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**COMMUNITY MOTHERS OR IMPROMPTU ACTRESSES?
THE MULTIFACETED EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN THE
NEW YORK POLICE DEPARTMENT (1900-1941)**

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Abstract

In the first half of the twentieth century, women police played a small yet active role in the New York Police Department. This article does not intend to narrate the growing presence of policewomen in the department but to examine their professional roles, identities, activities and experiences. It emphasizes the diversity of their tasks and social background, taking especially into account the division between former police matrons and social workers. Given this diversity, the category of gender is thus reinterpreted to understand how it functioned as a flexible and complex identity in relation to other forms of identity. Gender could be played up or down and negotiated according to circumstances and individuals, to either integrate a male-dominated institution, perform social work or do investigative work.

Keywords: women police, role of, policewomen, New York Police department, police and gender, police and class, investigation

Introduction

'Women are vastly more interested than we are in the administration of the criminal law, and in the suppression and punishment of crime.' This statement, shrewdly calculated to appear at the same time slightly provocative and flattering to the audience he was addressing, was made in 1901 by famous lawyer and clubman Joseph Choate in New York City to a large group of women organized to promote the non-partisan ticket which had at its head William Travers Jerome for District Attorney. A few years later, in 1915, it was chosen by pioneer historian Mary Beard to introduce the chapter entitled 'Corrections' of her book on the work of women in municipalities.²

Beard intended to examine the specific interest of women in an institution as masculine-identified as the criminal justice system. In a few pages, she suggested several reasons, three of which I would like to recall to discuss the involvement of women in the New York Police Department (NYPD) during the first half of the

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² Mary Beard, *Woman's Work in Municipalities* (National Municipal League Series, New York, Appleton, 1915) p.259. On Jerome's campaign, see Richard O'Connor, *Courtroom Warrior: The Combative Career of William Travers Jerome* (Little Brown: Boston, 1963).

twentieth century. First, Beard suggested that many crimes are committed against women. Second, the interest in public correction is 'but a simple and inevitable extension of the function of private correction which has been generally allotted to women in the home and in the school'. Third, there 'is no class line in crime or vice and the need of their correction. No group or class of women has escaped the ravages of these evils and thus a feeling of solidarity is evolved in the fight against the social evil and various forms of delinquency'.³ Could these three reasons account for the growing presence of women in the NYPD in the first half of the twentieth century?

Considering the discourse on women, crime, and the police used to justify the introduction of women into the ranks of the New York police during this period, one is struck (beyond the more or less sensational novelty that this introduction seemed to represent) by the considerable continuity and stability of arguments used over the years by men *and* women: women are better at the work of crime prevention and the protection of children and women; women can prevent crime without making arrest, they are 'community mothers'. Obviously these arguments reflected the stable gender ideology that dominated since the nineteenth century. But arguably wasn't the first part of the twentieth century also an era of gender redefinitions, as Sarah M. Evans and Nancy Cott, among others, have suggested?⁴ Moreover, as Lori Ginzberg has pointed out, one must not fail to take into account the possible gap between the reality of women's lives and the ideology which they themselves deployed.⁵ Finally, one can be suspicious of the presumed uniformity of the women's reform movement. The general principles which guided the introduction of women in the police may have been put into practice in different ways inside the NYPD. For instance, was the middle-class gender ideology of social reform shared by all women in the department?

If the movement which introduced policewomen into police departments across the US has been abundantly documented and interpreted as a consequence of the middle-class women's social reform movement, and if many of the conclusions do apply to New York City, I would like to examine the peculiarities of the New York City

³ Beard, *Woman's Work*, pp.259-260.

⁴ Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (Simon & Schuster: Philadelphia, 1997 (1989)); Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Yale University Press, 1987).

⁵ Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: morality, politics, and class in the nineteenth-century United States* (Yale University Press, 1990) p.3.

case by putting it in the context of the male-dominated history of the NYPD.⁶ What were for instance the implications of the relatively late introduction of policewomen in the NYPD, in 1918-1919? Formal positions for policewomen were not created in the NYPD before the years 1918-1921, i.e. later than in Portland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland or Denver. This might be surprising considering that the NYPD was the largest police force in the United States and that New York was often regarded, for better or worse, as the capital city of American policing (especially until the emergence of a powerful federal police force). Moreover in 1918, the NYPD was already a professionalized body whose mission had been redefined around crime-fighting and was under the authority of the first Police Commissioner (PC) who had risen through the ranks, Richard E. Enright.⁷ Even more surprising, the appointment not only of policewomen, but also, for the first time in 1918, of a woman as Deputy Police Commissioner (Ellen O'Grady), was made under a traditional Tammany mayor, John Hylan, after three reform-oriented administrations.⁸

So what did it mean for a hardened policeman such as Enright, whose work identity heavily relied on the criticism of reformers, to manage a department including for the first time a - relatively - inexperienced woman (O'Grady had worked formerly as a probation officer) as Deputy Police Commissioner and a - relatively - significant number of policewomen?⁹ Consequently, how did the policewomen and female managers of the women police who entered the NYPD react to the dominant, i.e. masculine, police culture? The aim of this article is not to narrate the introduction of women into the department, as Theresa M. Melchionne has already covered in her groundbreaking Master's thesis, but to review some of the evidence in order to

⁶ On the general movement, see Dorothy Moses Schulz, *From Social Worker to Crimefighter: Women in US Municipal Policing* (Praeger: Westpoint, Connecticut, 1995), pp.9-42 and Janis Appier, *Policing Women: The Sexual Politics of Law Enforcement and the LAPD* (Temple University Press, 1998), Part One, 'Gender, the Police, and Criminal Justice Reform' pp. 9-69.

⁷ On the redefinition of the mission of the NYPD, see Christopher P. Thale, 'Civilizing New York City: Police Patrol, 1880-1935', unpublished PhD thesis, (University of Chicago, 1995) and Yann Philippe, 'Mais que fait la police? Réformes policières et lutte contre la criminalité à New York au début du xx^e siècle (1906-1918)', unpublished PhD thesis, (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en sciences Sociales, Paris, 2006). On the appointment of Richard E. Enright, see *New York Times*, 24 January 1918, p.1.

⁸ Tammany was the name of the Democratic Party organization that ruled New York City politics and which gained a reputation for graft and corruption. George B. McClellan (1904-1909) especially in his second mandate and William Gaynor (1910-1913) were elected with the support of Tammany but defined themselves as reformers. John P. Mitchel was a fusion mayor. 'Fusion' refers to an agreement between reformers and often the Republican party to back a single ticket and defeat Tammany candidates. On the appointment of Ellen O'Grady see *New York Times*, 29 January 1918, pp.1, 11.

⁹ On the opposition of cops to reformers and its expression in gendered terms, see Thale, 'Civilizing New York City', pp. 867-870.

emphasize the diverse work experiences policewomen had in the NYPD. First, taking especially into account the resilient tradition of the former matrons who became policewomen, obscured for example in Janis Appier's study, complicates the framework within which we understand the presence of women in municipal police departments. Policewomen negotiated in varied ways their occupational identity in relation to their own social and ethnic background, their position in the department, the women's reform movement and the masculine culture of the police institution. In this respect, I will follow Louise Jackson to consider 'the ways in which "gender" intersects with other categories to create identities that are multiple, fluid and malleable rather than fixed'.¹⁰ Second, as uncovered by Jackson in the case of the United Kingdom, the scope of policewomen's tasks was probably more diverse than earlier noted and thus not strictly limited to the 'social role' conventionally allotted to women.¹¹ The female police mandate must thus be understood in a new way to consider what made it both 'feminine' and flexible. Third, recourse to the 'feminine' could be used as a tactic to gain acceptance in the department and obtain interesting or rewarding assignments (surveillance or investigations where a woman was needed). This led to different gender performances that displayed, 'exposed and subverted' gender assumptions.¹² In this respect some policewomen were given the opportunity to be 'impromptu actresses', according to the expression used by one of them.

