

Global Bodies Global Lives

A Transnational and Global History Seminar Publication



Issue 1

'Controlled Bodies, Bodies in Control'

2022

Oxford

Foreword

Global Bodies, Global Lives?

What does public scrutiny of the First Ladies of the United States have in common with the experiences of Japanese-American soldiers during the Second World War? How does the cultural significance of Shah Abbas’ crown inform our understanding of the symbolism of the Fez in nineteenth-century Ceylon? Can we find commonalities in the experiences of Chinese widows under Mongol rule and Jewish immigrants arriving in New York City in the late nineteenth century? How might the joint study of dancers from Mumbai and Korean activists reframe our understanding of acts of resistance? This publication proceeds on the basis that comparisons, contrasts and connections between these subjects are worth exploring, and that significant benefits for our understanding of the global past can result despite their cultural, spatial and even temporal distance.

The principal subjects of global history are often found at the macro scale: empires and environments; corporations and commodities. As subject matter, these topics have guided the questions we ask about the past, and how (and where) archival work is approached. For all their historiographical offerings, global historians are still grappling with an enduring tension: how to reconcile the study of ‘big’ topics with that of smaller analytical units. Exploring the individual – easily abstracted in its physical and emotional aspects – is one such subject. Moreover, this is a subject matter that is necessarily subjective too.

‘Global Bodies, Global Lives’ throws down the gauntlet: can a reciprocal reading of individual experiences and the often-abstracted notion of ‘the global’ be established? Can shifting the focus of global history to the individual and corporeal level enable a balancing of the subjectivity of individuality with the objectivity of macro forms of analysis? Can individual lives and localities elicit new understandings of the past through their comparison, contrast, or connection? These questions formed the basis of a ‘Call for Submissions’, issued in March 2020 for a conference – initially intended to be hosted in Oxford that Summer, organised by the Oxford Transnational and Global History Seminar (TGHS).

TGHS has provided a space for graduate students at Oxford and beyond to



engage with and to discuss topics of ‘global’ and ‘transnational’ history for over a decade. Initially operating as a thematic counterpart to the long-standing and Faculty-led ‘Imperial and Commonwealth History Seminar’ (now the Global and Imperial History Seminar), its aim has been to provide graduate and early career researchers the opportunity to present works-in-progress, as well as receive feedback from peers in a collegial environment. In 2018, TGHS hosted its first graduate conference, an event which brought together early career scholars to compare approaches to the study of global history.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020 halted the third iteration of that event, but presented new opportunities for scholarly exchange. For as long as the seminar has been running, the convenors of TGHS have recognised the limitations in fostering global conversations (in terms of participants, approaches, and accessibility) through a seminar rooted in a single place. But as lockdown mandates restricted mobility, and limited inter-personal engagement, these limitations ultimately proved a catalyst to reconsider how the seminar might foster different types of dialogue amongst a global community of scholars. The decision to invite those who had submitted abstracts to the conference to pen longer-form essays ultimately generated an asynchronous dialogue both between disparate scholars and literatures which form the basis for this new publication.

After three drafts, three lockdowns, and (at least) four covid variants, these articles will be published across three distinct, thematic issues over the course of 2022. “Global Bodies; Global Lives” seeks to address some of the manifold ways globality has impacted people and personhood and the investigations of our contributors overlap a variety of historical terrains: conceptually, temporally, and spatially. Each issue will feature a short introduction by a guest reviewer.

The first focuses on the question of physical control – as imposed upon bodies by norms and regulations – and asks whether control can be reclaimed by the individual through social and spatial mobility. The second brings our attention to the imbrication of contested agencies, at the differing yet interlocking levels of the family, the community, and the broader political culture. A third and final issue examines how the body can be understood as a spatial entity, whose geographical positionality at the local, national, and global level is central to identity formation.

We are delighted to share the results of this collaborative work with you. It is a bold new step forward for the seminar, and we are honoured that so many scholars



have chosen to present their work in this format. But we hope it represents an initiative that also supports the commitment of TGHS to providing a space for scholarly dialogue between graduate students and early career researchers. We hope you find these essays as provocative, enlightening, and as enjoyable as they have been for us to read and reflect upon since those abstracts first landed in the conference Gmail account twenty-four months ago.

Olivia Durand, Callum Kelly, and Sean Phillips

TGHS committee 2019-2020



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Issue One • **Controlled Bodies,
Bodies in Control**

Introduction

Dr. Mara Keire

In their two very different essays, Avio Edoardo Elia and Freya Peters analyse how the meaning of bodies change depending on place and audience. Elia considers how government regulation and geography shaped women’s sexualized labour in Banaras, Shivdaspur, and Mumbai over the course of the twentieth century, while Peters discusses the self-presentation of first ladies from Jackie Kennedy to Hillary Clinton in their travels abroad. While the women in these two studies could not diverge more starkly in terms of their social status, they all experienced moments when the cultural significance of their bodies exceeded their autonomy; yet the authors also show how both sex workers and first ladies could use societal expectations to create opportunity.

Many of these opportunities came through movement. Elia and Peters both demonstrate that travelling between localities allowed women to shift their self-presentation and concurrent economic possibilities. Commuting between Shivdaspur and Mumbai, sex workers moved away from brothel prostitution and toward sexual dancing. The more public act of dancing in turn brought in audiences allowing for further travel: a return to ritual religious dancing in Banaras and new erotic secularised performance abroad in Dubai, Israel, and European countries. While their initial reasons for relocation usually came from new regulatory controls, Indian women used their passage from place to place to create new spaces for more lucrative work.

By contrast, politics not regulation shaped the travels of first ladies. Exemplars of “soft power”, first ladies still answered to the needs of the state when planning where they would travel. Whether on the campaign trail or on diplomatic missions abroad, first ladies needed to embody symbolically the message of their husband’s presidency. Deviation from white heterosexual middle-class norms met with a flurry of criticism from constituents, the press, and during political briefings. Peters shows, however, that within those limited norms, first ladies sought to express their individuality and affirm programmes such as women’s fitness that carried personal meaning and bolstered their prestige at home and abroad.



Most importantly, Elia and Peters explore how women limited by regimes of regulatory and cultural control found ways to stretch those boundaries. Recognising the constraints women faced, they never romanticise their adaptability in reshaping their lives. Instead, they bring needed scholarly insight into the tension between exercising control and experiencing its imposition.

December 2021

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Sex work regulation and displacement in Banaras: from the red-light district to Mumbai dance bars.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences of girls and women in the Shivdaspur red-light district in Banaras (or Varanasi, India) and expands on a recent scholarship into previously neglected histories of a city long depicted as a Hindu sacred centre. Drawing on data from ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, this work aims to navigate the tension between international anti-trafficking campaigns and local law enforcement, outlining its effects on the women’s geographical movement within and outside the city’s boundaries. In particular, after the enactment of the anti-trafficking laws (SITA) in 1958, the “traditional” dancing, entertainment, and sex work communities were forced to vacate their houses in the then red-light area of Dal Mandi, at the centre of the old city. Many moved to the “infamous slum” of Shivdaspur, on the city’s outskirts, which rapidly became a new hub for prostitution. During this crucial urban transition, which radically changed the geography of sex workers in Banaras, some women moved to Mumbai, establishing family and new financial relationships between these two cities. Since then, much of the next generation has continued to travel between Banaras and Mumbai to satisfy the market demand for female “dancing bodies”, without, however, relinquishing their ritual role in the Hindu temples of Banaras, the “holy city”.

Essay

Introduction

The city of Banaras is on the western bank of the sacred river Ganges, in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Over time, British colonial narratives, Brahmanical hegemonic rhetoric, Indian nationalists and scholars have eulogized and depicted Banaras as the most sacred city in Hinduism and as a very prestigious pilgrimage centre, with two thousand sanctuaries and a half million sacred images (Singh 1997). Beginning in the late 18th century, and continuing until the early decades of the 20th century, the normative image of the “sacred city” became deeply intertwined with the religious landscape and the ritual geography specified in various mythological and sacred texts, such as the *Puranas* (Desai 2017) that still play an important role in the ongoing urban development policies today.

