

Vice Queens and White Slaves: The FBI's Crackdown on Elite Brothel Madams in 1930s New York City

JESSICA PLILEY
Texas State University, San Marcos

IN THE WAKE OF THE FBI'S ATTACK on organized prostitution operating out of exclusive call houses in the late 1930s, which, according to J. Edgar Hoover, "had revealed that powerful vice rings operate in almost every large city in the country," a sex worker named Linda Robertson from Minneapolis wrote a letter to the bureau chief defending her right to engage in prostitution.¹ Proclaiming herself to be "a common prostitute. Clean, healthy, in fine physical condition," she pointed to her educational background, her ability to rationally choose prostitution in a sex-segregated job market, and the fact that her employers looked after her interests as evidence that she provided a service "necessary to our social structure." Of her customers, she had this to say: "Lawyers, Priests, business-men, social lions, scions of pioneer families, city and state official and officers of the Law form the bulk of our customers. They demand superior girls and they get them." She concluded her note by signing off: "So in the future wouldn't it be more sportsmanlike to leave us to our devices and let those who actually think they have cause arrest us?"² Robertson believed the FBI's crackdown on elite call houses to be hopelessly naive, needlessly interventionist, and perhaps hypocritical in that it criminalized what Robertson believed to be a victimless crime; it targeted only the upper echelons of the commercial sex market, which catered exclusively to the wealthy and well-connected customers, like the ones that Robertson described.

Though Hoover suspected the letter might be a hoax, he still shared it with Courtney Ryley Cooper, a well-known journalist of true crime articles

¹ Hoover quoted in "'G' Men Plan Drive on Vice—Hope to Purge Nation of White Slavers, Racketeers and Gamblers," *Milwaukee Journal*, 8 February 1936.

² Linda J. Robertson to J. Edgar Hoover, in J. Edgar Hoover, Memorandum for the Attorney General, 19 November 1937, White Slavery, RG 60 Records of the Department of Justice, entry 132, box 67, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

and books who served informally as a publicist for the FBI by working closely with Hoover. From 1933 to 1942 Cooper collaborated with Hoover to polish the public image of the FBI; he operated as “Hoover’s most important ghostwriter of the 1930s” while also publishing books and articles celebrating the work of the FBI under his own name.³ Cooper reprinted the most sensational parts of the letter as the opening vignette in his 1939 exposé of prostitution, *Designs in Scarlet*. In that vignette, Cooper recalled what Hoover had said when he handed over the letter: “[Note] the viewpoint. The idea that a well-educated, apparently otherwise decent girl may look upon prostitution as an envied profession.”⁴ Hoover believed that it was the FBI’s responsibility to protect silly girls like Linda Robertson from the venal people who profited from their degradation. In providing Cooper with this letter, Hoover was mounting a defense against those accusing him of unsportsmanlike, or overly interfering, tactics in his antivice campaigns.

The FBI began investigating call house prostitution in the fall of 1935, and Hoover announced a nationwide attack on vice rings—criminal networks devoted to profiting off of prostitution—in February 1936. For the remainder of that year newspapers across the country routinely published articles about the G-men’s daring exploits against organized vice and their targeting of the madams—frequently called “vice queens”—who profited from New York City’s sex marketplace. Sensational headlines abounded: “Blonde Indicted as White Slaver,” “Bad News for Vice Queen,” and “Women Unfold Sordid Story in Slave Case.”⁵ In the FBI’s telling, Hoover’s FBI sought to protect the hearts of innocent, naive, white girls from the machinations of madams consumed with greed, ambition, and perversity. According to Hoover, these madams were particularly dangerous because they acted as procurers, “inducing the victims to transport themselves interstate” and violating the federal White Slave Traffic Act, commonly known as the Mann Act.⁶

Hoover’s embrace of publicity and public relations tactics during this campaign was an unprecedented effort to remake the FBI into a popular culture product. The public relations narrative of the FBI emphasized, in the words of historian Matthew Cecil, “a story of responsibility, science, and leadership, themes that, not coincidentally, undermined critics’ concerns about unchecked federal power.”⁷ In this effort to solidify the

³ Matthew Cecil, *Hoover’s FBI and the Fourth Estate: The Campaign to Control the Press and the Bureau’s Image* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 64, 63–74.

⁴ Courtney Ryley Cooper, *Designs in Scarlet* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), 4–5.

⁵ “Blonde Indicted as White Slaver,” *New York Daily Mirror*, 7 March 1936; “Bad News for Vice Queen,” *Washington Herald*, 25 September 1937; and “Women Unfold Sordid Story in Slave Case,” *Miami Daily News*, 24 November 1936.

⁶ “White Slave Traffic Gains: Hoover Asks Public Aid in Drive to Wipe Out Violations,” *Boston Evening Recorder*, 17 August 1936.

⁷ Cecil, *Hoover’s FBI*, 59.

bureau's image, Hoover encouraged certain earlier myths, tropes, and narratives about prostitution.⁸ This narrative—protecting the virtue of young women—could only work by resuscitating older tropes of white slavery that assumed prostitutes to be exploited sex slaves with little ability to rationally choose sex work. It highlighted the vulnerability of young women living without familial support amidst the economic chaos of the Depression, pointing out how easily they could drift into prostitution or be preyed upon by vice queens. Hoover's campaign and the publicity that accompanied it positioned the FBI as the protector of young women, morality, and public order. FBI rhetoric accentuated the naïveté of the young women, women like Linda Robertson, while dramatizing the social and sexual perversity of the vice queens. The FBI concentrated on these “high priestess[es] of the vice racket” because their position as exploiters of other women—as profiteers who sold, in the words of one journalist, the “virtue of young women”—marked them as particularly deviant.⁹ Collectively, they defied conventions of universal sisterhood and inverted ideals of womanly goodness, upending prevailing gender norms in particularly garish ways. Anxieties about class and economic instability propelled the campaign, yet these resurrected tropes of white slavery obscured the very real class privilege of wealthy men to purchase sex anonymously. This article explores the class and gender dynamics of the FBI's campaign against the vice queens to demonstrate that J. Edgar Hoover drew upon the rhetorical power and collective memory of the Progressive Era white slavery panic to justify increasing federal intervention as part of his War on Crime and to reinforce the FBI's public image as a heroic force for morality.