1 No Class Lines in Policing? The Broken Sisterhood of the NYPD

Obviously Mary Beard's argument that there was no class line regarding crime or vice reflected the dominant ideology of Progressivism, namely that the whole of society could be united in the pursuit of the common interest if it followed the lead of middle-class social activists and experts. It has long been noted how the reform movement resulted in greater social control¹³. Less known is one of the peculiarities

¹⁰ L. A. Jackson, *Gender, Welfare and Surveillance in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester University Press, 2006), p.4. The main findings of my article were made before I read Jackson's book and I was encouraged to discover the similarity of some of the conclusions we attained concerning the experiences of policewomen on both sides of the Atlantic. However, I found that many of her interpretations were so eloquently and powerfully formulated that I decided to retain some of them to introduce my study.

¹¹ In this respect, the following statement made by Jackson could apply to the NYPD: 'Women played an active role in plain-clothes observations, detective and decoy work, even in forces where they were not formally appointed to the Criminal Investigations Department.' (*Gender, Welfare and Surveillance* p.2).

¹² On 'tactic' and for the final quotation, see Jackson, *Gender, Welfare and Surveillance*, p.5.

¹³ For one instance, Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp.32-33.

of women policing in New York City: the existence of different traditions and the extent to which class or ethnic lines were reproduced inside the sphere of policing.

Different models governed the introduction of policewomen. The most visible was that of 'Community Mothers' – what Appier aptly called 'The female reform tradition' or the 'crime prevention model'.¹⁴ As Appier and Dorothy M. Schulz have shown, the introduction of policewomen in the US was the consequence of the pressure exerted by women's groups and organizations on police departments and municipal and state officials.¹⁵ In a paradox that has often been commented on, these women drew on middle-class gender stereotypes (the famous 'woman's sphere' and the ideology of domesticity) to create new positions for women in the public sphere: it was because women represented private moral values that these new policewomen could best take care of women and children. New York City was no exception in this respect. The creation of women officers of crime prevention (called *patrolwomen* from 1920 to 1935) was secured, as Melchionne has demonstrated, through the intervention of reform groups, such as The Girls Protective League, the New York Probation and Protective Association, The Traveler's Aid, The Women's City Club, Big Sisters' organizations, The Young Women's Christian Association, or even the Woman Suffrage Party.¹⁶ Finally, the Mayor's Committee of Women on National Defense, 'a mosaic of overlapping groups with civic, humanitarian goals, organized to further the war effort, now served as a springboard for promoting this new cause'.¹⁷

This tradition of women policing, based on the idea of a 'policewoman's field' or a 'policewomen's domain' is best represented in New York City by women officials such as Deputy Police Commissioners Ellen O'Grady and Julia George Loft, or patrolwoman, then Director of the Women's Bureau, Mary E. Hamilton.¹⁸ Hamilton, for instance, described explicitly the work of policewomen as that of 'community mothers':

In a sense we are community mothers, probation officers, &c. The average child in the home is cared for, the child in school is well cared for, supposedly;

¹⁴ Appier, *Policing Women* pp.9, 3.

¹⁵ Schulz, *From Social Worker to Crimefighter*, pp.21-42; Appier, *Policing Women*, pp.9-69.

¹⁶ Theresa M. Melchionne, 'Policewomen: their introduction in the police department of the City of New York (A Study of Organizational Response to Innovation)', M.P.A. Thesis, (Bernard M. Baruch College, City University of New York, 1962) pp. 48-62, 70-71, 75-93.

¹⁷ Melchionne, 'Policewomen', p.137.

¹⁸ The phrase 'policewoman's field' was used by Mary Hamilton (*New York Times*, 27 January 1926, p.25); 'policewomen's domain' was used by the *New York World* in 1924 to describe the creation of the Woman's Bureau under the direction of Hamilton (21 December 1924).

but what about the child in the street. If I had my way I'd have every child under the special care of policewomen.¹⁹

As in the Los Angeles case studied by Appier, the model was definitely elitist. Hamilton, for example, opposed the 'intelligent' and 'more subtle' work of crime prevention (perfectly suitable for 'college-trained women'), with the 'stupid punishment of crime' - policemen having at the time an enduring reputation of stupid, uneducated brutes.²⁰ The strategy was also definitely separatist. It relied less on the idea of the gradual integration of policewomen into the police profession than on the ideal of 'policing from the outside' both the department and society.

This model is especially valid for New York City if we consider the argument of Estelle B. Freedman on the 'persistence of women's contributions to social reform in the post suffrage era'.²¹ Indeed, the climax of the policewomen reform movement in New York was not 1918, but the creation of the Crime Prevention Bureau (CPB) in 1930, with a woman director who supervised the work of policemen and additional personnel: in one year, between 1930 and 1931, the number of women in the department rose from 125 to 155 (i.e. from 0.67% to 0.80 % of the total force). The first efforts originated in 1925 when the Women's City Club formed a joint Committee regrouping representatives of 15 women's and reform organizations (including the Women's Prison Association, the League of Catholic Women, the City Federation of Women's Clubs, the League of Women Voters, and the International Policewomen's Association), 'to consider ways to improve the functioning of the woman police' 'in accordance with recognized standards of social work'.²² After several state crime

¹⁹ *New York Times*, 28 September 1924, x, p.18. Again *New York Times*, 27 January 1926, p.25. For a larger view of the theme, see Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (eds.), *Mothers of a New World, Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (Routledge: New York, 1993), especially the introduction, "Mother Worlds" and the Politics of Motherliness', pp.1-42.

²⁰ *New York Times*, 28 September 1924, section x, p.18. In her book, she wrote: 'The idea of protection is the very essence of a policewoman's duty. She is the guardian of life and property in the community just as the policeman is, only she protects in a more subtle unseen way', *The Policewoman: Her Services and Ideal* (Stokes: New York, 1924, reprint Arno Press and the New York Times: New York, 1971) p.167.

²¹ 'Even during the rise of professionalized social work and the provision of welfare by state and national governments, women's local, voluntary associations continued to play an important role in sustaining progressive reform.' See Estelle B. Freedman, 'Separatism Revisited; Women's Institutions, Social Reform, and the Career of Miriam Van Waters', in Linda K. Kerber et al. (eds.) *US History as Women's History: New Essays*, (University of Carolina Press, 1995), ch.8, pp.170-187.

²² Minutes of the meeting of 9 April 1925, called by the Women's City Club to consider the functioning of Policewomen in New York City, in Letter 20 April 1925, from Edith G. Mitchell, Joint Committee to consider Functioning of Policewomen, to F. H. Whitin, General Secretary of the Committee of Fourteen (Committee of Fourteen Records, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, Box 13, Folder 'Policewomen'). 'Outline of Plan for Work

commissions that stressed the necessity of crime prevention and further activism by the NY Women's City Club and the NYC League of Women Voters, the CPB was finally started in January 1930. Its first director was none other than Virginia Murray, who had been chairman of the initial Executive Committee, appointed by the Women's City Club to work on the question.²³

However, the two Police Commissioners who devoted the most important place to women policing were not middle-class reformers but hardened police officers: Richard Enright and Edward P. Mulrooney.²⁴ It may actually have been convenient for male police officers to introduce policewomen to take care of women and children because their function had been redefined and narrowed by officials around the task of crime fighting since the 1900s. One of the goals was to reunite the police department around an institutional identity that linked aggressive crime-fighting and masculinity. Consequently, abandoning certain police tasks to women, especially those centered on welfare work was a relief, as the *Annual Report of the NYPD* for the year 1922 noted:

Unconsciously, police officers have always, to some extent, performed welfare work. The police officer on post in a quarter of the city inhabited by the very poor is continuously called upon for many varieties of aid, not excepting financial. This service – if may be called that – has been systematized and its energies concentrated by placing it in the hands of a special branch of the force, the Special Duty Division.... Each year the volume of work performed has greatly increased. New opportunities for service are daily brought forward. The foregoing is particularly true in reference to the work being performed by women police officers. The welfare work of the men of the Division has been greatly restricted, during the past year, by the heavy demand for their services in other lines of duty.²⁵

Professionalism was thus synonymous with abandoning the type of work that did not exactly fit with the - masculine - redefinition of police work. In 1918, Police

of Policewomen' in Letter from Virginia M. Murray, Chairman, Joint Committee on Policewomen, to Police Commissioner George McLaughlin, 6 January, 1926, in Letter 20 January, 1926, from Virginia Murray to F. H. Whitin, (Box 13, Folder 'Policewomen').

