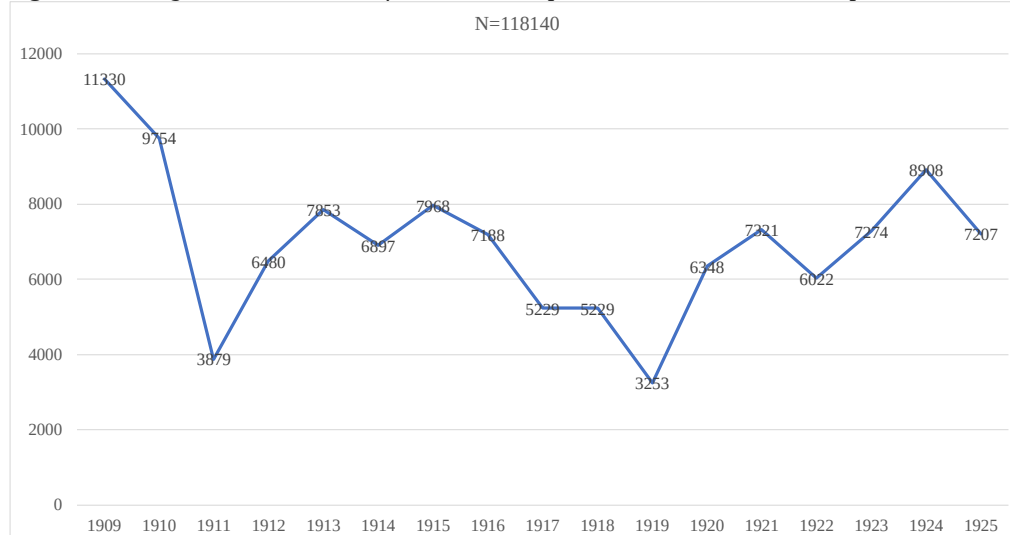
⁶⁶ BFL VII.101.d. rab.I.2134; BFL VII.101.d. rab.I.5195; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1899.144; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1903.69; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1904.1920.

⁶⁷ BFL VII.101.d. rab.I.3287; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1904.1414; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1904.2265; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1904.2561; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1906.2166; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1916.609; BFL XVI.3. fogoly.1919.3422; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1901.1269.

⁶⁸ BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1913.617; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1920.5302; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1922.6552; BFL VII.102.a. fogoly.1918.2396.

Meanwhile, the number of complaints and arrests involving prostitutes amounted to several thousand each year⁶⁹. Although the sources indicate a decline in 1911 and 1919 – presumably because of data loss – the First World War and the early 1920s brought an upward trend, although the figures still failed to reach the level recorded in 1909 (Figure 1). From an international perspective, the number of arrests increased during the nineteenth century in several major European cities, including Helsinki, Cambridge, Glasgow, and London, but declined during the interwar period. The scholarship explains this development by the gradual improvement of public security.⁷⁰

Figure 1. *Changes in the Number of Prostitutes Reported to the Police in Budapest, 1909–1925*



Source: Pálosi 1927: 91.

The offences committed by prostitutes both corresponded to and diverged from the broader patterns of contemporary criminality. An examination of the prisoner registers indicates that offending among prostitutes was primarily characterized by offences against property – above all theft (“prostitute theft”), receiving stolen goods, and embezzlement – whereas offences against the person remained relatively rare. The large body of violations consisted not only of conventional criminal offences but also of regulatory infractions, such as “indecent conduct” and “clandestine prostitution”, through which prostitutes were criminalized by virtue of their mere presence. The operation of the Budapest Morality Police Office also demonstrates that criminalization was continually reproduced by policing practices themselves: regulations applied rigorously but selectively, raids, networks of informants, and administrative registers – including registration cards and the “black book” – became instruments for disciplining urban space. Police excesses and mistaken identifications reveal the risks inherent in everyday enforcement practices. The double standard applied in law enforcement – the particular severity directed against women – was also reflected in the sanctions imposed: short periods of detention, fines, and, above all, expulsions deepened their social exclusion. The high proportion of juveniles and the frequency of recidivism were consequences of pressures of subsistence and a stigmatizing institutional environment. Police corruption emerged as a structural phenomenon: protection payments, negotiations surrounding licenses, and official tolerance produced a dual system of governance based on a balance between public severity and practical toleration. This arrangement simultaneously ensured the containment of public scandals and the permanent vulnerability of prostitutes. Permanent injuries and physical marks indicate that these were connected partly with the prostitutes’ own offending and partly with criminality arising from this “occupation.” Nor can it be overlooked that offending among prostitutes emerged at the intersection of marginalization, economic vulnerability, and exposure to policing. The statistical data currently available reflect both patterns of offending and police priorities; in this context, the prisoner registers and court judgments also provide evidence of the techniques of criminal adjudication.

⁶⁹ Individual prostitutes were reported to the authorities on multiple occasions, which accounts for the high number of cases.

⁷⁰ Järvinen 1993: 612; Howell 2000: 386; Braber 2009: 270; Slater 2010: 338–341.

Overall, it may be concluded that prostitutes in Budapest during the Dualist era were both objects of police surveillance and subjects within a social process in which regulation, corruption, and moral panics collectively produced the figure of the “prostitute-criminal.” The offences committed by members of this group were consequences of marginalization and vulnerability. These findings also indicate two directions in which the research should undoubtedly be continued. First, microhistorical examinations of individual life trajectories are indispensable. Second, international comparison is required in order to distinguish local specificities from the general patterns of modern urban governance.

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