THE WHITE SLAVE TRAFFIC ACT: ORIGINS AND ENFORCEMENT

From 1907 to 1914 Americans encountered a near steady stream of stories about white slavery, which proliferated in sensational newspaper reports, in muckrakers' exposés, at movie theaters, in churches, and at public lectures. These stories proclaimed that thousands of young women were trapped in America's brothels. Edwin W. Sims, a prominent antivice activist in Chicago, declared in 1910 that “literally thousands of innocent girls from the country districts are every year entrapped into a life of hopeless slavery and degradation . . . [by] ‘white slave’ traders who have reduced the art of ruining young girls to a national and international system.”¹⁰ Together these stories asserted that pimps, procurers, and brothel madams preyed

⁸ Claire Bond Potter, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men, and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

⁹ “Queen of the Under World: Secrets of the ‘G-Men,’” *People* (London), 27 February 1938.

¹⁰ Edwin W. Sims, “The White Slave Trade of Today,” in *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls or War on the White Slave Trade*, ed. Ernest A. Bell (New York: Nichols, 1910), 47–60, 48.

on young women by plying them with drink and drugs, exploiting their economic desperation, and keeping them bound in systems of debt bondage. In the most sensationalistic accounts, women were said to be regularly kidnapped and enslaved.¹¹

The victims in these tales shared a common vulnerability: they were invariably disconnected from traditional male-headed family structures. Through either migration or wage work, the victims were described as young women alone in a city filled with sexual danger. After conducting an investigation into white slavery in Chicago while serving as US district attorney, Sims declared: "If I lived in the country and had a young daughter I would go to any length of hardship and privation myself rather than allow her to go into the city to work or to study. . . . The best and surest way for parents of girls in the country to protect them from the clutches of the 'white slaver' is to keep them [at home] in the country."¹² The exploited girl's innocence, which gave these tales their moral salience, was described as both physical (her virginity) and mental (her naïveté). White slavery narratives also constructed innocence along racial lines; victims were invariably white.

White slavery narratives functioned to maintain racial boundaries in a number of ways. Because the victims were constructed as exclusively white, the narrative functioned to erase the sexual exploitation of black women under chattel slavery; innocence was racialized as racist commentators assumed that African American girls matured more quickly and had a natural

¹¹ On anti-white slavery activism, see Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870–1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982); David J. Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene: Women, Prostitution, and the "American Plan," 1900–1930* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002); Petra De Vries, "'White Slaves' in a Colonial Nation: The Dutch Campaign against the Traffic in Women in the Early Twentieth Century," *Social Legal Studies* 14, no. 1 (March 2005): 39–60; and Francesco Cordasco and Thomas Monroe Pitkin, *The White Slave Trade and the Immigrants: A Chapter in American Social History* (Detroit: Blaine Ethridge Books, 1981). On narratives of white slavery, see Brian Donovan, *White Slave Crusades: Race, Gender, and Anti-vice Activism, 1887–1917* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Frederick K. Grittner, *White Slavery: Myth, Ideology and American Law* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990); and Margit Stange, *Personal Property: Wives, White Slaves, and the Market in Women* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). On the relationship between prostitution and white slavery in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Egal Feldman, "Prostitution, the Alien Woman and the Progressive Imagination, 1910–1915," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1967): 192–206; Robert E. Riegel, "Changing American Attitudes toward Prostitution (1800–1920)," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29, no. 3 (July–September 1968): 437–52; Mark Thomas Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982); Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987); and Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City Prostitution and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

¹² Edwin W. Sims, "Menace of the White Slave Traffic," in *The War on the White Slave Trade*, ed. Ernest Bell (Chicago: Charles C. Thompson Company, 1909), 70–71.

lasciviousness that precluded them from really ever being innocent.¹³ Yet at the same time, as Brian Donovan notes, “the white slavery narrative worked to police the sexual practices of both racial insiders and outsiders” by rendering the pimp or procurer—the immediate source of sexual danger—as either an immigrant or a nonwhite man.¹⁴ Echoing European stories of white slavery, muckraker George Kibbe Turner argued that Russian Jews controlled white slavery in New York City.¹⁵ Ernest Bell, one of the most widely read antivice writers, claimed that forced prostitution was fundamentally a foreign practice imported to the United States by immigrants. Similarly and in typically lurid prose, Jean Turner Zimmerman wrote that white slavery was not an Anglo-Saxon practice but was “carried on and exploited by a foaming pack of foreign hellhounds, . . . the moral and civic degenerates of the French, Italian, Syrian, Russian, Jewish or Chinese races. . . . [A]n American or Englishman conducting such a business is almost entirely unknown.”¹⁶ Such arguments simply assumed Americans to be racially white, and antivice reformers consistently argued that nonwhites ran the business of white slavery for their own profit.

Outrage over forced prostitution reached a fevered pitch in the first decade of the century, forcing federal, state, and municipal authorities to respond. In 1910 Congress passed the White Slave Traffic Act in response to fears that sex traffickers were transporting unwilling sex workers across state and international borders. The law made it illegal to cause, induce, or facilitate the crossing of a state line by a woman or girl for the purposes of prostitution, debauchery, or “any other immoral purpose.” Twenty states had white slave laws before the Mann Act passed, and an additional twenty-five states would pass similar legislation between 1910 and 1916 (only South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi failed to do so). Moral reformers also pushed states to pass laws to eliminate brothels (through either laws against keeping disorderly houses or injunction and abatement

¹³ Sander Gillman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature,” in *“Race,” Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Meta-language of Race,” *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992): 256–58; Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969); Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 18.

¹⁴ Donovan, *White Slave Crusades*, 107.

¹⁵ George Kibbe Turner, “The Daughters of the Poor: A Plain Story of the Development of New York City as the Leading Center of the White Slave Traffic Trade of the World,” *McClure’s Magazine* 34 (November 1909): 45–61, 47; Nancy M. Wingfield, “Destination: Alexandria, Buenos Aires, Constantinople: ‘White Slavers’ in Late Imperial Austria,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 2 (May 2011): 291–311; Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 17–26; and Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*.

¹⁶ Quoted in Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 118.

laws to close a brothel that had become a public nuisance) and to raise the age of consent and track venereal diseases.¹⁷ Meanwhile, forty-three cities launched vice investigations to explore the prevalence of prostitution and white slavery within their city limits, resulting in various efforts to eradicate public prostitution.¹⁸ Taken together, statutory innovations motivated by efforts to prohibit the sexual exploitation of women represented a legal revolution in the policing of sexuality.