²³ On the creation of the Bureau, see *New York Times*, 13 January 1930, p.1.

²⁴ In her study of policewomen, Melchionne notes: 'Commissioner Enright climaxed his departure from office by obtaining an increase in the policewomen quota from 70 to 95, so that in December, 1925 he was able to appoint 26 more policewomen' ('Policewomen,' pp. 126-127). On the support given by police Commissioner Mulrooney to the CPB, see, for example, *New York Times*, 17 June 1931, p. 22. Additon explains that the decision of Mayor Walker to make the CPB a permanent part of the NYPD had much to do with the fact 'that a 'hard-boiled cop' [Mulrooney] ... believed in it', ('The Crime Prevention Bureau of the New York City Police Department,' in Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck (eds.) *Preventing Crime, A Symposium* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1936), p.217.

²⁵ New York City Police Department, *Annual Report, 1922*, p.164. On the type of personnel employed in the SPD, see below.

Commissioner Enright justified his decision to appoint Ellen O'Grady as Deputy by referring to her identity as a mother of three daughters:

At this very moment hundreds of mothers, whose hearts are burning, are seeking information regarding their daughters who have mysteriously disappeared ... Men have not the same kind of sympathy in these cases as a mother who has daughters of her own'.²⁶

Moreover, recent sociological and historical studies have shown that police departments were not only reformed from the outside by middle-class reformers but also from the inside by the police officers themselves. In the 1920s, former police officers, like Enright, who became police officials, were eager to appear themselves as reformers, or at least as modern and efficient managers, open to new techniques of policing – including the prevention of criminality or the protection of children, women and morality by policewomen.

Finally, the NYPD was not only reformed from the top, but also from the bottom up, which suggests another line of explanation for the increasing involvement of women. Mary A. Sullivan, a police matron who eventually became director of the Policewomen's Bureau, wrote in her autobiography:

Some policewomen's duties were gradually taken over by policewomen themselves without reference to any fixed policy at headquarters. In a way the women on the force have made their own jobs. Given no training and little scope in the beginning, they took on many duties in the field of social service. Also as it became obvious that women could keep a secret and were good impromptu actresses, they found themselves doing many different kinds of detective work.²⁷

Not all policewomen were middle-class social activists. A second, and less visible, tradition of female policing was that of former police matrons who became '*policewomen*'. Many, like their male counterparts, had working-class or police social backgrounds. Sullivan, as she wrote in the first words of her autobiography, came from 'a police family': before her there had 'always been a Sullivan in the department'. Her uncle who lived with her was a lieutenant in the NYPD and an imposing figure. One brother was a police lieutenant, another a detective, and a sister... a policewoman. Another brother, Edward J. Sullivan a former policeman himself was elected to the Board of Aldermen in 1921 and continued to serve until 1937'.²⁸ Describing how she gradually moved toward a police career, Sullivan wrote:

²⁶ *New York Times*, 29 January 1918, p.11.

²⁷ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.140.

²⁸ Melchionne, '*Policewomen*', p.124.

'The occupational tradition of the Sullivans rose in my blood'.²⁹ Many of the police matrons were police widows, notably Isabella Goodwin, the first woman detective of the NYPD. According to Hamilton, eight widows of policemen passed the policewomen's first examination in 1921. And, in 1939, according to the *New York Times*, between 13% and 20% of New York City policewomen were married to policemen from the department. And some had sons in the department.³⁰

Many of these women worked under a specific title in the department. In 1920 former police matrons obtained the right to be called '*policewomen*', with a civil service examination different than that of *patrolwomen*. In 1920, of the 75 women who were officially members of the NYPD (either as policewomen or as patrolwomen), 55 were actually former police matrons.³¹ So it seems reasonable to argue not only that police matrons 'paved the way', but that they constituted the central force of the pioneer female police officers.³²

Coming from police families also meant coming from social and ethnic backgrounds different to those of middle-class reformers who were often native Protestants: Mary Sullivan and Mary Shanley were Irish-Americans, Rae Nicoletti, a member of the Italian Squad for some time, was Italian-American.³³ For many of these women, especially widows, being in the police force was probably more of a job than a vocation or a cause. And there is no reason to assume that the social gap between middle-class social workers (*patrolwomen*) and working class *policewomen* disappeared, since social activists complained recurrently about the easy nature of the civil service examination for *policewomen*.³⁴

²⁹ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, pp.3-11

³⁰ On Goodwin, 'The First Municipal Woman Detective in the World', *New York Times*, 3 March 1912, SM, p.1; Hamilton, *The Policewoman*, p.30; on policewomen married to policemen, see *New York Times*, 26 March 1939, section viii, p.23.

³¹ Melchionne, 'Policewomen', pp. 108-109. To add complexity, *patrolwomen* were first called *policewomen* until in 1920 police matrons became *policewomen*.

³² See, for example, Schulz, 'The Police Matron Movement: Paving the Way for Policewomen', (1989: Fall), 12(3), *Police Studies*, 115-124.

³³ Shanley, *NY Times*, *New York Times*, 13 September 1957, p.25 and 27 March 1941, p.25; on Nicoletti, see Michael Fiaschetti, *You Gotta Be Rough: The Adventures of Detective Fiaschetti of the Italian Squad* (Doubleday, New York, 1930) p.237, and Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.105.

³⁴ For instance, Chloe Owings wrote in 1927: 'They are appointed after passing a civil service examination which is very elementary' ('Women Police in New York City', report 25 July 1927, Committee of Fourteen Records, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, Box 13, Folder 'Policewomen').

These women were probably not completely at ease with the elitist model of crime prevention. In her autobiography, Sullivan distanced herself from clubwomen, whom she portrayed as romantic amateurs, as idealists who sympathized with dangerous criminals, or as moralists shocked by the dances of the youth.³⁵ *Policewomen* were probably torn between their identity as women (thus suffering in a male-dominated institution from sex discrimination) and the necessary solidarity and cultural bond they shared with their brothers, fathers, husbands or neighbors. They were probably more eager to integrate into the community of male police officers (to police from the inside), and inclined to distance themselves from the moralistic, elitist and knowledge-driven approach of social workers.

This difference is illustrated by the contrasting reactions of O'Grady and Sullivan to departmental politics. When in December 1920, DPC O'Grady quit her position after almost three years of work, she complained of the 'brutal insults' she received from PC Enright and Mayor Hylan and described her situation in explicitly gendered terms:

I wanted to let the world know that a woman could do this work – that it was the kind of work only a woman could do.... Commissioner Enright made life miserable for me all the time I was doing a great work. Oh, if I were only a man! I would have never permitted him to drive me out. But I would not want to be the type of some of those who surround the Commissioner. I never knew how men could lower themselves until I saw some of them at headquarters, crawling and fawning around Mr. Enright.³⁶

Where O' Grady used the old stereotype of dirty male politics, Sullivan described her demotion from the Detective Division back to station house duty as an inevitable downturn in a police career and as part of a typical police officer's story. She did not conceal the fact that the decision was a hard blow, nor that she was even tempted to resign,³⁷ but she mentioned how she was comforted by her male superiors, and one, in particular, whom she quotes: 'Well, this is the army, and you've got to take orders. But you'll survive it. Don't forget that the pendulum of the clock swings in both ways'.³⁸ Sullivan complained about the influence of politics in terms quite similar to those of her male colleagues.³⁹ In her narrative, there is no dichotomy between horrendous male politics and female moral qualities.

³⁵ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, pp.89, 137.

³⁶ *New York Times*, 14 December 1920, pp.1-2.

³⁷ 'If I hadn't had my heart and soul in my police career I would have thoughts of resigning' (Sullivan *My Double Life*, p.144).

³⁸ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.143.