The discursive and intellectual inheritance of the city as an eternal and “holy site” has often overshadowed the complexities of a dynamic socio-anthropological reality within which its urban dwellers constantly negotiate meanings and respond to internal and external pressures. For example, several scholars have explored the historical trajectories of the city by looking at the local responses to British trade, land taxation, and education (Bayly 1988; Cohn 1987), or by investigating the effects of colonial rule and urban modernity on Banaras architectural landscape (Dodson 2012). Other studies have focused on a perspective that looks at the city’s “sacred spaces”, either in relation to its maps, images, and practices of representation (Gaenzle and Gengnagel 2006) or by analyzing the regulation of contested religious places through moral policing (Lazzaretti 2020). However, focusing on the contemporary social and urban texture of the city, Banaras reveals a very interesting story of interconnectivity with global phenomena such as international tourism, consumption, social exchange (Huberman 2012), market-driven displacement policies and its effects within the geographical boundaries of Shivdaspur, its red-light district (Minestroni and Avio 2020). In fact, since India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi promulgated the “smart city” policy in 2014, following the example of Kyoto (Japan), the local administration pushed the urban landscape of Banaras towards further and increasingly rapid change. In particular, during the last six years,

the Municipality has advocated a requalification and “beautification” project¹ to reinforce its Hindu religious significance as a holy place and pilgrimage destination, trying to hide sex work from public view (Papayanis 2000; Hubbard 2004). Nevertheless, the nexus between the urban texture of the city and the displacement of entertainment and sex work communities traces its origins back to the last century, when Banaras’ most famous red-light district was located at its geographical core.

In fact, Dal mandi (from the English “doll” and “*mandi*”, market in hindi) located a few paces away from the most important Hindu temple of the town (*Kashi Visvanath mandir*) and adjacent to the Chawk police station, had long been the central point not only for sexual pleasure but also for socio-religious and commercial activities. During the Mughal period, the area was the abode of entertainment for aristocrats, the cultural urban elite and the rich merchants who visited the *kothas* (salons) to enjoy the fine arts and the aesthetic refinements embodied and performed by the once well-known Hindu and Muslim courtesans (*tawaiifs* and *baijis*), and prostitutes (*vesyas*). However, soon after the Mutiny (1857), the urban and societal reforms enacted by the local administration under surveillance of British colonial power reshaped the cultural fabric of the city and with it, its local mores. During the 1920’s, social reformers’ and Hindu nationalists’ agendas, aligning with the Victorian precepts of the time related to female sexuality, strictly condemned the ritual dancing and the participation of “prostitutes” during religious and popular festival of the city, codifying both courtesans and sex workers under the umbrella term of “fallen women” (*patit*). The intertwining of these ideological and political forces resonated during the 30’s in the promulgation of SITAs (Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act) which contributed to erode the social status of courtesans, pushing them towards the margins of Banaras political life along with sex workers. However, this heterogeneous female worker community resisted the implementation of the laws in Dal Mandi until well after the Independence in 1947.

But again in 1958, Banaras witnessed a more stringent enactment of international anti-trafficking laws and the enforcement of moral policing prohibiting

¹ The biggest contradiction of the “beautification” process in Banaras is the destruction of some of the oldest neighbourhoods in the old city. It is interesting to note that the same happened during British colonial era, when after the Mutiny, entire *mohallas* of north Indian cities were completely uprooted in the rebuilding and modernizing process of the urban landscape. (See for instance Sharar, Llewellyn-Jones, and Oldenburg, 2001; Dalmia 2017; Dodson 2012).

prostitution in the centre of its “sacred geography” (Singh 1997). These policies have eventually driven the courtesan and sex worker² communities towards the city’s marginal areas.³ During this delicate phase of urban transition, which lasted for at least three decades (from the 1960s to 1980s), women involved in sexual labour activities had to relocate within new “geographies of sex” (Brown and Browne 2016), such as the red-light district of Shivdaspur. At the same time, this spatial shifting pushed them to renegotiate the relationship of power with local actors such as landowners, residents, clients, pimps, traffickers, local administrators, police officers, and NGO activists, while simultaneously positioning themselves within the broader dynamics of the global socio-economic sex trade and entertainment industry.

Thus, by locating Banaras at the centre of broader networks, I argue that the international regulation of sex work and the urban transformation processes still act as vectors of displacement for the members of these communities which today live in the peripheral red-light district of Shivdaspur, wherein they negotiate and resist institutional and informal pressures through their voices and every-day resistance strategies.

International regulations and provincial negotiations

The League of Nations’ International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children of 1921 included years of world-wide abolitionist discourses and reflected the “moral panic” of the time about white women being transported to brothels in colonies (Tambe 2009a, 52). The brothels were perceived as hubs of broader networks of sexual exploitation and the bill, to which India was a signatory, aimed at suppressing these centres of human trafficking, in line with legislation in others parts of India and “the rest of civilised world” (Legg 2014, 160). At the beginning of the 1920s, the Acts against prostitution trafficking were enforced within the British colonial geography, firstly in Burma and Ceylon, and later in other Indian states and provinces, such as Bombay and Calcutta in 1923. In the following years,

² I have preferred to refer mainly to the term “sex workers” instead of “prostitutes.” In fact, in some recent studies and through the definitions of the “prostitutes” themselves of their activity, the concept of “sex work” has been widely adopted by various scholars, researchers, social workers, health practitioners, and policy makers to depict prostitution and other related activities in a less judgmental and more self-determining way (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998).

³ Govt. of India, Regional Centre for Urban and Environmental Studies, “Classification of city into zones”, p. 19.

the debate around the abolition of prostitution developed at different scales and levels, blending in with existing anxieties about space and morality (Legg 2014). Starting from the late 19th century, social purity, medical health, and moral values spawned by Victorian ideology found common ground in North India with the Brahmanical vision of respectable female sexuality, both defining it as confined to the conjugal family unit (Whitehead 2003, 154). By the 1920s, female sexuality became deeply intertwined with the modernist conception of the nation and its moral, political, and geographical boundaries. Against the backdrop of a new chaste and desexualized womanhood idolized by Indian middle-class nationalists (Chatterjee 1989), prostitutes and “dancing girls” became the antithesis of purity and self-sacrifice.⁴ Hence, “fallen women”, stigmatized and criminalized by nationalists, social reformers, and early women activists were to be both ideologically and spatially marginalized from the “body politic” (Tambe 2009b) and its imagery.

The sexuality of these women, before the inception of Victorian mores on the local urban texture, had long been embedded within the socio-religious dimension of the city for specific auspicious rituals, public celebrations or popular festivals patronized by the urban elite. It was now out of control and dangerous for the modernising project fostered by social institutions and the new municipalities (Dalmia 2017).⁵ The abolitionist demands for more stringent laws against prostitution intersected with the formation of new municipal boards⁶ and gained momentum in the Government of India Act (1919). Under the diarchy system following this Act, the departments of local self-government, education, medical administration, public health, and agriculture were transferred to provincial administrations, where they were run by elected Indian ministers, who gained further power in the reforms of 1935 (Legg 2014, 17). Regional governors had control over

⁴ Interestingly, even middle-class women nationalists were vocal in their demand for the abolition of prostitution. Internalising the ideal of women’s sexual purity, they placed prostitutes and dancing girls outside the pale of Indian womanhood on whose behalf they claimed to speak. (See for example, Dewan, *Tawaifnama*, 355).

⁵ I suggest that this premise is fundamental to understand the societal transition about the “self-cleansing” and modernizing plan undertaken by Banaras administration at the beginning of the 20th century, since it still plays an important role in the on-going urban development policies today.

⁶ Debate about ousting the once famous community of courtesans and sex workers from the city centre of Banaras found legitimacy in the restructuring of urban and social fabric of the city, which followed the Municipalities Act of 1916. This Act continues to govern UP even today (See for example, Dalmia, *Fiction as History: The novel and the city in modern North India*, 130-131).

most policies relating to sex work and its regulation.

The Calcutta SITA (Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act) became a model for similar legislation enacted in different parts of the country through the 1930s. Although the former United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh or UP) passed a SITA in 1933, some municipalities had to wait for the law enforcement. In March 1936, the UP minister for education stated the Act would be implemented in stages and only in city areas such as Banaras, Lucknow, and Agra, where there was very little popular backing, interested parties reacted with fierce opposition.⁷ This meant that the League of Nations summary for 1936-1937 could only report a partial application of the UP SITAs.