Though antvice activists could celebrate extraordinary successes in suppressing publicly tolerated prostitution during the Progressive Era, with 116 public vice districts closing during World War I, white slavery as an animating political issue had a relatively short life span.¹⁹ Some commentators, like Teresa Billington-Greig, an English woman whose writing was widely read and commented on in the United States, cast doubt on the veracity of white slavery tales, noting that they tended to be vague, sensationalistic, and hyperbolic. More problematic for some social workers was that activists against white slavery tended to assume that all white sex workers were white slaves forced into sex work, thereby simplifying what was in fact a complex social problem.²⁰ By 1916 the *New York Times* began to argue that white slavery had been nothing but a myth perpetuated by moral reform forces and that anti-white slavery laws did more harm than good because they provided a convenient tool for blackmailers.²¹

The FBI initially conceived the White Slave Traffic Act as an antiprostitution measure and aggressively enforced it in the 1910s. But after a 1917 Supreme Court decision ruled that the clause concerning “any other immoral purpose” could apply to a wide range of heterosexual misbehavior, including nearly all nonconjugal sex, the FBI broadened the types of cases it investigated; attention to domestic relationships grew, while the policing

¹⁷ Joseph Mayer, *The Regulation of Commercialized Vice: An Analysis of the Transition from Segregation to Repression in the United States* (New York: Klebold Press, 1922), 29; Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 211; and Peter C. Hennigan, “Property War: Prostitution, Red-Light Districts, and the Transformation of Public Nuisance Law in the Progressive Era,” *Tale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 16, no. 123 (2004): 123–98.

¹⁸ Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 14.

¹⁹ Edward M. Coffman, *The War to End All Wars: The American Military Experience in World War I* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1998), 80; Hennigan, “Property War”; Thomas C. Mackey, *Red Lights Out: A Legal History of Prostitution, Disorderly Houses, and Vice Districts, 1870–1917* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987). For works on the Progressive Era and prostitution, see footnote 13.

²⁰ Connelly, *The Response to Prostitution*, 129–132.

²¹ Jessica R. Piley, *Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 112–18; David J. Langum, *Crossing Over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 77–96; Angus McLaren, *Sexual Blackmail: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 88; “Government Aid to Blackmailers,” *New York Times*, 14 January 1916; “The Blackmail Act,” *New York Times*, 20 September 1916, 8; William J. Burns, “Blackmailing Now the Big American Crime,” *New York Times*, 23 July 1916, SM9.

of prostitution fell in priority.²² Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s the FBI continued to investigate Mann Act cases—as many as 47,500 from 1921 to 1936—but cases of sexual slavery more or less disappeared from the popular imagination and public discussions.²³ Even the term *white slavery* fell out of use during World War I. By 1910 feminists active in the international anti-white slavery movement began arguing for a change in terminology because they feared the term *white slave* could be perceived as too exclusive and was not at all accurate to what the movement was attempting to do, that is, protect all women regardless of race.²⁴ Certainly some anti-white slavery organizations operating on the international level, like the International Bureau for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic, were only interested in white women (usually their national compatriots), while those most active in transnational groups, like members of the International Abolitionist Federation, shied away from discussing prostitution in this type of racialized way by the mid-1910s. By 1921 the phrase “the traffic in women and children” emerged as preferable to white slavery because it was seen as more precise.²⁵ In spite of the ongoing international attention paid to sex trafficking, the hysteria and sensationalism that had surrounded discussions of white slavery in the 1910s largely fell quiet within the new sexual order of the 1920s.²⁶

A revolution in attitudes toward sexuality that had been blossoming since the turn of the century became fully matured by the 1920s. The new phase of sexual liberalism was characterized by the separation of procreative function from recreational sexual pleasure, a celebration of sexual desire and pleasure as healthy for both men and women, and a tolerance for youthful sexual experimentation. This sexual modernity was embodied in the ideal

²² A vast majority of cases prior to 1917 dealt with prostitution. Perusing the sample of over a thousand Mann Act cases in my possession, in 1924 73.6 percent of cases were noncommercial and 26.3 percent were prostitution cases; in 1927 81.6 percent of cases were noncommercial cases and 18.3 percent were prostitution cases; and in 1932 61.5 percent were noncommercial and 38.4 percent were prostitution. On the legislative and legal history of the Mann Act, see Pliley, *Policing Sexuality*, 264; Pamela Haag, *Consent: Sexual Rights and the Transformation of American Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Langum, *Crossing Over the Line*; and Ariela R. Dubler, “Immoral Purposes: Marriage and the Genus of Illicit Sex,” *Yale Law Journal* 115 (January 2006): 756–812.

²³ J. Edgar Hoover quoted in “White Slave Traffic Gains: Hoover Asks Public Aid in Drive to Wipe Out Violations,” *Boston Evening Recorder*, 17 August 1936.

²⁴ Karen Offen, “Madam Ghénia Avril de Sainte-Croix, the Josephine Butler of France,” *Women's History Review* 17, no. 2 (April 2008): 239–55.

²⁵ For more on feminists in the international white slavery movement, see Jessica Pliley, “Claims to Protection: The Rise and Fall of Feminist Abolitionism in the League of Nations’ Committee on the Traffic in Women and Children, 1919–1937,” *Journal of Women's History*, Winter 2010, 90–113; and Stephanie A. Limoncelli, *The Politics of Trafficking: The First International Movement to Combat the Sexual Exploitation of Women* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

²⁶ The phrase “new sexual order” comes from John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 169.

of the companionate marriage, which dictated that the healthiest marriages were built upon a foundation of affection, compatibility, and mutuality.²⁷ This public reorientation of marriage and heterosexuality quelled earlier anxieties about the prevalence of prostitution and its negative social impact, which evaporated from public discourse.²⁸ Hoover's campaign to publicize the importance of the FBI in a "War on Crime" put an end to this silence. Through feature films, close cooperation with hand-picked and vetted publicist-journalists, and carefully orchestrated photo ops and press conferences, Hoover reintroduced a highly gendered reading of the Mann Act and revived the language of white slavery. He particularly targeted madams of elite New York City call houses, whom he accused of contributing to the delinquency of minors by promising great wealth for sex work.²⁹

THE GREAT DEPRESSION, GENDER ROLES, AND PROSTITUTION

The Great Depression of the 1930s ushered in a phase of increasing concern about how the worsening economic climate would lead to rising rates of prostitution.³⁰ The economic devastation of the Depression caused many to worry that high levels of male unemployment would undermine and disrupt traditional gender roles. The Great Depression produced a crisis in American manhood as unemployed men could no longer fulfill their roles as the family breadwinner, leading to emasculation and the potential loss

²⁷ Ibid., 241; Christina Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 3.

²⁸ Hornell Hart, "Changing Social Attitudes and Interests," in *Recent Social Trends in the United States*, by the President's Research Committee on Social Trends (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1933), 414.