³⁹ For example, see Lewis. J. Valentine, *Nightstick, the Autobiography of Lewis J. Valentine, Former Police Commissioner of New York* (Dial Press, New York, 1947). For a study of police memoirs as a genre, see Yann Philippe, "L'enquête comme évocation du monde:" langages

Indeed, occupational or institutional identity seemed stronger for Sullivan than gender identity and the supposedly stronger moral values and interest in social work women were supposedly predisposed to have. She frequently referred to the 'necessity of taking orders'.⁴⁰ She even justified her acceptance of a dangerous assignment for the reason that 'she was eager to get the good opinion of her superiors'.⁴¹ In 1912, Goodwin expressed a similar point of view to a *New York Times* correspondent:

One morning Commissioner Dougherty sent for me and outlined what he wanted me to do. The Commissioner thought the thing all out and told me just what I would have to do. Would I take the chance? Well rather! I don't think I hesitated a moment, for a detective whose heart is in the work must take things as they come.... I went to work merely out of a sense of duty.⁴²

Of course, when they expressed their point of view, both Goodwin and Sullivan were still members of the NYPD, thus not in a position to question the chain of command. Sullivan's memoirs seemed also to function partially as a tribute to both the department and women police. Yet, in discussing their being made policewomen, Sullivan and Goodwin insisted more on their professional experience, especially their beginnings as matrons (Goodwin had 15-years' experience), than on gender identity or on the teachings of social work. This reveals that they had absorbed and espoused the dominant police culture.

(Sullivan) Though I didn't realize, station house work is excellent training for a young officer. She gets an intensive course in meeting the types she'll see throughout her police life, and above all, she learns to handle them without fear.⁴³

(Goodwin) The Mercer Street Station, owing to the proximity to Police Headquarters is one of the most important in the city, for there all woman prisoners from Headquarters are taken to be searched or attended to, and for this reason I soon began to get acquainted with notorious women criminals. My experience as a matron stood me in good stead when I took up regular police work.⁴⁴

de l'enquête et légitimation du New York Police Department (1900-1940)', Septembre 2007, 113, *Revue Française des Etudes Américaines*, pp.76-90.

⁴⁰ For instance, she described her work as matron in the following terms: 'I learned that I had to be a good soldier and conform to the semi-military regulations if I wanted to get ahead' (*My Double Life*, p.26).

⁴¹ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.66.

⁴² *New York Times*, 3 March 1912, SM, p.1.

⁴³ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, pp.21-22. She adds: 'My long experience in the department gave me an unusually broad understanding of human beings, especially of those brought in touch with the law,' p.117.

⁴⁴ Goodwin, *New York Times*, 3 March 1912, SM, p.1.

Goodwin related her successful part in the investigation of the Trinity Place taxicab robbery (the dangerous assignment referred to earlier) to her previous experience in minor cases of clairvoyants and fake medical practitioners.⁴⁵

Evidence suggests the existence of two distinct groups of female police officers. However, documenting the relationship between the two is more problematic. Melchionne has already related how police matrons opposed, at first, the creation of new positions for *patrolwomen* in the department, going as far as to lobby in Albany to defend their interests.⁴⁶ If everyday relationships between these two groups of policewomen are particularly difficult to describe, women police in New York City could not be described as a strong sisterhood. The existence of two different titles, *patrolwomen* and *policewomen*, based on two different civil service examinations, was a major division although after a few years 'in every day administrative practice numbers of both groups were frequently detailed to the same assignments'.⁴⁷ Yet this did not bridge the gap between the two groups. As late as 1932, Sullivan wrote: 'For about eleven years we have had dissension and confusion in the PD because of the two ranks of women officers performing the same duty and receiving the same salary'.⁴⁸

Unsurprisingly, the New York City press was eager to report personal conflicts between leading policewomen or officials - after all, it reinforced stereotypes about women being irrational and moody. In 1930, three women were said to have competed bitterly for the newly created position of Sixth Deputy Commissioner in charge of the Crime Prevention Bureau (Hamilton, Sullivan and Additon): Valeria H. Parker of the American Social Hygiene Association even publicly declared that Hamilton criticized the Bureau because her application was unsuccessful and that Sullivan's Brother, an alderman, had voted against the continuance of the Bureau because her sister did not succeed either.⁴⁹ But little was said about the reasons that could explain those disagreements for example, the strained relationships between some leading policewomen and reformers (most social reformers had adopted the

⁴⁵ 'The long, hard schooling I received in my work of detecting fortune tellers and fake healers served me in good stead in the work I was ordered to do regarding the taxicab robbers' Ibid.

⁴⁶ Melchionne, 'Policewomen', pp.92, 99-110.

⁴⁷ Melchionne, 'Policewomen', p.117.

⁴⁸ Letter 23 March 1932, from Mary A. Sullivan, Policewomen's Endowment Association, Inc., to Mrs. Mortimer Menken (Committee of Fourteen Records, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, Box 13, Folder 'Policewomen').

⁴⁹ *New York Times*, 17 June 1931, p.22. On Edward J. Sullivan's vote, see *New York Times*, 10 June 1930, p.13.

crime prevention model). The Committee of Fourteen did not give its support to Mary Hamilton when she directed the Women's Bureau in 1924 and seemed to have a distant relationship with Sullivan, relying rather on their 'most reliable informant', officer Genevieve McLaughlin.⁵⁰ The relations of both Hamilton and Sullivan with the International Association of Police Women (IAPW) were limited whereas Murray and Additon were praised by the organization. For instance, Sullivan, Director of the Women's Bureau in 1928, replied abruptly to the secretary of the Committee of Fourteen, who had forwarded a request from the executive secretary of the IAPW regarding information relative to the 'new type of woman criminal' (especially the participation of women in hold-up gangs and other types of crime):

I have your communication of October 8th with enclosure from Miss Helen Pigeon of the International Association of Policewomen of Washington, DC, in which she is asking for data to enable her to compile a paper to be read at some future date. It is Miss Pingeon's work to gather information along various lines, assemble the facts gathered and then read a paper here, there, or elsewhere. We are very busy in this department and I shall ask to be excused from communicating with Miss Pigeon in connection with the subject she is asking for.⁵¹

Sullivan clearly opposed the serious and 'real' work of municipal police officers with the superficial and cosmopolitan activity of speaking at conferences. Firmly committed to her local and institutional identity, she conveyed no sense of a national community of policewomen but rather a clear social gap. Sullivan started working as a saleswoman before joining the NYPD, whereas Additon and Murray were respected social workers with a college education and even teaching experience: Additon came from an 'old Georgia family', was born on a plantation and was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania (from which she also received her M.A.); Murray had studied at the New York School of Social Work.⁵² These fractures in the women's police sphere may also have been related to different ways to conceive crime and police work.

⁵⁰ On Hamilton, see letter 24 April 1924, from F. H. Whitin, General Secretary, Committee of Fourteen, to Mrs. George W. Loft; on Sullivan, letter 26 May 1926 from Whitin, to Mrs. Mina C. Van Winkle (Committee of Fourteen Records, Box 13, Folder 'Policewomen').

⁵¹ Letter 15 October 1928 from Mary E. Sullivan, Director Women's Bureau, to George E. Worthington, Secretary of the Committee of Fourteen (Committee of Fourteen Records, Box 13, Folder 'Policewomen').

⁵² For a portrait of Murray, *New York Times*, 22 January 1930, p.6; for a portrait of Additon, *New York Times*, 12 October 1930, p.22 and 12 July 1931, section xx, p.12.

2 Many are the Crimes Committed Against Women: the Definition of Women Policing

'Cherchez l'homme!' If none of the women in law enforcement I have studied specifically asserted that they entered the field because too many crimes were committed against women, as Mary Beard suggested, most did share the historian's opinion about the relationship of women to crime. Crime was predominantly seen as male. Consequently children and women were primarily victims of bad environment and male evil influence. As Mary Hamilton said: 'There is danger lurking in parks, playground, beaches, piers and baths'.⁵³ Women, children, girls were in danger in the city. Discussing the role of automobiles as instruments of crime, Hamilton wrote:

A man with a car makes a strong appeal to the pleasure craving, romantic young girl who, alas, usually believes too firmly in a short life and a merry one. Many men today use a car as an inducement in "picking up" girls. They "cruise" along the prominent thoroughfares of large cities seeking to entice foolish girls who see no harm in a little flirtation. To the man, any woman who accepts his advance is a potential prostitute; the average girl thinks of nothing beyond the fun of a joy-ride.⁵⁴

There was also an apparent consensus on the definition of crime as a social disease, and the idea that it must be tackled through a modern scientific approach. At the end of the 1920s, under the influence of experienced trained social workers who became heads of the Crime Prevention Bureau, this discourse grew even more sophisticated. Virginia Murray and Henrietta Additon, in the annual reports of the Bureau, described crime as a complex phenomenon.⁵⁵ Casework, which worked 'as much a code word for professionalism as a social work methodology' according to Regina G. Kunzel,⁵⁶ then became an identified element of the police discourse on crime. Between 1930 and 1934, the annual reports included a summary of typical cases: 20 pages were devoted to this section in the 1931 report with subsections such as gangs, individual adjustments of minors.⁵⁷

⁵³ *New York Times*, 28 September 1924, section x, p.18. This idea is repeated in Hamilton, *The Policewoman*, p.170.