In other instances, local authorities could not tackle trafficking in women and children because of a lack of executive power, social ostracism, and moral ambiguities related to women's consent in the trade.⁸ Subsequently, official police forces stated that human trafficking still existed, but many cases remained unreported or undetected because of a popular belief that trafficking of women was a remedy for “disproportion of the sexes” given that many of them were sold as “willing wives.” Police authorities reported interstate trafficking of young women in North India as a sexualised and gendered form of migration and sex-ratio equalisation,⁹ classifying commercial sex trade cases as “cases of violence and abuse”. By the 1940s, implementation of the SITA laws was still partial, and the arbitrary nature of the classification of offences continued over the following years.¹⁰ The discrepancy between the text of the laws and their application suggests that international legislators did not consider the enforcement practicalities at the time of formulation (Tambe 2009a, 123). Instead, it seems the laws functioned rhetorically to counteract the global “moral panic” of the time related to female sexuality, leaving the matter unsolved locally, both in terms of statistical accounts and law implementation.

⁷ For example, the Legislative Council of United Provinces opposed the act because it had been proposed by a Christian member, namely, Ahmad Shah (Legg 2014, 162).

⁸ *Ivi*, 157-159.

⁹ *Ivi*, 158.

¹⁰ The UP police practice of classifying cases that are clearly related to ‘trafficking for prostitution and exploitation of others’ as “other offences” is clear in the Official Gazetteer of Banaras, 1965. In the Section “Law, Order and Justice”, the sub-section “Sex Crimes” only mentions rape cases, without any references to SITA cases: “The average number of cases of rape committed during the nine years ending 1960 was about 4 per year, the highest number being 7 in 1957.” (See: Uttar Pradesh Gazetteer, Varanasi, 1965, page 252).

Law enforcement in Banaras: controlling trafficking or immoral bodies?

In May 1950, in New York, independent India was once again a signatory of the United Nations Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. Enacted by the Indian Parliament in 1956, a new SITA came into force across India on 1 May 1958.¹¹ While prostitution *per se* was not considered a criminal offence, the law aimed to inhibit or abolish commercialised vice, namely the traffic of people for prostitution as an organised means of living. SITA criminalized trafficking of minors and women for prostitution, indulging in prostitution in or near a public place, including places of worship, and seducing or soliciting for prostitution.¹² While the Central Government had drawn up the law, its implementation remained with state governments and municipalities.

Following SITA's enactment, it became increasingly difficult for the many courtesans (*tawa'if and bais*) who performed for clients in salons to prove that these establishments were not premises for prostitution. Districts famous for the singing and dancing of courtesans and for other sexual services provided by sex workers, such as Dal Mandi (Doll Market) in Banaras, Chowk in Lucknow, and Hira Mandi in Lahore, became subject to police raids (Maciszewski 2007, 124). In most North Indian cities, the municipal authorities finally drove them out after 1956 (Dalmia 2017, 128).

Despite the prohibitions outlined by international legislators, courtesans and female sex workers operating in Dal Mandi in the late 1950s and 1960s opposed the local implementation of the police eviction orders with specific resistance strategies. For example, Sharafat Ali Khan, an old accompanist musician resident in Dal Mandi, recently recounted:

During the 1960s and 1970s our *mohalla* (neighbourhood) had plenty of 'duplicate' women. In other words, there were common sex workers (*jism farosh karnevali*) pretending to be courtesans (*tawaiifs*). On the one hand, their increasing presence became a

¹¹ Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act (SITA), 1956, amended in 1986 under the name ITPA.

[http://ncpcr.gov.in/Acts/Immoral Traffic Prevention Act \(ITPA\) 1956.pdf](http://ncpcr.gov.in/Acts/Immoral%20Traffic%20Prevention%20Act%20(ITPA)%201956.pdf) (last accessed 04/2020).

¹² The law reflects Anglo-American legal-sexual beliefs that criminalises all non-spousal, non-marital, interpersonal sexual activities (see Kotiswaran, *Sex work*, 260).

threat to those women who were really skilled at singing and dancing, while on the other, it was a smart strategy to circumvent the new law.¹³

Mr. Khan recalls the period when sex workers and courtesans in Dal Mandi were both seeking for social upward mobility to resist SITAs and the daily illegitimate police practices. In fact, the more influential and rich courtesans who owned their palaces counter-balanced sex workers attempts to ascend social hierarchies by adopting a similar strategy: they formed, together with some male musician accompanist, the *Gayka Sangh* (Singers Association). The aim was, on the one hand, to intercept social acceptance and respect within public opinion, and on the other, to file legal petitions against the security forces' brutal enforcement of the law as the main obstacle preventing social rehabilitation and redemption. They also decided to appeal to the local vernacular Hindi newspaper *Aj* as follows:

Today, instead of being employed to improve our lot, the law is being misused by the police to barge into our houses and issue threats to make our lives worse than they are. We feel that the government should entrust the implementation of the law to sisters engaged in social work. They will understand our problems and apply the law in a humane manner...¹⁴

The rhetorical attempt made by *Gayka Sangh* was addressed to the District Magistrate of Banaras without sorting any reasonable effects. Police raids and eviction orders intended to “cleanse” the area of immorality, seal courtesans’ own properties and confiscate sex workers’ rented brothels, increased during this period. Nevertheless, concerns about the inefficacy of administrative measures to tackle the sex trade and the connivance of police with brothel keepers and landlords remained a prominent feature of the *Aj* newspaper narrative. For instance:

Furthermore, the delay in law implementation measures contrasting women and girls immoral sex trade, have led the recently obtained progress to a starting point. In front of alcohol shops opened till late night, the people make so much noise that even the shame feels sorry. Everything happens just in front of

¹³ Personal interview with Sharafat Ali Khan, Dal Mandi, February 2018. This mood of resistance enacted by sex workers in the 1960s, mirrors their struggle to get social respectability and testifies their skilful adaptation to new social and legal circumstances.

¹⁴ *Aj*, 29 May 1958, [my translation].

police eyes. Though the courtesan-prostitutes salons have been sealed, other women involved in immoral activities keep sneaking into this infamous area.¹⁵

During this period, the boundaries between legal and illegal, moral and immoral (Gupta 1995), courtesans/entertainers and sex workers, salons and brothels, were constantly blurred on the ground by police and other social actors involved by the SITAs. Public anxiety reported by *Aj* newspaper articles also revealed the lack of any rehabilitation or re-location programme which could have stopped the spread of sex workers to respectable localities of the city.¹⁶ Again, prostitution and morality became deeply intertwined with socio-spatial politics of inclusion and exclusion.

During the 1970s, the normative space of Dal Mandi radically changed, as municipal officials and the police, together with some male residents, staged public protests in order to cleanse the area, often through extra-judicial actions. For example, local authorities confiscated some courtesans' properties because of social stigma attached to their profession and then put it up for auction,¹⁷ or in other instances, they made pressures on landlords (mostly belonging to the Seth businessmen community) who rented their buildings to sex workers. The vested interest of the local authorities was to convert the area of Dal Mandi into a “safe and clean area” dedicated to the commercial activities of emergent and respectable (*izzatdar*) middle-class business people, with whom they started negotiating political and economical power.¹⁸

The shifting boundaries between moral and legal practices (Jauregui 2016; also see Lazzaretti 2020), were embodied at the time by Inspector Ranjeet Singh, the officer in-charge of the Chowk police station from May 1970 to July 1974. He is still remembered by local residents of Dal Mandi as the “strict Inspector who cleaned the

¹⁵ *Aj*, 28 May 1958, [my translation].

¹⁶ For example, “*Vastav men yehe prashn vicharaniya hai ki bina kisi sarkari vyavastha ke ini badi samkhya men veshyaen ghar chodkar kaha jaengi?*”, “In reality, without any governmental program, where will these women go in such a big number?” *Aj*, 31 May 1958 [my translation].

¹⁷ Interview with Ahmad Khan, February 2020. According to the local newspaper *Aj*, in Banaras there were six hundred apartments where “immoral sexual activities” were being held, half of which in Dal Mandi. Cfr. “New police campaign in eradicating prostitution” [My translation] *Aj*, 10 July 1970.