²⁹ For examples of motion pictures that featured G-men, see Warner Bros.' *G-Men* (1935), MGM's *Public Hero #1* (1935), Twentieth Century Pictures' *Show Them No Mercy!* (1935), and many others. Bob Herzberg, *The FBI at the Movies: A History of the Bureau on Screen and behind the Scenes in Hollywood* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2007). Hoover engaged the services of several journalists who operated more as FBI publicists. For example, Courtney Ryler Cooper wrote twenty-four color stories about the FBI for *American Magazine* from 1933 to 1940, as well as 1934's *Farewell, Mr. Gangster!*, 1935's *Ten Thousand Public Enemies*, 1937's *Here's to Crime*, and 1939's *Designs in Scarlet*. Other publicist-journalists included Rex Collier and Walter Winchell. Athan G. Theoharis and John Stuart Cox, *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 119.

³⁰ Elizabeth Clement argues that Prohibition led to a bifurcation of the sex industry—legal dance halls, movie houses, and burlesque theaters that only served soda, on the one hand, and speakeasies visited by prostitutes and madams operating outside the law, on the other hand. But both sides of the New York City sex industry saw repeated crackdowns during the 1930s. See Elizabeth Alice Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 178–211; and Andrea Friedman, "The Habitats of Sex-Crazed Perverts": Campaigns against Burlesque in Depression-Era New York City," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 2 (October 1996): 203–38.

of familial authority.³¹ As chronicler Frederick Lewis Allen reported, "Mrs. Jones, who went daily to her stenographic job, was now the economic mainstay of her family, for Mr. Jones was jobless and was doing the cooking and looking after the children (with singular distaste and inefficiency)."³² The Depression cast traditional gender roles into a topsy-turvy imbalance that, to many onlookers, threatened to undermine the stability of American families. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies attempted to shore up a conventional family structure characterized by the male-breadwinner/dependent-wife model; it offered work relief primarily to men, wrote women's dependency into the system of social security, and, with the exception of a few programs spearheaded by Eleanor Roosevelt, ignored the fate of unemployed single women.³³

Homeless women were particularly invisible during the Depression because of the way that work was gendered as male and women were routinely associated with the family.³⁴ As historian Elaine S. Abelson has noted, when journalists did discuss homeless women, they were invariably white, and they were "cast into a conventional narrative framework: young, single, female in peril."³⁵ Older notions of women's innate dependency suggested that women who lacked familial support could only survive by turning toward prostitution.³⁶ In times of deprivation, their natural dependency could lead to depravity.

The concern that lone white women would turn to prostitution hid just beneath the surface of newspaper reports about homeless women during

³¹ Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 59–60; Margaret Hobbs, "Rethinking Antifeminism in the 1930s: Gender Crisis or Workplace Justice? A Response to Alice Kessler-Harris," *Gender & History* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 4–15, 7; Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 96; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 254–55, 260.

³² Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The 1930s in America* (1939; New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 48.

³³ The literature on the gendered nature of the welfare state in the United States is vast. See Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Gwendolyn Mink, *The Wages of Motherhood: Inequality in the Welfare State, 1917–1942* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Linda Gordon, *Women, the State, and Welfare* (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

³⁴ Elaine S. Abelson, "Women Who Have No Men Work for Them': Gender and Homelessness in the Great Depression, 1930–1934," *Feminist Studies* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 104–27, 117.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁶ For more on women as dependent beings, see Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Key Word of the US Welfare State," *Signs* 19, no. 2 (1994): 309–36; Martha Gardiner, *The Qualities of a Citizen: Women, Immigration, and Citizenship, 1870–1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 87–100; and Barbara Welke Young, *Law and the Borders of Belonging in the Long Nineteenth Century United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

this period. In 1932 Florence Dean of the Salvation Army told the *New York Times*: "It is a terrible thing to contemplate what might happen to these girls and women if they could not secure shelter from the [Salvation] Army. . . . If we can't get the money to continue I suppose we will have to start turning these women out into the streets."³⁷ When a *Times* reporter interviewed social workers in thirteen cities for an article about what aid was available to the lone woman, only one Atlanta-based social worker admitted that some young women were "turning to vice as a means of livelihood." But all of the individuals the reporter spoke to expressed a sense of bewilderment about how vulnerable lone women survived without family support.³⁸ Similarly, noted leftist journalist Meridel Le Sueur observed, "It is one of the great mysteries of the city where women go when they are out of work and hungry." She offered the following vignette to capture the desperation of unemployed women: It starts in a crowded and demoralized employment bureau office as one young woman walks out without having obtained a job. "'I guess she'll go on the street now,' a thin woman says faintly, and no one takes the trouble to comment further. Like every commodity now the body is difficult to sell and girls say you are lucky to get fifty cents. It is very difficult and humiliating to sell one's body."³⁹ This one story poignantly weaves together the themes of the street, unemployment, and femaleness to explain how women fall into prostitution. In a similarly haunting essay, "The Slave Market," journalists Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke noted the same constellation of economic desperation, the street, and gender, though they added the category of race to their analysis. They described how black women gathered on a street in the Bronx, hoping to acquire employment for the day as domestic servants, but that only the luckiest few got hired from these "slave markets." Hinting that prostitution then became these black women's only option, Baker and Cooke speculate: "If not the [white] wives themselves, maybe their husbands, their sons, or their brothers, under the subterfuge of work, [will] offer worldly-wise girls higher bids for their time."⁴⁰ Meridel Le Sueur, Ella Baker, and Marvel Cooke were particularly prominent in New York City's vibrant leftist communities during the 1930s, and all were blunt in their insistence that if women could not sell their labor, they would be driven to sell sex.⁴¹

These concerns were not new. Social purity activists like Kate C. Bushnell had asserted the connection between female economic vulnerability and moral

³⁷ "Destitute Women on Increase Here," *New York Times*, 15 June 1932, 21.

³⁸ "Unemployed Women Becoming a Serious Problem Which Many Cities Are Having Difficulty Solving," *New York Times*, 25 December 1932, E6.

³⁹ Meridel Le Sueur, "Women on the Breadlines," *New Masses*, January 1932, reprinted in *Women on the Breadlines* (Cambridge, MA: West End Press, 1977), 2–3.

⁴⁰ Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, "The Slave Market," *Crisis* 42 (November 1935): 330–31.