⁵⁴ Hamilton, *The Policewoman*, pp.171-172.

⁵⁵ 'Crime is becoming an organized business with tentacles reaching out into every branch of our complex social system' (NYCPD, *Annual Report, 1930*, Report of the Bureau of Crime Prevention, p.20).

⁵⁶ Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (Yale University Press, 1993) p.42. The NYCPD *Annual Report, 1929* wrote: 'The work of the Crime Prevention Officer is similar in many respects to that of the trained social worker in other fields' (p.58).

⁵⁷ NYCPD, *Annual Report, 1930*, pp.28-31; *Annual Report, 1931*, pp.95-116. Additon was the author of academic articles and books (*City Planning for Girls*, University of Chicago Press, 1928). She used her experience as Deputy Police Commissioner to contribute ('The Crime

But beneath this consensus, another police discourse on crime was held by women detectives. Like their male colleagues, they offered a more classic hard-boiled view of criminals, purporting to be that of realists and marked if not by cynicism (Sullivan rejected the term), at least by a certain degree of fatalism. They approached the problem of crime in terms of nature and often spoke in terms of ontology rather than sociology: 'The things I have learned about poor weak human nature'; 'My long contact with criminal types hasn't embittered me against human nature', said Goodwin and Sullivan respectively.⁵⁸ Their knowledge of crime was not based on data furnished, compared and classified by social science but the result of their practical and personal experience, the sum of their multiple individual encounters with criminals. But in no way did this view prevent them from using broad generalizations. Their typologies constantly referred to naturalized types or classes:

(Goodwin) My experience among the woman denizens of the underworld had taught me one thing – that these kind of women are fearfully jealous of each other. This class also will not hesitate to talk to servants.⁵⁹

(Sullivan) I soon learned that it is much harder to break down a woman suspect than it is a man. Women are better actresses and more skilled at concocting stories... A woman's most vulnerable point is her vanity... Women brought as witnesses are generally extremely loyal to their men.⁶⁰

Sullivan also made biological comparisons: 'It is as difficult to get Gypsies out of Coney Island as it is to get cockroaches out of a tenement house'.⁶¹ Even Hamilton, a self-proclaimed proponent of the social approach to crime, could on one page write that criminals were made, not born and on the following page mention harmful hereditary influences.⁶² And then go on to discuss the dangers of new women criminals as representing 'a more serious threat to society than that of men for these women criminals may also be mothers and have considerable influence on their offspring'.⁶³

So there may have been differences between the policewomen's moral view of crime and the patrolwomen's social view of crime. Each version may even have had its own contradictions. But imprecision, as Nicole Rafter and Marie-Christine Leps have

Prevention Bureau of the New York City Police Department') to a book edited by Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck, *Preventing Crime, A Symposium* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1936).

⁵⁸ Goodwin, *New York Times*, 3 March, 1912, SM, p.1; Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.301.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.84.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁶² Hamilton, *The Policewoman*, pp.151-152.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp.153-154.

pointed out, was a key element in the discourse on crime.⁶⁴ High-brow and low-brow women in the police shared a common paradigm in their view of crime: one which used a web of concepts or images and understood the criminal as a result of multiple and interconnected influences such as economic and social environment, education, biology, psychology, evolution and degeneration. Thus the concept of a criminal could be expanded or contracted according to the targets of police action. It could be made to include women, 'wayward girls', lower classes or inferior races. In any case, gaining and displaying knowledge about criminals was a way to confer authority and power in the NYPD.

Consequently, the tasks of policewomen were likely to be varied and the scope of their work could be almost indefinite. But in any case they revolved around the two main functions of prevention and protection. Crime prevention, the task most identified as feminine, was based on the assumption shared by most members of the police department that it takes a woman to help a woman or a child. The annual report of the NYPD officially proclaimed in 1920 that 'it is a well recognized fact that women are particularly fitted to do preventive and protective work; this is the key-note of our modern police methods'.⁶⁵ Crime had to be prevented at an early stage in the career of prospective criminals and women and children had to be protected. But it raised two questions: what was exactly prevention and to what extent was it feminine?

Crime prevention was initially, before the introduction of policewomen in 1918, designed as a male experiment during the mandate of Arthur Woods, Police Commissioner between 1914 and 1917. Young policemen were assigned to patrol various districts of the City in order to act as 'Big Brothers' to boys and girls and to report breeding places for crime. A Junior Police force was even created to offer decent and responsible recreation and entertainment for young boys.⁶⁶ The military drilling and patriotic education given to the boys was in accordance with the militarization of American culture described by Cecilia E. O'Leary.⁶⁷ Crime prevention

⁶⁴ Nicole H. Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals* (University of Illinois, 1997), pp.8, 119; Marie-Christine Leps, *Apprehending the Criminal, the Production of Deviance in Nineteenth Century Discourse* (Duke University Press, 1992) p.221.

⁶⁵ NYCPD, *Annual Report, 1920*, p 237.

⁶⁶ NYCPD, *Annual Report, 1916*, p.xxiv. Arthur Woods even wrote a book on the subject: *Crime Prevention*, (Princeton University Press, 1918). See also David B. Wolcott, *Cops and Kids: Policing Juvenile Delinquency in Urban America, 1890-1940* (Ohio State University Press, 2005), pp.94-95.

⁶⁷ For examples of the activities of the Junior Police, see the journal edited monthly by the NYPD *The Junior Policeman* (New York Public Library). On the militarization of American

was not exactly implemented in New York City as part of a feminized Progressive agenda, relying on the domestic-based rhetoric of maternalism. Rather it *became* feminized with the introduction of policewomen. So, in the New York Case, I would not argue, as Appier does for Los Angeles, that 'the women's gender division of police work in the 1910s led to the development of the overtly masculine crime control model of police work, still in use today, and the macho subculture of modern American police departments'.⁶⁸ This masculine model was already in place in the NYPD.

The transfer of functions was not a difficult process though, since this distribution of work fitted gender stereotypes. For the reasons aforementioned, it may have been convenient for police officials of the subsequent Tammany administration to transfer this type of work to the new female officers. As the 1920 annual report reveals, the welfare or special duty units in charge of crime prevention were made up of both women and partially disabled men. This had two advantages according to male officials: it released the 'able-bodied' men from welfare work and conversely took disabled men off the pension roll. But it made very clear that a female officer was the equivalent of a disabled man. Accordingly, the function of women officers in welfare or crime prevention work was primarily defined as giving help, information and advice, as displaying an understanding attitude that would gain them the confidence of women, adolescents and children. And the confidence accorded to the rehabilitative influence of women's police was proportional to the solidity of gender identities. Many of the interpretations made by Appier in the case of Los Angeles do apply, in this respect, to New York City.

But to what degree could female officers intervene in people's lives? The crime prevention model seemed to furnish a specific kind of power since police intervention did not even require the commission of a crime. 'A policewomen must discriminate between necessary interference and being simply a meddler and spoilsport', wrote Sullivan.⁶⁹ What happened if people (adolescents, women, families) resisted this interference? In 1919, a woman, Helen Larom, who worked in a dance hall, was approached by a policewoman who warned her that she might gradually fall into a life of prostitution. She replied, according to the report, 'that we had no right to interfere

culture, Cecilia E. O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton University Press, 1999), pp.227-236.

⁶⁸ Appier, *Policing Women*, pp.3-4.