¹⁸ Interview with Dawar Khan, electronic components businessman in Dalmandi, Banaras 2019.

dirtiness of the area, eradicating bad habits with efforts of any kind”.¹⁹ Even a former female entertainer and sex worker in Dal Mandi salons remembers the Inspector’s incursions into the brothels as “frightening to the extent that I decided to quit that area to move here, in Shivdaspur. Dal Mandi shop-keepers and businessman fully supported the police actions since they did not want ‘dirtiness’ (*gandagi*) dancing upon their heads. Dancers, performers and sex workers were criminalised under a unique category in the name of the law.”²⁰ Some agents (*dalal*) and criminals (*goondas*) involved in sex trafficking and operating as women’s “protector” kept operating from a control position, often hand-in-glove with local authorities and political actors.²¹ The clientele also rapidly changed as “poorer men and braggarts (*lafange*) sneaked into the salons looking only for sex, not being interested anymore in dance or entertainment.”²²

Thus, the moral policing drove many female entertainers and sex workers away from Dal Mandi as a result, while measures to tackle the trafficking of women and children for commercial sex and exploitation were not introduced. By the 1980s Banaras administration officially cleansed Dal Mandi of prostitution, and the majority of women involved in sexual labour moved to the outer and rural area of Manduadih-Shivdaspur, where they initially got protection and shelter from local and powerful landowners.²³ Interestingly, soon after, different institutional and informal coercive forces started influencing again the micro-social dynamics of prostitution, and its moral, legal and geographical boundaries. Again, at the beginning of this century, a new alliance between police officers, municipal authorities, village’s headmen (*pradhan*), commercial elites and some local residents staged public protests against the immorality of the profession to pave the way for the spatial politics of “beautification” that even today aims at transforming the red-light district of Shivdaspur into a slum-free new market and middle-class residential

¹⁹ Interview with Munne Khan, member of the Congress party and leader of the ‘Dalmandi cleansing protest’ in the 1970s, Banaras, February 2019.

²⁰ “Ranjeet Singh daroga itne bade bhayankar chape mara karte the ki mujhe yaha ana pada. Shivdaspur men akar bhi unhone chapa mara aor ham sab logon ko, bina kisi farq ke, ek category men dal diya tha.” Interview with S., former performer and sex worker, 75 years old, Shivdaspur, February 2020.

²¹ Dewan, *op.cit.*, 525.

²² Interview with a former female singer and performer in Dalmandi, Banaras, 2018.

²³ Personal interviews with Shivdaspur sex workers, Banaras 2019.

area.²⁴

Sex trafficking and NGO-led rescue operations

To the sex workers who migrated to Shivdaspur from the city centre in the 1970s, it was just a village devoted to agricultural activities, which looked like “a fearful dark jungle inhabited by spirits.”²⁵ It rapidly became a centre for prostitution and a transit hub for the trafficking of women and girls supplying Indian brothels elsewhere, in particular to Mumbai’s expanding dance bar industry.²⁶ Today, the suburb of Shivdaspur, which has little infrastructure and few health facilities, provides permanent or temporary shelter to hundreds of female sex workers and dancers, pimps, procurers, and other agents involved in the sex industry.

Shivdaspur’s women sex workers, who once occupied the lowest level of the hierarchy of courtesans, trace their origins back to the communities of entertainers from across northern India,²⁷ including Banaras. In the transformed contemporary urban, political and cultural landscape, these communities of singers and dancers have been forced to reinvent themselves as stage performers and bar dancers or veer toward prostitution, with a handful of them emerging as the elite among sex workers and brothel owners in Shivdaspur.²⁸ Other older sex workers report the high level of compulsion (*majburi*) hidden in the “hereditary caste-based profession” (*khandani peshwa*), often denouncing the involvement of police and politicians (*neta*) along the sex trade route.²⁹

While entertainment and sex work communities resettled in Shivdaspur during the 1970s, dance bars appeared in Mumbai (Chaukar 1989). Bar dancing,

²⁴ “Slum free city plan of action”, Varanasi, Regional Centre for Urban and Environmental Studies (Sponsored by Ministry of Urban Development, Govt. of India), p.95.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ This information is from an interview with Ajit Singh, chief of Gudiya Sanstha Association, Banaras, March 2018.

²⁷ Many women who presently live in Shivdaspur and engage in various forms of sexual labour, whether locally or in Mumbai, belong mostly to the *Nath* and *Kanjar* caste (*jati*) from Rajasthan, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. These communities are officially listed as Scheduled Caste (SC). Other sex workers belong to Muslim marginalised communities.

²⁸ Dewan, *op.cit.*, 359.

²⁹ Western Bangladesh and Nepal constitute the two major areas from which women are trafficked to Banaras. In an interview, one said: “I reached this place from Asansol red-light area, in Bengal. During the journey I realized that everything had already been organized through a government network. Nobody could stop this.” (S., sex worker, 45 years old, Shivdaspur, December 2019).

where sex, although part of the scene, was not compulsory, mitigated sexual labour, providing women increased negotiation flexibility with clients and bar owners (Kotiswaran 2010). During the bar dancing boom in Mumbai, women involved in sexual labour activities in Shivdaspur moved to Mumbai to earn an income with “*izzat*” or self-respect, displaying their agency and “freedom of choice.” Remembering those days, Chandra says:

When I was young, I used to travel by train from Shivdaspur to Mumbai Foras Road dance bars. It was a good opportunity to earn easy money by dancing and singing. Sex was part of the game but there were not bad clients at that time, and everything was carried out with respect. It was a different era. Today everything is changed. Whether you study or not it is very hard to get a secure job here. That is why our girls have no option than to do sex work.³⁰

With the neoliberal shift of the Indian economy in the 1990s, hotels and bars offering alcohol, entertainment, and sexual services proliferated in the Indian metropolises, such as Mumbai.³¹ The liberalization policies embraced by the Indian government in 1991 facilitated the transfer of not only consumer goods but also the spread of a new global sex market economy. An increasing number of trafficked girls appeared in Shivdaspur as the sex and entertainment industry boomed. As a result, sex workers and dancers involved in sexual labour activities increasingly moved between the “dirty and tiny brothels of Shivdaspur’s red-light area and the beautiful Mumbai dance bars and vice versa, establishing patronage and family relationships.”³² In the mid-1990s, as part of a wave of HIV/AIDS-related interventions targeting sex workers in India, the non-government organization Gudiya Sanstha established a school in Shivdaspur’s red-light area. Focusing on HIV prevention and children’s education during its initial years, Gudiya’s volunteers started a grassroots program’ through a “multidimensional perspective for woman and child empowerment”³³ to eradicate slavery and trafficking for prostitution in Shivdaspur. The NGO’s strategy

³⁰ Chandra, 75 years old, former dancer and sex worker, Shivdaspur, February 2019.

³¹ Dance bars in Maharashtra are a relatively recent phenomenon with reportedly 24 dance bars in 1985-86 but almost 1,300 bars by 2005, of which only 300 were properly licensed by the state. Almost 42 per cent were from communities which traditionally relied on sex work or dancing for sustenance. (Kotiswaran 2010, 108).

³² Interview with P., *kathak* dancer and agent (*dalal*) in Shivdaspur, Banaras, March 2020.

³³ Interview with Ajit Singh, chief of Gudiya Sanstha, Banaras, February 2018.

also aimed at helping women against social ostracism and stigma while fighting the local administration and criminals involved in the sex trade at the same time.

After 2000, there was a resurgence in international moral panic regarding the trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation. This translated into a shift in international funding from HIV related projects to supporting local initiatives intended to eradicate “sex slavery” and child prostitution (Tambe, 2009a, 128). The global anti-trafficking discourse veered towards the ‘rescue and rehabilitation’ of children and women from prostitution, and the sex and entertainment industry. This resulted in Gudiya’s decision to tailor its agenda to fit in with the flow of international funds. In 2005, it conducted raids in Shivdaspur in the name of the rescue and rehabilitation of minors³⁴ leading, eventually, to a deterioration in the relationship between female sex workers and the social activists.