⁴¹ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 77–80.

vulnerability since the 1880s.⁴² The dire economic climate of the Depression revived these fears, and social hygienists contended that the population of prostitutes would swell due to the Great Depression.⁴³ Virginia Murray, the director of the New York Travelers' Aid Society, argued that many lone women, "finding themselves out of work and unable to get work . . . might more easily drift into prostitution than normal times," while Charles Gordon Heyd, of the New York Medical Society, declared, "Vice, prostitution, and other evils result from unemployment, for unemployment represents an increasing struggle and competition for place and remuneration."⁴⁴ The Oregon Social Hygiene Association seemed to confirm these assessments when it reported in 1934 that "vice conditions, through recent years, have steadily become more alarming," and "the heart of our city [Portland] is honeycombed" with brothels.⁴⁵ In St. Louis, reform-minded women like Julia Carnes believed that unemployed couples would fall "prey to gambling, stealing, and prostitution." To prevent the poor from falling prey to this fate, these civically minded women launched a social hygiene-based antiprostitution campaign.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, New York City's Committee of Fourteen, an antiprostitution organization dating back to 1905, echoed the language of Baker and Cooke's report by reporting that "investigations of the New York 'girl market' disclosed tonight that commercialized vice in the metropolitan area is greater in volume and more brazenly open than at any time in the last fifteen years."⁴⁷

In addition to increasing the number of women entering sex work, the Depression put downward pressure on the price of individual sex acts. New York City's Committee of Fourteen revealed that the common price for vaginal sex in 1928 in New York City had been fifteen dollars, according

⁴² For an example, see Kate C. Bushnell, "Working in Northern Wisconsin," *W.C.T.U. State Work* (Madison, WI), 1 November 1888.

⁴³ The relationship between the social purity movement and social hygiene movement in the United States was convoluted and at times competitive. By the 1930s the social hygienists had emerged triumphant, as public health arguments gained credence over merely moral arguments, though the line between the two was easily blurred. See Pivar, *Purity and Hygiene*; Kristin Luker, "Sex, Social Hygiene, and the State: The Double-Edged Sword of Social Reform," *Theory and Society* 27, no. 5 (October 1998): 601–34; and John C. Burnham, "The Progressive Era Revolution in Attitudes towards Sex," *Journal of American History* 59, no. 4 (March 1973): 885–908.

⁴⁴ Virginia Murray, "The Relation of Prostitution to Economic Conditions," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 18, no. 6 (June 1932): 314–23, 315; Charles Gordon Heyd, "Social Hygiene and Unemployment: From the Medical Point of View," *Journal of Social Hygiene* 18, no. 6 (June 1932): 323–40, 323–24.

⁴⁵ "Annual Report for the Oregon Social Hygiene Society—1934," folder 4, Minutes [1934–38], box 1, Oregon Social Hygiene Society Records, MSS 1541, Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland, Oregon.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Jamie Schmidt Wagman, "Women Reformers Respond during the Depression: Battling St. Louis's Disease and Immorality," *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 5 (July 2009): 698–717, 702.

⁴⁷ "Commercial Vice Declared at Peak," *Washington Post*, 20 July 1931, 3.

to an interview with a cab driver; but by 1931 oral and vaginal sex could be purchased for as little as five dollars.⁴⁸ A study of prostitution conducted in Portland, Oregon, in December 1932 found that though most brothel owners felt that they were “doing well,” the prices they could charge for each sex act had dropped precipitously. One brothel madam told the investigator, “Of course we used to get more money around here. I used to get \$5 for the girls, then I got \$3, and now they’ve got to take \$2. Occasionally, a fellow has only \$1.50, so we take him, too.”⁴⁹ By 1936 a New York City madam reported a similar slide in prices, telling a *Time* magazine reporter that “her rates had come down from \$3 to \$1.50. ‘That,’ she explained, ‘was because of the Depression.’”⁵⁰

Adding to the concern about a rise in prostitution were stories about New York City police officers involved in corruption and graft related to prostitution. The 1930 Seabury investigation revealed that police used prostitution charges to extort women’s savings from them. Many of the women targeted by the police had respectable reputations and claimed that they had never engaged in prostitution.⁵¹ “Perhaps if they [the police] had confined themselves to shaking down people like me, who were violating the law,” commented notorious New York City madam Polly Adler, “public indignation would not have risen to such a pitch.”⁵² Journalists eagerly reported the revelations of the Seabury investigation in newspapers and magazines throughout the country, as Seabury interviewed over three thousand witnesses in public hearings. The revelations of such widespread police corruption, which reached from the mayor’s office to organized crime rackets to the Women’s Court, led some journalists to wonder if the police were nothing more than a uniformed and more organized version of the gangsters they supposedly opposed but were revealed to cooperate with.⁵³ The Seabury investigation contributed to pervasive anxieties about a rise in lawlessness during the 1930s.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ See reports from 2 October 1928, folder: Go-Betweens, box 35, 1927–30; and 9 May 1931 and 30 September 1931, folder: 1931 House of Prostitution, box 35, Committee of Fourteen Records, New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York City.

⁴⁹ “Commercialized Prostitution, Dec. 4–5, 1932,” p. 3, and H9–H10, folder 4, Prostitution [1932–41], box 3, Oregon Social Hygiene Society Records.

⁵⁰ “Bawdy Business,” *Time*, 25 May 1936, 15.

⁵¹ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 193–94.

⁵² Polly Adler, *A House Is Not a Home* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1950), 176.

⁵³ R. L. Duffus, “The Facts Revealed in the Seabury Inquiry,” *New York Times*, 14 August 1932, xx1. The *Times* published hundreds of articles on the inquiry’s public hearings, documenting daily the corrupt practices of the police. For a few examples, see “Bribed by Police to Flee, Girl Says,” *New York Times*, 9 July 1931, 2; “Feared ‘Influence’ Weston Declares,” *New York Times*, 14 July 1931, 6; “More Women Tell of Vice Case Fees,” *New York Times*, 16 July 1931, 2; “Says Lawyer Asked \$200 Police Bribe,” *New York Times*, 17 July 1931, 38.

⁵⁴ Marilynn S. Johnson, *Street Justice: A History of Police Violence in New York City* (New York: Beacon Press, 2004), 116; Clement, *Love for Sale*, 193–96.