⁶⁹ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.137.

with her, as it caused her a great deal of annoyance'.⁷⁰ The report seemed to imply that no further police action was taken. But both Hamilton and Sullivan repeatedly remarked that they often had to act as intermediaries between the runaway girl or boy and their families: the main explanation they gave for this phenomenon was actually not lax parenthood (a favorite theme associated with middle-class reformers), but on the contrary the harshness with which parents, especially immigrants, treated their children (Sullivan cites Greek and Italian families).⁷¹ There again class and professional lines influenced the definition of women policing.

Moreover, the shift from a collective approach to an individualized and 'scientific' approach to crime prevention increased the power of female officers. At first, the task of policewomen, as Hamilton pointed out, was mainly to observe groups, in parks, beaches, playgrounds or places of commercial amusements such as dance-halls, moving picture theaters or billiard rooms, to see that moral values were not infringed.⁷² But, according to its director Additon, 'the Crime Prevention Bureau was primarily concerned with 1) helping to secure more adequate treatment for individual juvenile delinquents and wayward minors'. The CPB and its officers were put at the centre of a network of agencies to help individuals to 'readjust' to the community: hospitals, clinics ('used for physical diagnosis and treatment'), schools, public and private social agencies, associations, churches ('every effort was made to reestablish religious connections and to interest the clergy in individual problem children of their parishes').⁷³ As several authors have pointed out, this 'scientific approach', stressing psycho-analytical or environmental factors and the necessity of tackling the problem of 'criminal careers' at their inception heightened social control on 'defective' delinquents, minors or young women in need of 'adjustment.'⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Letter 6 May 1919, from Ellen O'Grady, Fifth Deputy Commissioner, to F. H. Whitin, Committee of Fourteen (Committee of Fourteen Records, Box 13, Folder 'Police-Fifth Deputy Commissioner').

⁷¹ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, pp.266-268; Hamilton, *The Policewoman*, pp.89-102. For a discussion of the 'girl problem' and its roots in family relationships, see Ruth M. Alexander, *The "Girl Problem": Female Sexual Delinquency in New York, 1900-1930* (Cornell University Press, 1995), pp.22-27, 33-66.

⁷² 'Police protection and crime prevention, while reaching individuals in a personal way through the safeguarding of homes and public streets, concentrates upon the crowd or group' (Hamilton, *The Policewoman*, pp.169-170).

⁷³ Additon, 'The Crime Prevention Bureau', p.222 (first quotation), and pp.223-225.

⁷⁴ See Ellen Fitzpatrick, *Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and Progressive Reform* (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.101-114; Rafter, *Creating Born Criminals*, pp.133-231; Alexander, *The Girl Problem*, pp.60-66; Kunzel, *Fallen Women*.

On the other hand, this evolution from a maternalist to a scientific agenda meant that the influence of gender was less crucial in the definition of social work. In the 1930s, when patrolwomen resisted the consolidation of the two titles of *patrolwomen* and *policewomen*, they did so mostly with the language of qualifications and professional standards.⁷⁵ In 1932, Marion Mullen, President of the Patrolwomen's Benevolent Association, wrote a letter to George E. Worthington of the Advisory Committee of Bureau of Crime Prevention:

The rank and grade of patrolwomen was established in accordance with the spirit of specialization pervading every profession and calling existent today.... The tendency of the police department, insofar as the male ranks have been concerned, has been towards specialization. Why should this tendency be departed from in relation to the women's branch of the service? The necessity for specialization in the women's branch was recognized by the State Legislature in 1920, when they created the rank and grade of patrolwomen whose duties were specifically set forth in the charter. The legislative intent, as set forth in the debate attending the passage of this section, clearly shows that the purpose of the Legislature was to obtain better trained women than those performing matron duty in the department.⁷⁶

Since there was no possibility to rise through the ranks in the women's police (they could not take the sergeant's exam and climb the police ladder), the existence of two different titles maintained a hierarchy that gave *patrolwomen* a sense of superiority based on ambition and education. But for *policewomen* with little or no education, the only way to receive recognition from male colleagues and superiors was to do investigative work on criminal cases.

'It takes a woman to catch a man'. If Mary Sullivan defined her mission mainly as social work - 'Much of my work has to do with helping people stay out of jail, rather than putting them in'⁷⁷ - she actually wrote at least as much about the famous arrests she made and the criminal cases she helped to solve. As the annual reports and the newspapers indicate, the second main function of policewomen was to investigate and gather information in order to lead to arrests and offer protection to women. 'The function of a policewoman, according to Mrs. Mary A. Sullivan, administrative head of

⁷⁵ For a discussion on the relationship between professionalism and gender identity, see Cott, 'Professionalism and feminism', *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, ch.7, pp.215-239; Daniel J. Walkowitz, 'The making of a Feminine Professional Identity: Social Workers in the 1920s', (1990) 95(7), *The American Historical Review* 1051-1075, and *Working with Class*.

⁷⁶ Letter 10 March 1932, from Marion Mullen, President of the Patrolwomen's Benevolent Association, to George E. Worthington, Advisory Committee of Bureau of Crime Prevention (Committee of Fourteen Records, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, Box 13, Folder 'Policewomen'). In this respect, patrolwomen adopted the 'Professional Woman' model elaborated by Walkowitz, 'The Making of a Feminine Professional Identity', pp.1069-1072.

⁷⁷ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.19.

the squad under Chief Inspector O'Brien, is to obtain information upon which arrests and prosecutions can be based'.⁷⁸

Assuming this definition of the work of policewomen, Sullivan agreed with Police Commissioner Edward P. Mulrooney in recommending the appointment of younger women. The Commissioner argued:

A large part of the work of the Police Department is criminal investigation. In the women's section of the force such work requires a different and younger type than that now enlisted. Younger women can readily obtain information from criminals where older ones fail.⁷⁹

Indeed this mission seemed to respond to a social demand: many women complained to the mayor about conditions in their neighbourhood. They wrote to complain about their husbands spending family money on drinks, cards or gambling; they complained about prostitutes and disorderly resorts of all kinds. But they did not complain solely about vice, they also complained about serious crimes: thefts, assaults (offences against property or against persons). I have shown in a previous study, based on a sample of letters sent to the mayor between 1910 and 1917, that the proportion of women complaining about vice was not higher than the general proportion of complainants. In this respect the 'woman's sphere' was not visible. Women who wrote were not only middle-class, but also ordinary and sometimes poor women: they wrote as mothers, wives or working girls. Moreover, they wrote that they had previously complained to the local police and that it had no effect on the men who annoyed women on street corners (rowdies). Usually these rowdies went away when they saw the uniform of a policeman.⁸⁰ Sending female officers who worked in plain clothes (female officers did wear uniforms until 1935) to investigate was thus definitely a good idea.⁸¹

If men represented the greatest threat, to put them away women had to be used as decoys. They would walk around the city and try to catch 'mashers' (a euphemism for exhibitionists or men who tried to annoy women in moving picture theatres, or attack women in parks). Another reason to use policewomen was that it was very difficult to

⁷⁸ 'Policewomen Perform Varied Tasks', *The New York Times*, 19 June 1932, section 8, p.9. As early as 1922, the annual report noted: 'Policewomen are an absolute necessity in every modern and progressive police organization, whether they are used to secure evidence in certain kinds of cases or assigned to do welfare work' (*NYPD, Annual Report, 1922*, p.167).

⁷⁹ *The New York Times*, 19 June 1932, section 8, p.9.

⁸⁰ For data and methodology, see Y. Philippe, 'Mais que fait la police', pp.180-187.

⁸¹ On policewomen's uniforms, see *New York Times*, 14 January 1935, p.17.

get girls to testify against male offenders.⁸² They also investigated suspicious advertisements in newspapers used by men to attract young women (the 'most dangerous assignment' Sullivan ever had). Sullivan also investigated prohibition cases and played a major role in interrogations of women criminals and accomplices. She was ultimately a member of the Homicide squad. It is hardly surprising then that Sullivan conveyed a 'sense of police loyalty and police identity' that 'cut across gender boundaries.'⁸³ She worked on a regular basis with male officers and had to rely on them for back-up on dangerous assignments as decoy. At the end of the 1930s, she stated that of the 150 policewomen who were in the women's bureau, almost half of them were 'willing and even eager to undertake dangerous jobs.' Two of them were even used as narcotics undercover investigators.⁸⁴ Given the diversity of the tasks given to female officers in the NYPD, to which extent was their work experience shaped and structured by gender?