When in 2001 the Manduadih police station Inspector Shukla banned all the activities in Shivdaspur, included singing and dancing³⁵, we initially welcomed Gudiya’s effort in helping us with food and children’s education, but finally they cheated us. They got money from abroad in the name of our children’s uplift ... and then they betrayed our trust. In 2005, they raided the area and some sex workers have been arrested. I was jailed for six months and I have lost my girls. Since then, 12 years have passed, and we are still facing legal cases.³⁶

Tulsi, a former sex worker and female brothel keeper who was jailed in 2019 during Indian political elections rallies, explained how the NGO members eventually acted as quasi-state actors, formally pretending to “empower female sex workers and their children” but conducting unauthorized raids that often ends up replicating the structural violence exerted on their bodies by the Indian State and its apparatus. Thus, at the beginning of this century, a cluster of stratified forces shaped once again sex work and entertainment female community activities. In particular, Shivdaspur sex workers highlighted a vast network of corruption between the police, procurers, real estate market companies and residents. Anita, a woman who presently works in the red-light district told me that the police had come under the influence of people

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ The ban lead again to the reshuffling of internal hierarchies between the two different social groups, since the prohibition of singing and dancing performances in Shivdaspur pushed the female entertainers and dancers community to adopt other strategies of survival.

³⁶ Tulsi, female brothel keeper trafficked from Nepal, 55 years old, Shivdaspur 2018.

“whose grandparents once sold their land to us willingly” but who now wanted the land back. She revealed that already in 2001, the police and local administration had been involved in trying to displace them and take over their properties –while a Shivdaspur residents Committee and a right wing political party were encouraging protests– because of the increase in land values in the area.³⁷ This statement confirms how institutional and informal actors, driven by commercial and real estate lobbies, exert increasing pressure on the urban poor, often making “the vulnerable more vulnerable” (Hubbard and Scoular, 2009).

Unfortunate conjunction and Shivdaspur younger women’s resilience

In March 2005, soon after the NGO’s rescue operation in Shivdaspur, the Government of Maharashtra imposed a ban on dance bars.³⁸ On the one hand, the arguments on the ban revolved around sexual morality and issues of trafficking, and on the other hand, the constitutional principles of Equality and Right to life and livelihood. The ban, together with police action in Shivdaspur (following the local NGO-led rescue operation in October), affected the personal security and the geographical movement of the sex workers and dancers who, before the ban on dance bars, used to travel to Mumbai to make a living from erotic dance performances in hotels and bars. In this period, their social mobility was increasingly limited by these unfortunate conjunctures.

Though few dancers from Shivdaspur stayed in Mumbai after the ban, many others went back to their families in Shivdaspur’s red-light area. Because of police picketing, curfews implementation and relentless patrols against sexual labour

³⁷ See, for example: “Sex workers resent police high-handedness”, *The Times of India*, 17 November 2001. One female brothel-keeper I met in Shivdaspur, added that even today some local people and real estate agents still pressure the administration to abolish brothel-based prostitution from the urban landscape of Banaras.

³⁸After a long legal battle, in March 2006, the Bombay High Court struck down the ban as unconstitutional. Once the Bombay High Court quashed the petition, the Government of Maharashtra filed its appeal to the Supreme Court (Special Leave Petition (C) No. 7993 of 2006), challenging the judgement. While, the petition is still pending in the Supreme Court, it has ordered continuation of interim stay on the processing of licences and on bar dancing. This has meant that the bars continue to remain open, and women continue to work in them, except that they do not dance on the stage. Women continue to work in these bars as waitresses, as singers, or the new phenomenon that has emerged where they ‘stand’ in front of the stage or by the side of the dining tables (Thatra 2012, 59).

activities, which soon after led to the killing of a local agent (*dalal*) and trafficker,³⁹ many girls had no option but to rely on their performances at wedding receptions, private parties, and musical programs held during Hindu religious festivals in Banaras temples, mostly located in the sacred core of the city, such as “Baba Shamshan Nath” (Shiva as the Lord of the Cremation ground) at the “Manikarnika Ghat”. Since then, the livelihood of the younger generation of Shivdaspur women has strongly depended on their ritual dancing performances that even today forces us to reconsider how this female social group members continuously negotiate and subvert hierarchical and spatial relations that occur locally (De Neve and Donner 2007). In fact, positioned within the sacred space of the city, the girls self-direct and dramatize their identity against the background of popular music, spectacular choreographic and scenographic effects, while rehabilitating their “dangerous” and “contagious” sexuality within this particular religious context. Though the “absence of shyness, necessary for public performances, is directly associated with sexual promiscuity” (Shrestova 2008, 209) by the male public attendants, outside the brothel, many young women seem to manage their profession and their bodies autonomously, controlling and even subverting any “unilateral right of direct sexual use of a woman’s body” (Pateman 1997, 204).

We like performing at ‘programs’. It’s our art. When, for any reason, we cannot perform, we ask our men to send us money. If they don’t do it, we won’t meet them anymore...They do not live with us since they are already married (smiling). Sometimes we also have sexual intercourse with other customers we meet at temples or at wedding programs. We travel to Mumbai during the wedding-off season. Our bodies are the sole means of our livelihood that we and our family can count on.⁴⁰

Thus, ritual performances and weddings seem to be a tool for empowerment for the new generation of Shivdaspur dancers and sex workers. They inherited this socio-religious role from their female ancestors, resisting throughout generations the institutional and patriarchal forces that morally censored and legally abolished the “prostitutes” dancing and singing in temples and festival occasions through the

³⁹ “Sex trade infamous broker killed in encounter”, [My translation], *Dainik Jagran*, 30 November 2005.

⁴⁰ S. 20 years old, Shivdaspur, February 2020.

enforcement of different laws.⁴¹ By ritual dancing, the so-called “city’s brides”⁴² keep alive a “tradition” which, between various disruptions, continues to give them not only public visibility but a livelihood opportunity and the access to economic sources as well.

In this scenario, the constant movement between the ghettoized red-light area of Shivdaspur and the temples located in the “sacred geography” of the city centre, and on a bigger scale the road which leads to Mumbai dance bars could be seen a struggle over power where dancers and sex workers transgress social and spatial boundaries while locally and globally adjusting to urban, economic, legal and social changes. Furthermore, exposure to the “outside world” of Mumbai hotels and bars leads some of them to even travel beyond the national boundaries. For example, several young women from Shivdaspur have recently travelled to Dubai, Israel, and European countries, to perform erotic dances and sexual activities in bars and pubs.⁴³ This reflects how the “global now” shapes their lives through increased mobility that enables the disruption of the strict social relations imposed by Indian patriarchal society and avoid the urban politics of exclusion at play in Banaras red-light area.

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⁴¹ See for example *The Devadasi Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947*.

⁴² The mediatic flow of local vernacular Hindi newspapers represents the girls who perform during such religious occasions through the term *nagarvadhu* (the city’s brides).

⁴³ Interview with D., Banaras, Saraswati Hindu Temple, February 2020.

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“What are you trying to do, ruin my political career?” The Bodies of the First Ladies on the International Stage, 1961-2001

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Abstract

American first ladies, from Jacqueline Kennedy to Hillary Rodham Clinton, were at the centre of American politics. In a non-elected role governed by political and patriarchal ideals, judgements of these women have most often been based on their impact on the presidency. This study places these women’s bodies at the forefront of historical enquiry, to assess the power and autonomy they held, and to understand more about their position. The aim is to reveal how their role was shaped by their gender, cultural expectations and public perceptions. By doing so, it examines to what extent the first ladies’ bodies were controlled by themselves, or by external factors.

Essay

No-one has truly succeeded in defining the role of first lady of America. The women who occupied the role, from the beginning of Jacqueline Kennedy’s term in 1961 to the end of Hillary Rodham Clinton’s in 2001, had a complex position to fulfil. Yet politicians, the public and the world at large expected them to not just fulfil the role, but excel at it. The first ladies found themselves having to adhere to standards that were both ever-changing yet immovable: a symbol of ideal womanhood but a real person, in tune with public opinion yet having opinions of their own, traditionalist yet modernist. On the international stage, it meant embodying the best of America, and this is the context within which I define the concept of “global bodies” in this study. Seeking to understand American first ladies as global bodies means increasing

our understanding of them and uncovering the degree to which they were capable of independently controlling their lives.