Widespread anxieties about the disintegration of traditional family structures and the social impact of lone women drifting into prostitution combined with journalistic sensationalism surrounding organized crime to produce an opportunity for Hoover to publicize the FBI agents' role as the protectors of vulnerable American girls. Raising the bureau's profile in this way seemed especially urgent in late 1935, after New York prosecutor Thomas E. Dewey grabbed national headlines by cracking down on notorious mobster Lucky Luciano's prostitution racket, thus threatening to displace the FBI as the nation's premier crime-fighting force.⁵⁵ After the repeal of liquor prohibition in 1933, leading New York City gangsters aggressively moved into the world of clandestine prostitution to offset their lost proceeds. They offered sex workers protection from prosecution (through bribes) for a fee. Reportedly, Luciano had around one thousand girls paying him for protection, and he controlled over two hundred illegal brothels in the city.⁵⁶ Dewey's successful prosecution of Luciano earned him nationwide accolades in the press. In response to the press coverage generated from the Dewey investigation, Hoover directed his East Coast office to start a vigorous search for Mann Act violations and evidence of organized prostitution. Hoover even claimed to be working with Dewey, a fact Dewey refuted.⁵⁷ In the end, Hoover's nationwide campaign against vice proved rather anemic. It lasted only a short time, peaking in 1936 and ebbing in late 1937, and it failed to be truly nationwide, focusing primarily on the northeast corridor, with special attention to New York City. However, the campaign generated nationwide publicity for the FBI, and it gave Hoover a platform from which to trumpet the crime-fighting credentials of his agency. He told journalists that his efforts were justified by the fact that while every type of major crime had decreased in 1935, "white slavery had increased by 15 per cent."⁵⁸ In an effort to highlight FBI efforts to combat the problem, Hoover personally led the vice raids conducted in Atlantic City, Connecticut, and Baltimore that resulted in the arrests of scores of women and the convictions of many pimps, illegal brothel madams, and traffickers connected to the organized trafficking of sex workers. Yet these raids did not lend themselves to obvious, simple narratives packaged for the press, because most of the women arrested had voluntarily become professional

⁵⁵ "Bawdy Business"; Clement, *Love for Sale*, 205; John M. Murtagh and Sara Harris, *Cast the First Stone* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1957), 242; Charles Winick, "Organized Crime and Commercial Sex," in *Handbook of Organized Crime in the United States*, ed. Robert J. Kelly, Ko-Lin Chin, and Rufus Schatzberg (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 289–310, 295; Robert J. Kelly, *Encyclopedia of Organized Crime in the United States: From Capone's Chicago to the New Urban Underworld* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 198–202; Mary M. Stolberg, *Fighting Organized Crime: Politics, Justice, and the Legacy of Thomas E. Dewey* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995).

⁵⁶ "Bawdy Business."

⁵⁷ "J. E. Hoover's Men Working on Vice," *New York Sun*, 8 February 1936.

⁵⁸ "G Men' Center upon White Slavers," *Literary Digest*, 29 August 1936, 26–27.

prostitutes years earlier and could hardly be classified as weak victims in need of FBI protection. Though the campaign against the vice queens was part of this larger initiative, the FBI carefully managed the media coverage to produce prepackaged narratives that resurrected an older trope of criminality: the venal brothel madam who trafficked powerless white slaves. Hoover's attention to vice reintroduced the language of white slavery and returned the Mann Act to public prominence. Over the course of just a few months, Hoover initiated investigations against three infamous New York City madams: Mae "Billie" Scheible, Jean Reed, and Lucille Malin.⁵⁹

PUBLIC HOSTESS NO. 1: THE CASE OF MAE SCHEIBLE

Mae Scheible came to the FBI's attention in September 1935, when, in the course of searching for fugitive, counterfeiter, and confidence man "Count" Victor Lustig (famous for having sold the Eiffel Tower twice), FBI agents raided her apartment and discovered numerous address books filled with prostitutes' names, indicating a probable violation of the White Slave Traffic Act. They also found a card index of clients. Realizing that the client list included many of Pittsburgh's and New York City's most prominent men, who could be embarrassed if their association with Scheible became public knowledge, the FBI quickly put the card index under lock and key.⁶⁰ The FBI also seized several letters from madams throughout the eastern seaboard and Midwest that provided proof of Mann Act violations. A typical one, written by Florette Benoy, read:

I'm in Miami already in Moorish Castle. The season seems to be promising, and Miami expects more yachts this season than ever. Will you please tell some of the girls you know to come to Miami to work for Sherry. I know the girls you would send will be nice and good workers. . . . Sherry's Castle is very beautiful, and furnished luxuriously. I think girls would enjoy opportunity working here in wintertime. If any girl wants to come, tell them please that fare would be very reasonable to arrive by automobile from Pittsburgh, lot's [*sic*] of cars are going to Florida.⁶¹

Other letters painted the same picture of madams informally writing one another to request new sex workers, share gossip, and maintain friendships.

⁵⁹ The most notorious New York City madam of the 1930s was Polly Adler, who in 1935 had been sentenced for running a disorderly house and served thirty days in jail. Adler would be under NYPD and FBI surveillance through much of 1935 and 1936.

⁶⁰ For example, see E. A. Tamm, "Memorandum for the Director, Re: Count Victor Lustig," 9 October 1935, FBI 31-42481-6, Record Group 65, Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation—FBI Headquarters Case Files, Classification 31, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereafter referred to as FBI White Slave Files).

⁶¹ Quoted in J. J. Keating, "Mrs. Mae Scheible, New York City," 30 September 1935, 31-42481-1, pp. 40–41, FBI White Slave Files.

Letters like these implicated Scheible and her correspondents in Mann Act violations because the law made it illegal to induce a woman to cross state lines for the purposes of prostitution. Consequently, casual suggestions about opportunities for sex work could and did constitute a violation of federal law.

Scheible had become prominent in the vice world in Pittsburgh, where she was known as “Public Hostess No. 1” (in a clever feminizing of the FBI’s own term, “Public Enemy No. 1,” someone presumed to be male).⁶² Born in Ohio, Scheible first set up a roadhouse outside of Pittsburgh in the early 1920s where she sold illegal liquor to wealthy patrons. Some of her clients persuaded her to open a call house in downtown Pittsburgh, and, according to the FBI, “her house [quickly] enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the expensive ‘call house’ trade.”⁶³ Courtney Ryley Cooper wrote that “Mae is alleged to have been the inventor of the call house. In other words, she was supposedly the first woman to use her place as a clearing-place for prostitution demands, receiving requests by telephone and filling engagements for hotel and apartment-house service.”⁶⁴ Though there is no way to confirm Cooper’s claim that Scheible invented the call house, call houses had emerged in many American cities in the 1920s after the closing of legal brothels during World War I and in response to the growing violence of the vice world. A call house madam generally operated out of an apartment that could host two to five women at a time. She relied on the telephone to conduct her business, using it to arrange “dates” between customers and sex workers. If she needed additional sex workers, she had a phone book of local young women who could fill the specific needs or desires of the customer. Scheible had six address books with 351 entries of sex workers going back four years from cities and towns throughout Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. Most women appeared multiple times in Scheible’s books, indicating changes of residence. The typical entry read “Jean Gray Keith, small, red hair, very nice” or “Carmen, tall blonde.”⁶⁵ Like the brothel madams of the 1910s, call house madams took 50 percent of a prostitute’s earnings and usually charged her additional fees for board and maid service if she actually lived in the call house.⁶⁶ In the case of Scheible’s Pittsburgh house, a date cost a minimum of twenty dollars but could easily grow to cost as much as two hundred dollars, making her call house one of the most exclusive and expensive in the city. Due to their small size, call houses enjoyed a higher

⁶² “Government Trial Tells How Billie Scheible Preyed on Pittsburgh’s ‘Playboys’ to Tune of \$20 a Visit,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 5 April 1936. The term “Public Enemy No. 1” originated during the manhunt for John Dillinger in 1934.