3 Was Policing the Extension of Private Correction? Femininity at Work

Police work was a multi-faceted experience in which women displayed an array of attitudes and 'performed' gender in different ways. The most immediate challenge to these policewomen was the definition of their job as socially inappropriate for women. 'You'll see the sordid side of life, no mistake ..., I hope It doesn't make you too unhappy' were, according to Sullivan, the words used by her mother when she announced that she was going to enter the police department.⁸⁵ Looking backward, Sullivan gave an explanation of how she was able to cope with it:

Women endure this part by looking at the ultimate purpose, and by realizing that in facing these unpalatable things, they are offering an important service to the community.... A policewomen's greatest compensation lies in her daily opportunity to do something important and worth while for other people.... Much of my work has to do with helping people stay out of jail, rather than putting them in.⁸⁶

One way to meet the challenge of a new job was for these women to draw on the traditional resources of their gender identity. Sullivan, who was not a representative of the maternalist social reform movement, referred to the sense of dedication and

⁸² Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p. 203; *NYPD, Annual Report, 1921*, p.97.

⁸³ As cited in Jackson, *Gender, Welfare and Surveillance*, p.128.

⁸⁴ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, pp.280 (quotation) and 214-220 (narcotics undercover investigators).

⁸⁵ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.19.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

sacrifice that was supposedly a characteristic of women. Goodwin explained her success as a detective in investigations of fortune tellers and fake healers by characteristics usually classified as 'feminine':

I attribute my success in this work to the fact that I use ordinary common sense. My intuition is strong and I am thus able to size up quickly some little weakness in the fakers Of course, a woman detective must be shrewd and quick in expedients.... More valuable than all is the quality of intuition, the ability to "feel" or sense things for which at first you have no actual proof. I think that the reason why a woman succeeds where a man fails is because she is more strongly endowed with this intuition.⁸⁷

Sullivan also mentioned that her 'feminine judgment' was often useful to detectives of the homicide squad, especially when interrogating women.⁸⁸ A fortiori, Hamilton used traditional gender identities to define the task of women in the police. She characterized instinct as the 'intangible heritage of women'.⁸⁹ She was also the staunchest supporter of the link between private correction and public policing:

Courses at the School of Philanthropy and New York University did much to round out my experience, but that which had the greatest educative value and has aided me most in my present work, is the rearing of a son from babyhood to manhood. To do effective police work, a woman must understand the child's point of view and appreciate the difficulties of adolescence, and who, but a mother has a better opportunity of acquiring this sympathy and understanding?... In many ways the position of a woman in a police department is not unlike of a mother in home.⁹⁰

But both Sullivan and Hamilton were extremely careful, in their books, public speeches and interviews to present the female officers as women of their time - the flapper era - and not as turn-of-the-century reformers. They often described them as modern and even insisted on their good looks. Hamilton went as far as to say that any woman who had to work with young people, especially girls, should look good. And she told the anecdote of a young woman who was much impressed by a policewoman who looked like a movie star and contrasted her with an old policewoman 'who called us all sorts of names... at the beach because we didn't have our stockings on. What does she know about what a girl should wear these days anyway.' Hamilton commented upon the incident by saying these old policewomen were in the minority: 'Most policewomen are modern women who

⁸⁷ *New York Times*, 3 March 1912, SM, p.1.

⁸⁸ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, pp.85-86.

⁸⁹ 'Policewomanhood is such a new profession for women that those who have undertaken it have had to depend largely upon what they have learned from doing other things, common sense and that intangible heritage of women - Instinct', Hamilton, *The Policewoman*, p.ix.

⁹⁰ Hamilton, *The Policewoman*, pp.xii, 4.

accept the modern views of things and work out their problems in both a sympathetic and scientific way.⁹¹

Describing her first experiences as a detective, the investigation of Rosenthal's murder, in which she had to keep company to a gangster's girlfriend, Sullivan wrote:

To a young woman new to the police department, Rosie was a sensational companion. In a day when make-up was still rather questionable, Rosie would take out powder puff and freshen up her face on the street, thus attracting the attention of taxicab drivers and East Side loafers' enthusiasm.⁹²

Hamilton and Sullivan tended to distance themselves from the image of stern moralists and experts that might be associated with the idea of reform and social work. Obviously these statements must be read with a degree of scepticism. Both officers sought to manipulate press coverage and publicly appeared as recruiting agents trying to reach applicants for the police department who could have been repelled in the 1920s and 1930s by too rigid a stance. But they also revealed an understanding of the gender dynamics at work in the 'flapper' era, when the notions of fun and excitement became central.⁹³ As in the UK case studied by Jackson, this was a 'move to repackage the work publicly as a modern professional but "feminine" career'.⁹⁴ According to Sullivan,

[A] day in the life of a policewoman is lively. She may be sent to the Brooklyn Navy Yard to keep a friendly eye on girls who are captivated by a uniform. She may be seen to investigate some "health barker" on Washington Street who pretends to be gathering in models for reputed well-paid jobs in Atlantic City. Or she may be sent to a movie theatre where youngsters are being admitted in defiance of the law'.⁹⁵

Goodwin also mentioned excitement as a characteristic of police work:

As soon as I was appointed I threw myself body and soul into the work. I grew to like it, and, although it has its ups and downs and furnishes as much hard labor as almost any other profession, it has its compensations also, and the excitement always keeps one's interest at the fever point.⁹⁶

Sullivan also presented her attitude toward dancing as opposed to that of reformers:

⁹¹ Hamilton, *The Policewoman*, pp.31-32.

⁹² Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.45.

⁹³ Evans, *Born for Liberty*, pp.175-176.

⁹⁴ Jackson, *Gender, Welfare and Surveillance*, p.49.

⁹⁵ *The New York Times*, 19 June 1932, section 8, p.9. Even in her work of matron, excitement seemed the ultimate goal: 'Usually I was bored, though at times the evenings crackled with unexpected excitement'; *My Double Life*, p 61.

⁹⁶ *New York Times*, 3 March 1912, SM, p.1. Even Hamilton wrote: 'Furthermore the work has in it an element of excitement and change and therein differs from the ordinary routine job a woman so often accepts and remains in because she must work and keep her position once she gets one'; *The Policewoman*, p.34.

It seems to me that reformers choose the wrong things over which to get excited. Twelve years ago, various groups were wrought about a famous dance hall known as St. Nicholas Rink. Three floors in this building were crowded every night with sailors and their girls doing dances that made the apache type look like a minuet.... The acrobatic dancing at St. Nicholas Rink was decried by many reformers who went there accompanied by a policewoman and for some reason had to stay hours and hours to get material for their reports. Personally, I could see little or no harm in it. Young people who spend the evening in such strenuous exercise haven't much ambition left for other forms of mischief. My only fear was that girls being swung around in wide arcs might strike a pillar and be shipwrecked'.⁹⁷

Even more interesting, for Goodwin and Sullivan, part of the excitement of being a policewoman seemed closely connected with the pleasure of beating and outwitting the criminals. This adversarial tone is quite similar to that conveyed by policemen in their autobiographies and denotes their participation in the more general police culture:

(Goodwin) [He] had an elaborate fortune telling establishment and was proficient in all the various 'stunts'. He told me the most ridiculous things about myself, not one of which was true.... He could tell me the most wonderful things about my past and look far into my future - all for \$2 of course - but he couldn't get the slightest inkling from his psychological powers that I was a detective and was after him. This fellow was convicted and how he glared at me when I testified against him in court!

