

Book Review: Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI by Jessica R. Pliley

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*Policing Sexuality links the crusade against sex trafficking to the rapid growth of the US agency the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In pursuit of offenders, working prostitutes were imprisoned at dramatically increased rates, while their male clients were seldom prosecuted. **Nafiseh Sharifi** thinks Pliley's intriguing and easy to read book is a brilliant resource for historians and researchers in the field of gender.*

Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the making of the FBI. Jessica R. Pliley. Harvard University Press. November 2014.

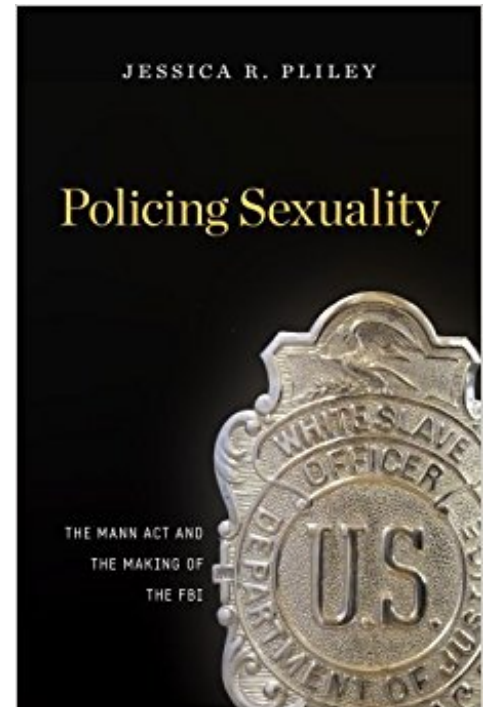
Laws intended to police sex trafficking rarely benefits those who have been trafficked; instead these laws mark women as bodies to be policed. – Policing Sexuality

[Jessica Pliley](#) is an assistant professor of women's history at Texas State University. Her first book, *Policing Sexuality*, is an insightful document about the history of government surveillance and control of sex and sexuality in the United States.

Pliley chooses a period of time in American history in which issues of prostitution, adultery, and venereal diseases became problematic. Specifically she looks at how increased visibility of prostitution in late 19th century led to establishment of the Mann Act in 1910, also known as the 'White Slave Traffic Act'. It was 'to protect women and girls from forced prostitution and sex trafficking' and led to establishment of Bureau of Investigations for its enforcement, which was later renamed to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Pliley demonstrates that the Mann Act investigations constituted the largest part of the Bureau agents' caseloads during the years before the Second World War. However, she argues that historians of FBI overlook how central policies of sexuality was to the development of the FBI and how the FBI's policing of sexuality "sheds light on the conservative culture" within it. She discusses that while between 1900 and 1941, the American society experienced shifts in ideas and values about marriage, women's roles and sex, the Bureau "consistently served as a defence against these cultural shifts". Through investigating cases of white slavery and policing prostitution, in fact, the Bureau celebrated "the male headed household and the dependant wife."

In the introductory chapter, Pliley refers to the Bureau's double standard of sexuality which "allowed men's promiscuity while severely restricting women's sexual behaviour to marriage". Pliley demonstrates that the Bureau had a vision of women as "either moral wives or mothers or immoral and vulnerable loose women".





In the chapter on “Policing Seduction and Adultery”, Pliley more specifically describes how families turned to the Bureau and used the Mann Act in order to control sexual conduct and behaviour of their daughters. She discusses different cases during the 1920s where FBI agents helped parents to “track down runaway daughters who defied their parent’s rules about who constituted an acceptable marriage partner” However, in most of the cases sexual reputation of a woman determined “whether the Bureau investigated the case”. Indeed, as Pliley argues, although based on the White Slavery Act the Bureau treated women as ‘victims’, not all women were considered ‘appropriate victims’; women’s class, race and respectability were influential factors for agents to follow the case. Pliley demonstrates that African-American women did not receive any protection from the Bureau and complains? from African-American parents treated with ‘negligence’.

In the concluding chapter, she looks at the recent cases of sex trafficking in the United States, which involved immigrant women, both legal and illegal. The issue of international sex trafficking attracted attention of the activists around the world after issuing of Palermo Protocol against it in 2000. She finds similarity between the current discourse of international sex trafficking and the White Slavery Act: instead of creating policies to protect sex workers similar to other workers, they function to re-criminalise prostitution. Therefore, even in recent anti-trafficking laws, women are mostly treated as ‘innocent’ victims and ‘slaves’ of sex trade, while women’s own will and consent are ignored. Consequently, prostitution is established as an illegal and criminal behaviour and if immigrant women’s participation is proved to be voluntary then she would be deported from the country. As Pliley argues, most policies seek to “conserve traditional domestic arrangement”.

Pliley emphasises on “extremely gendered” basis of the Mann Act, as it is the case for the “logic of most policy towards sex trafficking”. For instance in the accounts of trafficking and prostitution “the male customers are invisible” and protected by law enforcement.

According to her, enforcement of the Mann Act “could not be separated from the institution that administered it” as the gender conservatism of the Bureau in the early twentieth century formed who was perceived as a ‘victim worth saving’ and who was considered as a ‘deviant in need of policing’. Pliley concludes, the Bureau’s “enforcement of the Mann Act reveals the potential of the space between the letter of the law and the implementation of the law”.

Pliley’s study emphasises on gendered aspects of the state policies regarding sex trafficking. However, based on my own observation in the Iranian context, it is also important to look at how women themselves experience and negotiate the laws and policies that criminalise and marginalise their sex and sexuality. Therefore, I think studies that collect personal experiences of women affected by sex trafficking and victimised by the authorities would add new perspective to Pliley’s work.

Pliley's intriguing and easy to read book is a brilliant resource for historians, researchers in the field of gender and sexuality and anyone who is interested in the legal and historical aspects of sex trafficking and state policies.

Nafiseh Sharifi is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Gender Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. For her thesis Nafiseh is working on personal experiences of body and sexuality amongst different generations of Iranian women. Her research interests include gender and sexuality in Iran, sexual politics in Muslim societies, and women's narratives of embodiment.

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