⁶³ “I.C. #31-42481 Mrs. Mae Scheible, with alias,” p. 3, box 14, RG 65, Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation—Interesting Case Write-Ups, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

⁶⁴ Cooper, *Designs in Scarlet*, 326.

⁶⁵ Keating, “Mrs. Mae Scheible, New York City,” p. 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid.; Clement, *Love for Sale*, 199.

degree of invisibility from both police forces and moral reformers than the brothels of the 1910s; they could be secretly run out of any neighborhood or apartment. Call houses could also be very profitable. Scheible's Pittsburgh house was so profitable that she decided to open a second house in New York City. The vice queens targeted by the FBI all operated in the most exclusive New York City neighborhood—the Upper East Side.

Unfortunately for the FBI and US Attorney Seymour Klein, when the FBI agents conducted the search of Scheible's apartment they sought only to discover Count Lustig's whereabouts, so they conducted the search without a search warrant. Consequently, none of the evidence seized could be used in court. The only way for the FBI to build a case was to find former sex workers employed by Scheible whom Scheible had induced to cross state lines and who would be willing to testify against her. In other words, the agents needed disgruntled former employees.

They found such an employee in "Little Billy" Ward (born Monya Getty), a twenty-one-year-old prostitute who had first started working for Scheible in Pittsburg when she was seventeen. Ward believed that Scheible had ruined her chances for love and an advantageous marriage to one of the heirs of the Mellon fortune. William Larimer Mellon Jr., known to his friends as Larry Mellon, was the grandnephew of millionaire Andrew Mellon, and he had met Ward as a customer at Scheible's house in Pittsburgh.⁶⁷ In court Ward claimed that she had fallen in love with Mellon and had been reluctant to charge him the usual fee. "I thought he wouldn't want to see me any more," she complained. "Mrs. Scheible told me I was dumb."⁶⁸ After Ward had moved to New York City, Mellon called her up to ask for a date. Scheible told him that he could see Ward, but it would cost him two hundred dollars for each of her trips from New York to Pittsburgh.⁶⁹ Frustrated by Scheible's attempts to manage and monetize the relationship, Ward fled the call house and ran away to live with Mellon in Pennsylvania. In response, Scheible wrote a letter to Mellon's mother, informing her that her son's paramour was no more than a disease-ridden common prostitute.⁷⁰ Scheible's motivations for writing the letter are lost to the historical record, but she may have been interested in retaining the allegiance of the Mellon family, some of whom were still her customers and who would be grateful to know the true origins of the girl. At the same time, writing such a letter would serve to remind Scheible's other employees of the consequences of defection while also ensuring that Ward would not profit from her relationship with Larry Mellon.

⁶⁷ E. A. Tamm, "Memorandum for the Director, Re: Count Victor Lustig, Mae Scheible, et al.," 10 October 1935, FBI 31-42481-7, FBI White Slave Files.

⁶⁸ Warren Hill, "Girl Charges Mae Scheible Locked Her In," *New York News*, 2 April 1936.

⁶⁹ "I.C. #31-42481 Mrs. Mae Scheible, with alias," p. 14.

⁷⁰ Hill, "Girl Charges."

When Ward told her story of thwarted love in the courtroom, she carefully kept Mellon's name out of the proceedings. Indeed, Hoover became angry at the agent who had tried to contact Mellon in his search for Ward. Assistant Director Edward Tamm assured Hoover that the agent had been warned, writing: "I again called Special Agent R. L. Morgan at the Pittsburgh Office with reference to the efforts to locate Little Billy, and told him that the bureau does not desire that further efforts to locate this girl be made through Larry Mellon." Tamm promised that none of the "big shots" in Scheible's card index would be "bothered" and assured Hoover that none of the agents would give the impression that the FBI was going to "lay off" any individual just because he was a prominent person. Essentially, Hoover wanted to protect the sexual privileges of wealthy men, but he also wanted to protect the image of the bureau as an agency above corruption. Tamm concluded his letter by confirming the FBI's position: "We are not going to get involved in collecting any fodder for political scandals."⁷¹

Even though the FBI had internally declared that it would not collect "fodder for political scandals," Scheible's defense attorney raised the prospect that the US attorney or the FBI would use the client list for political purposes immediately after FBI agents seized it during the raid of Scheible's apartment. In October 1935 Scheible's attorney, Col. Lewis Landes, charged that Klein was refusing to return the card index to Scheible because he intended to embarrass the Republican Party members listed in the file. The index contained "the names of prominent Republican citizens," Landes argued, "and you [referring to Klein] want those names to hold over their heads to use in the next campaign."⁷² This argument was plausible enough that when Scheible's case came to trial in late March and early April 1936, the judge ruled that neither prosecution, defense, nor witnesses could name individual customers. Scheible's new defense attorney, Sanford Cohen, mocked this ruling in his closing statement: "Wherever you have men you have prostitution, but they have not produced them here. . . . You don't find the multimillionaires they have talked about, the big names present. They were kept out."⁷³ The FBI carefully tracked each copy of the list to ensure that only the individuals closest to the investigation, like US Attorney

⁷¹ Tamm, "Memorandum for the Director, Re: Count Victor Lustig, Mae Scheible, et al.," 10 October 1935. However, it is entirely likely that Hoover kept a copy of the list in his personal files. Athan Theoharis, *The FBI & American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); and Theoharis, *J. Edgar Hoover, Sex, and Crime* (New York: Ivan R. Dee, 1995).

⁷² "Use of Scheible Data for Politics Feared," *New York Times*, 3 October 1935. Scheible had replaced Landes with a different defense attorney, Sanford Cohen, by the time her case went to trial.

⁷³ "Bible Invoked by Attorney to Free Vice Queen," *New York Evening Journal*, 7 April 1936.