(Sullivan) The expression on his face when he learned the identity of the gullible widow is a memory which I have always cherished. My satisfaction was further increased by a commendation from Deputy Commissioner Dougherty, and early in 1912 came the opportunity I had been waiting for - a temporary assignment to the Detective Bureau.⁹⁸

This excerpt clearly reveals that institutional recognition resulted from Sullivan's ability to perform social identities as an actress. Yet the insistence and pride with which Sullivan depicts in her autobiography her ability to use her appearance and impersonate different characters in order to work undercover and trap criminals is curious.⁹⁹ Here is one example:

As I went over my assignment, I began to realize how much dramatic ability has to do with success as a detective. This is even more true of women than men, for a great part of a woman's detective's consists in playing a role. Her

⁹⁷ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, pp.137-138. Concerning the so-called Jazz Age, she also wrote that she refused 'to take very seriously' 'the revolt of youth'; p.139. She finally mentioned her opposition to Prohibition, seen as a waste of time enforcing an unpopular law, *ibid.*

⁹⁸ *New York Times*, 3 March 1912, SM, p.1; Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.38.

⁹⁹ Appier, for example, seems to refuse to take seriously into account this dimension. She refers somewhat ironically to Sullivan's book and its title and stresses mainly the sensational character of the narrative; *Policing Women* p.106. On the contrary, Jackson notes and takes into account a similar tendency in the recollections of Edith Hoyle, another pioneer policewoman in the UK; *Gender, Welfare and Surveillance*, p.118).

job is usually gathering evidence and to do it she must transform herself into everything from a broken tenement housewife to a rich woman.¹⁰⁰

Sullivan described playing a nurse, a madam looking for prostitutes, a Board of Health Inspector, a jail inmate. Obviously the book was intended as a sensational narrative exploitation of her heroic deeds. But when Rae Nicoletti was used by the Italian squad in the case of a boy kidnapped in 1921 by a black hand gang (as she spoke the Naples dialect, she posed a family member), the *New York Times* described her role precisely in terms of performance: 'Mrs. Nicoletti was selected to pose as a cousin of the Verottas' (the family of the child murdered)'.¹⁰¹

Obviously this performance was rooted in the conventional repertoire of femininity:

How a policewoman fried eggs in the Varotta home to throw an atmosphere of domesticity about her was told by Mrs. Rae Nicoletti in describing her manhunt for the slayers of five-year old Giuseppe Varotta, when she took the stand at the trial of Antonio Marino.¹⁰²

These examples show that at a time when policing was still a gender-based occupation, the main professional asset of policewomen resided precisely in the fact that they did not fit the stereotype of a male police officer (not mentioning detectives). Thus they were not suspected by criminals to 'be police'. Femininity itself was, to use Jackson and Juliette Pattinson's phrase, the 'best disguise'.¹⁰³ Michael Fiaschetti, a former commanding officer of the Italian Squad, explicitly justified his decision to send Nicoletti undercover in the Varotta Case in precisely those terms:

I put a policewoman in the Varotta flat, a clever Italian girl. She was represented as a cousin who was visiting the family. A woman would not mean 'copper' to the kidnapers.¹⁰⁴

This gender advantage was clearly linked to the minority status of female officers. But it meant that if they did not want to be confined to social work, the best way to carry out investigative work and integrate the dominant police culture was to perform different social identities and use their body accordingly. Though not strictly identical, this approach of gender as a performance was obviously influenced by the work of

¹⁰⁰ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, pp.35-36.

¹⁰¹ *New York Times*, 1 May 1923, p.1.

¹⁰² *New York Times*, 16 June 1922, p.15.

¹⁰³ Jackson, *Gender, Welfare and Surveillance*, pp.113-114. 'The mask of womanliness enabled the female detective to conceal her police identity and relationship to authority'; Juliette Pattinson, *Behind enemy lines: Gender, passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War*, (Manchester University Press, 2007), ch.6, 'The best disguise': performing femininities for clandestine purposes', pp.136-155.

¹⁰⁴ Fiaschetti, *You Gotta Be Tough*, p.237.

Judith Butler.¹⁰⁵ As Pattinson has noted, Butler's 'performance' is useful to analyse the emphasis placed on acting in testimonies.¹⁰⁶

Sullivan's testimony reveals how working as a decoy often required a deliberate and conscious performance. Referring to her work in Harlem and the necessity to disguise, she stressed the specific constraints on female officers:

Since all my work was done in the same district and most of the cases were heard in the same court, it became increasingly difficult to disguise myself. In addition to a large number of cheap evening dresses, I bought a black transformation. I also got some wide-brimmed hats, which I generally wore pulled over my face. The men detectives, who seldom have to disguise themselves elaborately, didn't realize the extent of my problem and thought that all I needed to change my appearance was a pair of glasses.¹⁰⁷

But Sullivan conveyed all over her autobiography the pleasure - even sometimes a feeling of elation - she took in playing these roles:

I studied the local types who came up to court and tried mimicking foreign accents. Without realizing it, I was becoming a fairly proficient actress. All the while I was leading a double life.... But although the social services features of my job have appealed to me, I must admit that the work has been fascinating for its own sake. I've enjoyed the excitement, the danger, and the business of watching wits with the criminal element. I've found few things in the world more thrilling than the moment of revealing myself to a trapped and started crook as a women detective.¹⁰⁸

In this respect, she insisted on the different costumes she chose for her undercover cases and made no secret that part of her success as an 'impromptu actress' was linked to her ability to choose the right outfit or the right hair style.¹⁰⁹ And once she

¹⁰⁵ 'Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.... As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation', *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: New York, 1990), p.140.

¹⁰⁶ 'Gender identities, according to Butler, do not pre-exist practices of femininity and masculinity but emerge from performances that conceal their constitutiveness. Gender is, then, a series of acts, rather than an attribute: a 'doing' rather than a 'being'. The act of 'doing gender' has become so routine, so thoroughly unexceptional and mundane, that it is taken for granted, like stopping for a red traffic light. Butler also introduced the notion of 'performance' which, in contrast to 'performativity', is a one-off event which is intentionally undertaken Not only does drag suggest that femininity can be mimicked by men and masculinity by women, it reveals that women also imitate femininity and men masculinity and that it requires work to accomplish (appropriate) femininity and masculinity'; *Behind enemy lines*, pp.16-17).

¹⁰⁷ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, p.65.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid pp.65, 302.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid pp.36, 56, 70. One of the reasons given by Goodwin for her success as detective was the following: 'I never overdress the part, and when necessary I assume simple disguises' *New York Times*, 3 March 1912, SM, p.1

rose to be Director of the Women's Bureau, she still conceived women policing in term of acting performances:

I have all types women in the bureau, ranging from blondes who can look very dizzy if they wish, to white-haired, motherly souls who no one would ever dream of identifying as detectives. In apportioning the work, I must bear in mind the characteristics and abilities of a hundred and fifty women.... Sometimes, as I try to give each officer the part she can manage best, I imagine myself a Hollywood casting director trying to find suitable roles for a widely assorted group of actresses.¹¹⁰

Gender was something that could be played up or down in the police department (just as policewomen could 'dress up' or 'down' when they worked as decoys). To integrate the male-dominated culture of the NYPD, policewomen had to downplay their feminine identity and adapt to the military-like 'esprit-de-corps'. To fulfill their social service duties, they were expected to act according to their dominant identity, i.e. as mothers, but increasingly defined themselves as professionals. Finally to carry out investigative work, they performed a large range of social types, which occasionally included an expressive display of femininity.

Conclusion

The 'identities of women officers were fluid and complex and ... they cannot be reduced to the dominance of either middle-class values or gender or occupational culture. Rather women officers were involved in a constant negotiation of the relationship between "self" and "others" as perceptions were challenged, negotiated and adapted as well as reinforced'.¹¹¹ This statement made by Jackson concerning the UK case could, to a considerable extent, apply to New York City. The policewomen of the 1920s and 1930s were not of course the forerunners of the policewomen who fought for equality in the 1950s and 1960s. Their everyday work environment may be difficult to document, but it was probably severely constrained, and they clearly suffered from sex discrimination. However, they were not necessarily excluded from or at the margins of the police profession. Some of them even participated in the police culture. Women policing, shaped by class, gender, professional culture and personal initiative, at times allowed a form of individual or group agency, and the possibility to act in a variety of ways.

¹¹⁰ Sullivan, *My Double Life*, pp.280-281.

¹¹¹ Jackson, *Gender, Welfare and Surveillance*, p.133.