First ladies symbolise America and, by association, the president. They serve both the White House and the nation. They find themselves occupying a position of power because their husband has been voted into one, sworn in by the Constitution. They remain a constant throughout the election process, throughout the time of their husband's office, and they leave when he leaves. If successful, during a period of approximately eight years the first lady will accompany her husband on state undertakings and also carry out visits, tours and ceremonies on her own.

Although they are their own person by the time they enter the White House, they must re-establish themselves in their new position. However, there is no first lady rule book that sets out who she must be, what she must do, and what image she should uphold. Compared to their husbands – overtly male, overtly political – the first lady is caught between the twin positions of a woman in a marriage and a woman in politics. How the first ladies of 1961–2001 navigated those circumstances has often proved to be the determining factor, for both historians and the wider public, in how 'successful' or otherwise they have been deemed to be.

By its mere existence, the body of a first lady represents certain values: physicality, femininity, experience, background. Roy Porter, a prominent historian on the body, pointed out in 2001 that bodies are present through how they are perceived. "Then", he argued, that "the history of bodies must incorporate the history of their perceptions".⁴⁴ For the first ladies of this era, perceptions of them were shaped chiefly by the media, specifically television and newspapers. The ways in which they carried out their many responsibilities internationally and domestically – filmed, recorded and distributed as they were – formed the basis of people's awareness and judgements of them. But obligations of state limited their ability to independently control their lives, since how they dressed, what they said and what they did on such occasions were determined by defined protocols over which they had little or no say. With these external factors influencing the perception of the first ladies' bodies, rather than the bodies being the exclusive possession of the women who physically inhabited them, I contend that the first ladies belonged simultaneously to themselves and the world.

⁴⁴ Roy Porter, "History of the Body". In *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. Edited by Peter Burke. 2nd ed. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 208

Throughout this study, “female bodies”, “womanhood”, and “femininity” refer to the most literal physical and biological form. “Gender” refers to the binary format. I have done this purely to aid the analysis of key traditional concepts of men and women as they would have been generally perceived and understood during the era in question. I identify first ladies initially by their full names, to differentiate them from their husbands, and from that point on refer to them by their surnames.

Robert Watson contended in 1997 that Rosalynn Carter and Hillary Rodham Clinton were “associate presidents” because they attended cabinet meetings, headed policy task forces, and had offices near to government.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, Lewis L. Gould argued in 1990 that the first lady provided political and cultural assets for the president to use or manage.⁴⁶ These approaches present two historiographical issues. First, that the first ladies were only progressive, valuable or suitable because they participated in politics. Second, that their politics were only useful (and helpful to historians) because they furthered their husbands’ politics. Although these presidential historians’ approaches are a useful first step when considering the institutional history of the presidency, it is important to consider the first ladies’ experiences as separate to those of their husbands.

Nonetheless, there is a reason why historiography has often been framed in the way Watson and Gould presented it: first ladies were expected to uphold their husbands’ politics. As early as 1958 John F. Kennedy responded to Jacqueline Kennedy’s new hairstyle by exclaiming “what are you trying to do, ruin my political career?”⁷ In doing so, he was acknowledging how the first lady appeared in relation to his own political standing: the female body was inseparable to the political establishment. This corresponds with Sonya O. Rose’s assertion that histories of the body are generally concerned with “how bodies are represented and serve as symbols...and how they become the focus of political mobilisation.”⁴⁷

Mary Stuckey argued in 2010 that the presidency is “an important site

⁴⁵ Robert P. Watson, “The First Lady Reconsidered: Presidential Partner and Political Institution”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27.4 (1997): 814. Accessed 23rd October 2019 via [jstor-org](https://www.jstor.org)

⁴⁶ Lewis L. Gould, “Modern First Ladies and the Presidency”, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 20.4 (1990): 678. Accessed 8th December 2019 via [jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org)

⁴⁷ Sonya O. Rose, *What is Gender History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 24

where...national expectations of gender are performed and ritualised.”⁴⁸ Her observation applies equally to the first ladies, who undertook the performances and rituals required of them (visits, tours, ceremonies, appearances, and so on) within the framework of Western notions of womanhood and a distinctly American femininity. Their bodies may have been global, but they were first and foremost American, and thus represented particularly American ideas of nationhood. Jacqueline Kennedy, known for her “Paris clothes” acknowledged “I must start to buy American clothes” during the 1960 election campaign.⁴⁹ A *Washington Post* article from 1977 commented on Rosalynn Carter’s respectable, “American-made” and “conservative” style, which was attributed to her “poor” upbringing and life as a working woman.⁵⁰ But whether the first lady’s home town was the metropolitan Hamptons (Jacqueline Kennedy) or southern, rural, Plains, Georgia (Rosalynn Carter), in their geographic and socio-economic differences they nevertheless extolled some of the most notable Americanisms: democracy, freedom, and, especially in light of the Cold War, capitalism. Furthermore, they represented ideals such as youthfulness and modernity, and at the same time tradition and rootedness. But despite the sometimes contradictory representations, the first ladies largely adhered to an approved definition: white, married, Christian, motherly, and exhibiting commonly-accepted feminine materialistic traits such as an enjoyment of make-up, jewellery, clothes and hair styles. An encapsulation, in other words, of enshrined American values.

So, in what ways did nationality and gender curtail bodily autonomy? As symbols of American femininity, the first ladies’ bodies belonged to a wider America. On the other hand, this very symbolism was used by them to ultimately aid their power. Gil Troy, in his 2000 work *Mr and Mrs President*, theorised the concept of a “presidential couple” developing in the 1970s – 1990s – in which president and first lady essentially adopted a “co-rulership” via their personal relationship.⁵¹ This construction, however, still discussed a first lady’s body as one half of a marital duo,

⁴⁸ Mary E., Stuckey, “Rethinking the Rhetorical Presidency and Presidential Rhetoric”, *Review of Communication*, 10.1 (2010): 44.

⁴⁹ Jacqueline Kennedy, in a letter to Diana Vreeland July 1960. Accessed 7th August 2021 via Hamish Bowles, *Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years. Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum*. New York: Bulfinch Press, 2001

⁵⁰ Nina Hyde, “Rosalynn Carter’s Fashion”, *The Washington Post*, 30th January, 1977. Accessed 22nd July 2020 via washingtonpost.com

⁵¹ Gil Troy, *Mr & Mrs President: From the Trumans to the Clintons*. 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000) 389-394

and not as an independent corporeal person in her own right.

One of the main public and official duties of the first lady was to act as hostess at the White House. Here, she enacted the traditional role of an American wife – extending during state visits with their accompanying entourages, hospitality and generosity to the international community. Regardless of a first lady’s political aptitude and stature, diplomacy was key. Indeed, the first lady was considered by White House operatives to be crucial to the whole occasion. Their status as wives and mothers thus became synonymous with their political responsibilities. Historian Molly Wood supported this notion in 2005 by arguing that “foreign service wives operated within conventional gender roles that emphasised domesticity.”⁵² Going beyond mere ceremonious obligation, a first lady’s body at such events became an embodiment of their own country’s definition of traditional womanhood and wifely duty.

Of course, White House dinners, for the first ladies, were not just about fulfilling official duties. First ladies could use them to express personal identities. A useful case study is Nancy Reagan, who served as first lady during the booming consumerism and materialism of the 1980s, and had a genuine belief in “dressing for success.”⁵³ The designer gowns she chose to wear to such events were an obvious extension of the culture of the time and the policies of her husband’s administration, namely, the “rollback” of communism and a rejection of anti-capitalist values.⁵⁴ However, dressing the way she did meant that she was able to differentiate herself from her husband in a way that did not appear inherently political, nor outside the limits of her marital and institutional role – a powerful manifestation of her individuality and preferences.

In demonstrating a position of female power through the way she looked, Nancy Reagan was able to exercise a degree of control over her body. However, both press and public criticised her interest in clothes, which they saw as superficial and frivolous. In 1981, Reagan faced an issue regarding her vast, stylish, yet undisclosed

⁵² Molly M. Wood, “Diplomatic Wives: The Politics of Domesticity and the “Social Game in Foreign Service, 1905-1941”, *Journal of Women’s History*, 17.2, (2005): 143

⁵³ Barbara Silberdick Feinberg, *America’s First Ladies: Changing Expectations*. (London: Franklin Watts, 1998), 36

⁵⁴ “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union” (the Reagan Doctrine), 6 February 1985. Ronald Reagan’s Major Speeches, 1964-1989. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum. Accessed 22nd June 2020 via reaganlibrary.gov

designer wardrobe, most of which had been accepted by her without payment. One White House official declared it a “potential public relations problem.”⁵⁵ The same year, a *Washington Post* poll revealed Nancy Reagan to have the highest disapproval rating of any first lady.⁵⁶ What the first lady wore thus became political and had the power to reflect poorly on her, and therefore, by extension, the administration. Personal autonomy over their bodies was never truly disconnected from the establishment. From an international perspective, Reagan’s clothes were seen as the representation of American freedom through the ability to spend and consume material goods – a not-necessarily negative reflection of America to the rest of the world. Thus, by means of the dressed first lady’s body, American femininity communicated American values globally. First ladies embodied the nation, even when they sought a level of individuality.

The turbulent and culturally resurgent 1960s characterised Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson’s time as first lady. In the public eye, her efforts to “beautify” American landscapes were a leap forward compared to previous first lady initiatives, although the ongoing Vietnam War led to criticisms of her priorities. For example, in an encounter with Eartha Kitt during a White House luncheon in 1968, Kitt confronted Johnson on the impact of the war on young people, and appealed to their (Johnson’s and Kitt’s) roles as mothers.⁵⁷ Kitt made Johnson consider her stance as an American woman in relation to other American women, something which went beyond her looks and the projects in which she was involved. Her symbolic embodiment of the nation left her open to criticism due to perceptions of her being a maternal figure yet not acting in a maternal way. In the eyes of others, her female body, representing fertility and motherhood, was not behaving as such. The presence of her body – on the international stage whether she liked it or not – was controlled by her feminine gender rather than what she was actually doing or not doing, saying or not saying.

The first ladies themselves were certainly aware of the impact of their physical looks. In the early 1990s, after the conspicuous consumer-spending era of the Reagan

⁵⁵ Kitty Kelley. *Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Autobiography*. (New York: Pocket Star - Simon & Schuster, 1992), 364

⁵⁶ Pierre-Marie Loizeau, *Nancy Reagan: The Woman Behind the Man*. (New York: Nova History Publications, 2004), 99

⁵⁷ Lewis L. Gould, “Lady Bird Johnson”. In *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacies*, edited by Lewis L. Gould. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 514

administration, the public considered Barbara Bush a more subdued and less visible first lady. Her physical looks had a significant part to play in achieving this image, and contributed to the perception of her as a more approachable, likeable, and acceptable candidate for the position. As she herself proclaimed: “I’d like to look like Nancy Reagan... but I wouldn’t like to be like Nancy Reagan because I’m larger, different, I’m Barbara Bush.”⁵⁸ She quickly spotted the different expectations placed upon her as a result of how Nancy Reagan had presented her own physical self in the White House. Bush saw that the first lady need not be constricted by patriarchal, conventional ideas of how the female body was meant to look, and used this fact to set herself apart from her predecessors.

Bush took advantage of the public’s perception of her as a good-natured, amiable woman to aid the administration. In the Wellesley College Class of 1990 commencement speech, she said “You must read to your children, hug your children, and you must love your children...our success as a society depends...on what happens inside your house.”⁵⁹ She was also frequently photographed with her grandchildren. These are examples of the “high moral principle” and “kinder and gentler face of a nation” that President Bush set out for the administration as early as his inauguration address in 1989.⁶⁰ Barbara Bush was able to strengthen the common perception of her and convey her matriarchal identity and individuality both to America and across the globe. This move translated into actual power, as Troy pointed out: “the matronly asexualisation of Bush in public meant she could enter the Oval Office as much as she liked.”⁶¹ The maternal image Barbara Bush created for herself led to the American leadership (president and first lady) appearing to reinforce the traditional masculine and feminine gender roles, and Barbara Bush’s body was key to their success. As an example of a first lady embracing a certain feminine ideal – homely, comforting, wifely – to their advantage, Barbara Bush stood out.

Even so, she experienced criticism. Bush’s neutral stance on issues such as

⁵⁸ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President*, 324

⁵⁹ Barbara Bush Wellesley College Class of 1990 Commencement Speech, 1990. George H.W Bush Presidential Library & Museum Audio-visual Archives. Accessed 7th August 2021 via bush41library.tamu.edu

⁶⁰ George H.W Bush Inaugural Address, 20th January 1989. George H.W Bush Presidential Library & Museum Audio-visual Archives. Accessed 7th August 2021 via bush41library.tamu.edu

⁶¹ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President*, 329

the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion rights led Liz Carpenter, press secretary to “Lady Bird” Johnson to note her disapproval: “To default on women’s rights seems out of character and deeply disappointing to millions of American women.”⁶² And her Wellesley commencement speech was protested and petitioned by 150 feminist students.⁶³ So, whilst wielding a certain degree of power in the White House, she was not immune to charges amongst female public discourse that it was the wrong sort of power.

In the 1970s, Betty Ford experienced a radical physical change as breast cancer meant she underwent chemotherapy and a mastectomy. She did so publicly, with her treatments subject to ongoing coverage in the media. The implications of a “woman’s disease” on Ford’s physicality and looks is evident in her biography, where she was worried about being able to “wear the same kinds of dresses she adored – cut to accentuate her body.”⁶⁴ Ford’s subsequent experience as first lady was closely tied to her activism – she was an outspoken advocate for the Equal Rights Amendment – which was associated firmly with her personal experiences as a woman. Her experience with breast cancer showed the importance of the body to a woman in the public eye, as she contributed significantly to de-stigmatising the illness both in America and abroad through her physical presence. Her support for women’s rights did not undermine female public perceptions of her with regard to her body. On the contrary, it enhanced them, as she received enthusiastic support from feminist groups during the Ford re-election campaign of 1976. For example, through “Betty’s Husband for President in ‘76” election badges.⁶⁵

Just a year after her diagnosis, Betty Ford accompanied her husband on a state visit to China, during which she took part in a dance demonstration at the College of Art in Peking.⁶⁶ This public manifestation of her physical health was undoubtedly a powerful display, not least in the perception she created for herself of

⁶² Liz Carpenter, “Candid biography fits unpretentious first lady”, *Austin American-Statesman*, 8th October, 1989. Accessed 7th August 2021 via newspapers.com

⁶³ “At Wellesley, a Furor Over Barbara Bush”, *The New York Times*, 4th May 1990. Accessed 7th August 2021 via nytimes.com

⁶⁴ Lisa McCubbin, *Betty Ford: First Lady, Women’s Advocate, Survivor, Trailblazer*. (New York: Gallery Books, 2018), 168 and 175

⁶⁵ Presidential election campaign badge from the GOP (Republican Party) Feminist Caucus: “Betty’s Husband for President in ‘76”, 1976. Accessed 29th July 2020 via omnia.ie

⁶⁶ Betty Ford dances with a student of the College of Art in Peking, People’s Republic of China, 7th May 1975. Collection: White House Photographic Office Collection (Ford Administration), 12/6/1973 - 1/20/1977. 7062593

her own femininity and physicality successfully overcoming health and body-image issues.

It is worth exploring a little more the first ladies beyond a purely American setting. In other words, on trips abroad, where the cultural and geographical contexts weren't national but international, and where the requirements were less American and more global. Interestingly, this often meant first ladies tailoring their appearance and behaviour to the specific country they were visiting.

Patricia Nixon, at the time, was the most-travelled first lady in history. In 1972, in a temporary but official capacity, she travelled as the president's ambassador to Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Liberia.⁶⁷ The Nixon administration considered her profile significant enough that she could stand in for the president, not only in ceremonial activities, but in official and political duties too.

In Liberia, Nixon dressed in traditional national dress, demonstrating the way clothes can transcend mere apparel and reach into politics and diplomacy.⁶⁸ Historians Cornelia H. Dayton and Lisa Levenstein argued in 2012 that “women's identities depended materially and ideologically on their relationship to other women.”⁶⁹ In Patricia Nixon's case, traditional Liberian dress literally signified her relationship with Liberian women as a material reality. By connecting to women and culture of a different country in this way, she used her gender to strengthen her diplomatic image and represent one nationality embracing another. Nixon's borrowing of a nation's traditional clothing showed that gender was something that women could share through material means. And in a way that was far from detrimental to the first lady's success.

A first lady was able to control her image to a greater degree when she was acting as a stand-in for her husband than when her husband was present and taking the lead role. Diplomatic ceremonies such as the ones described above were fairly benign first lady undertakings since they were largely focused on stereotypically

⁶⁷ Carl Sfererazza Anthony, “Patricia Nixon”. In *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacies*, edited by Lewis L. Gould. 529-30. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996),

⁶⁸ Patricia Nixon's state visit to Liberia, 1972. Nixon White House Photographs, 1/20/1969 - 8/9/1974, National Archives Catalogue.

⁶⁹ Cornelia H. Dayton, and Lisa Levenstein, “The Big Tent of U.S. Women's and Gender History: A State of the Field”, *The Journal of American History*, 99.3 (2012): 798. Accessed 14th May 2020 via [jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org)

female interests: culture, children, and fashion.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the public came to welcome overseas trips, popularised by Eleanor Roosevelt, even though politicians did not expect first ladies to overtly embrace politics during these visits. Still diplomats and the public expected first ladies to act within the normative boundaries of American womanhood.

Patricia Nixon's trip to Liberia was overshadowed when she was given the moniker "Plastic Pat" by the American press.⁷¹ Later, Nancy Reagan encountered criticism in Britain for not curtsying to the Queen at the 1981 royal wedding.⁷² Reporters' questions to Rosalynn Carter ranged from "Have you felt entirely comfortable with the knowledge you bring to [White House] meetings to understand what you're talking about?" to "What gives you the right to talk about foreign policy?"⁷³ It shows that, despite their successes abroad, first ladies were still subject to a preconceived notion of admissible behaviour. As much as they stood in for the presidents, in the eyes of many, they were not considered an alternative, only permissible stand-ins for diplomatic duties abroad, and not crucial domestic concerns.

The first ladies themselves were aware of this conundrum. In Barbara Bush's memoir, she established that she approved of Margaret and Denis Thatcher's relationship, stating that Denis "...played it just right... he was supportive of Margaret and yet had a life of his own."⁷⁴ Bush understood the clear line between the masculine and feminine roles each body needed to inhabit within the leader/spouse dynamic, and the idea that the wives of male politicians were in a much more vulnerable position when it came to jeopardising their husband's political careers than the other way round. Ultimately, she recognised the distinction of female and male power that existed within the White House and in the realm of public opinion.

Teresa Earenfight, although a medieval queenship historian, made the relevant argument in 2017 that political power is gendered through the way leaders exercise

⁷⁰ "Highlights of the First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's Visit to India (1962)". Accessed 20th June 2020 via [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

⁷¹ "Pat Nixon Asked About Being Called "Plastic Pat"", Patricia Nixon Interview, 1969. Accessed 5th April 2020 via [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

⁷² Loizeau, *Nancy Reagan*, 91

⁷³ Troy, *Mr. & Mrs. President*, 255

⁷⁴ Barbara Bush, *Barbara Bush: A Memoir*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 216

it: female power being “soft” and male power being “hard”.⁷⁵ Soft female power is not necessarily negative. The accomplishments of the first ladies were, after all, beneficial to themselves and the people with which they came into contact. But the power they possessed only came their way via “soft” means, as Joseph Nye in 1990 underlined when he states that “soft” power is co-optive, and that American culture was a “useful soft power resource.”⁷⁶ Thus gendered connotations combined with the allure of American culture brought power to the first ladies.

As Barbara Bush showed, an apparently asexualised woman could more easily cross the border into politics than a figure such as Jacqueline Kennedy who was known primarily for beauty and style. Bush’s body projected a more digestible format to the public because it embodied the traditional image of marriage and motherhood rather than overt sexuality (or liberation). Therefore, the first lady’s body was used by the media as a vehicle to convey the sanctity of American heterosexuality and morality. In the 1960s specifically, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, opposition to the Vietnam War, and broad social and political changes gave rise to a rhetoric of declining morality in America.⁷⁷ In such an atmosphere, first ladies had the responsibility of embodying an ideal America – patriotic, moral, dutiful – whilst conservative power brokers feared that the country itself was being corrupted and erased by a section of its own society.

Traditional heterosexuality as a determining factor in the public’s perception of the first lady carried through to another example: The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal of the late 1990s. Hillary Clinton physically stood beside her husband President Clinton during the January 1998 press conference, denying the allegations in an act of moral support.⁷⁸ What is significant about this affair is that unlike Watergate in 1972 (a key incident that questioned presidential morality), the role of the internet played a major part. As Diana Owen pointed out, the matter unfolded amongst the rise of “‘new media’ actors, such as talk show hosts, tabloid reporters, and internet

⁷⁵ Teresa Earenfight, “Medieval Queenship”, *History Compass*, 15 (2017): 3

⁷⁶ Joseph Nye, “Soft Power”, *Foreign Policy*, 80, (1990): 153-171. Accessed 7th November 2020 via [jstor.org](https://www.jstor.org), 167-168

⁷⁷ Heather R White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 113-114

⁷⁸ Bill Clinton press conference, 26th January 1998. Accessed 25th July 2020 via [Speakola.com](https://www.speakola.com).

gossip columnists, [who] had entered the political communications scene.”⁷⁹ The first lady had shifted into a new age, with her physical body now universally disseminated across the globe and the depth of public opinion about her now anonymous and limitless. Against this backdrop, Clinton’s presence alongside her husband during the scandal was central to the image people forged of them as a traditional, heterosexual couple and the marital strength they embodied. The affair unfurled across all media platforms, old and new, with Clinton’s private life and the relationship she had with her husband becoming a talking point centred around morality, which only heightened during Bill Clinton’s impeachment.

Through her association with her husband, the position Clinton found herself in raised questions of womanhood, female integrity and infidelity in marital relationships. Her political life has been much defined by the affair, and the relationship between two high-profile women – Clinton and Lewinsky – has been broadly defined by their gender and sexuality, to the extent of representing a Madonna-Whore dichotomy: two female bodies illustrating the two halves of man’s desire. In terms of the amount of control Clinton had over her body, in an age of global new media and relentless exposure, she had very little. Except, perhaps, that of a strong and loyal wife who had been morally wronged. Clinton was the forgiving wife, whilst Lewinsky was the “cheap, slutty girl you know puts out.”⁸⁰

The first ladies from 1961-2001 were diverse individuals who led different lives in a complex and ever-changing role. Tradition, protocol and politics dictated that they comply to a specific set of criteria in both the public and private arenas. Over the course of this study three aspects with regard to their bodies have emerged: their gender, the way in which they embodied the nation, and their ability in matters of diplomacy. Each first lady was at the whim of outside perceptions, and these, during the era in question, consisted of rigid gender expectations and preconceptions based on conventional, time-honoured views of what a female body represented. These were, in turn, imposed on them through the media, by the public, and from the administrations of which they were a part. Their bodies cannot therefore be categorised as belonging solely to themselves.

⁷⁹ Diana Owen, “Popular Politics and the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair: The Implications for Leadership”, *Political Psychology*, 21.1 (2000): 163

⁸⁰ “Jay Leno on Lewinsky (3rd March 1999)”, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno Segment, 1999. Accessed 9th December 2021 via [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

In 1987 Betty Boyd Caroli stated that “if a married woman achieves the presidency, it is not likely her husband will want to take on the full-time, traditional role.”⁸¹ 34 years later, with binary categories of both male and female bodies persisting – wife, mother, president, politician, representative, heterosexual – this situation seems as unlikely to change as ever.

The first ladies’ physical presence, clothes and looks help us to understand who they were and how they were viewed and accepted across society. As does the prevailing culture of the time, and how they conducted themselves amidst political circumstances both domestic and international. These factors let us understand how much power they realistically had, and to what extent they could determine how much control they had over their bodies. An individual first lady’s ability to adapt to whatever requirements were needed of her is certainly why some have been perceived as more likeable than others, thought of as more successful by the public, and viewed as more noteworthy in a historical sense.

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⁸¹ Caroli, Betty Boyd. *First Ladies*. 1st edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 330

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