Seymour Klein, could have access to it.⁷⁴ The privacy of the prominent men who appeared in Scheible's phone directory—men like automotive executive Walter Chrysler, department store magnates Barnard Gimbel and Edgar Kaufmann, brokers Harris Upham and Homer H. Johnson, and Lt. Col. Lewis H. Brereton—was closely protected.⁷⁵ The FBI argued that keeping the list secret was necessary for the protection of these men's marriages: "The contents should not be divulged . . . due to the fact that the majority of them are undoubtedly married men."⁷⁶ During the sentencing phase of the trial, Judge Knox told the courtroom that these men were very grateful for this consideration. Similarly, one of the investigating agents recalled that a Pittsburgh lawyer told him that "the male population of Pittsburgh was very thankful that their names did not appear in print incident to the investigation and trial" of Mae Scheible.⁷⁷ The FBI, the prosecuting attorney, and the judge thus all upheld the class privilege of wealthy men to purchase sex without consequences.

In addition to the tales of thwarted love, the FBI and Klein's case rested on the argument that Mae Scheible's dubious and dishonest business practices cheated her customers and employees alike. According to Judge Knox, "She took advantage of the girls and of her customers on a purely commercial basis."⁷⁸ Within this narrative, Scheible's greed led to her downfall. Assistant Director Tamm argued that Scheible lost a significant amount of money in the 1929 stock market crash and had become increasingly "unscrupulous in piling up the profits from her house."⁷⁹ The FBI alleged that Scheible had employed several scams to increase profits. She charged her customers for the alcohol that they and their "dates" consumed, though according to the maids who testified at the trial, the women drank only water. Another swindle involved a complicated scheme of getting blank checks from customers. After the customer had left, Scheible would fill out the blank check for an amount that she thought he would pay.⁸⁰ Again Judge Knox told the courtroom of the many letters he received from Pittsburgh men who had seen their bank accounts depleted due to this scheme.⁸¹ Hoover's revival of the Mann Act protected men who behaved in gender-acceptable ways through the enactment of a virile masculinity, even if their participation in prostitution threatened their class respectability. In shielding these men's privacy, the FBI and Judge Knox sent a message that wealthy men's sexual

⁷⁴ For example, J. Edgar Hoover to Mr. J. M. Keith, 9 October 1931, FBI 31-42481-1, FBI White Slave Files.

⁷⁵ Keating, "Mrs. Mae Scheible, New York City."

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁷ Rhea Whitley, "Memorandum for the Director," 24 August 1936, FBI 31-42481-155, FBI White Slave Files.

⁷⁸ "Billie Scheible Gets 4 Years," *Pittsburgh Press*, 13 April 1936.

⁷⁹ Whitley, "Memorandum for the Director."

⁸⁰ "I.C. #31-42481 Mrs. Mae Scheible, with alias," 4.

⁸¹ "Billie Scheible Gets 4 Years."



Figure 1. Vice queen Mae Scheible. Source: "‘G Men’ Center upon White Slavers," *Literary Digest*, 29 August 1936, 26–27.

misbehavior would be tolerated, while the vice queens' greed would not be condoned, and women who made the purchase of sex possible would be prosecuted.

But the government's case also rested on testimony detailing Scheible's underhanded labor practices. The FBI accused her of acting in an "arbitrary and high-handed fashion" toward her employees.⁸² FBI agents told reporters that she kept the doors locked at night, refusing to allow the women to leave.⁸³ Scheible demanded that her employees purchase expensive dresses from her, but according to Ward these were only the "dresses she had worn herself. As soon as we finished paying for one dress, we had to buy another."⁸⁴ Ward claimed that she could never save any of her earnings

⁸² Whitley, "Memorandum for the Director."

⁸³ Hall, "Girl Charges."

⁸⁴ "Scheible Maid Gives Lowdown," *Pittsburgh Press*, 1 April 1936.

because she had to keep buying used dresses at seventy-five dollars each.⁸⁵ Scheible probably did require her employees to dress in expensive clothes; because her house serviced the most elite customers, her employees had a reputation for being “carefully schooled in social elegance.”⁸⁶ Yet the expectation that her employees purchase her castoffs struck many as being beyond the pale of appropriate management tactics. FBI Assistant Director Edward A. Tamm emphasized that Scheible callously charmed and deceived all those who met her; she was “a leopard, who on the stand had attempted to hide her spots with the demeanor and voice of a house kitten,” he told Hoover.⁸⁷ Newspapers and magazines eager to publish pictures of the stylish and feminine Scheible (see fig. 1) fell victim to the house kitten image that she sought to project. Even the FBI described her in appreciative yet cautious tones: “Of small stature and not unrefined features, with a good taste for clothes, Scheible makes a fairly attractive appearance, speaks with a very sweet, girlish voice and affects a very sweet attitude when she wishes to impress.”⁸⁸

Yet throughout the trial, the prosecution’s case relied on the insistence that beneath the kittenish demeanor lay a domineering woman, a “first-class bitch-on-wheels.”⁸⁹ For example, Scheible was tried with a codefendant, Jack Ryan. Judge John C. Knox told a newspaper reporter that Ryan had only committed the sin of allowing “his manhood to be undermined and become dominated by Mrs. Scheible.”⁹⁰ The prosecution’s case presented Scheible as an example of deviant womanhood; she was motivated not by feminine traits of love, nurturing, and caring but by masculine traits like ambition, greed, and lust. More problematically, her “kittenish demeanor” and her “girlish voice” made her appear to be something she was not: a respectable, wealthy woman. She was passing—trespassing boundaries of class and respectability through various strategies of dishonesty and duplicity.

The fact that Scheible became what magazines called “America’s only millionaire madam” by exploiting the sexual labor of other women struck the FBI and the US attorney as morally and financially perverse.⁹¹ Scheible’s “lust for the dollar” led to an increase in her assets from \$18,662 in 1926 to \$271,678 in 1932.⁹² US Attorney Seymour Klein expressed outrage at Scheible’s life of luxury in her high-class call house apartment on 74th and Park Avenue, which was a transgression of class. He excoriated her treatment of her employees: “Mae used their bodies for her rent, her food, and

⁸⁵ “Held Captive Girl Informs Scheible Jury,” *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 2 April 1936.

⁸⁶ Murtagh and Harris, *Cast the First Stone*, 238.

⁸⁷ Whitley, “Memorandum for the Director.”

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸⁹ Cooper, *Designs in Scarlet*, 326.

⁹⁰ “Billie Scheible Gets 4 Years.”

⁹¹ “I.C. #31-42481 Mrs. Mae Scheible, with alias,” 4.

⁹² *Ibid.*; “Billie Scheible Says She Saved Her Patrons’ Faces,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 19 May 1938.

even their transportation to better markets.”⁹³ His arguments convinced the jury and the judge, and Scheible was found guilty of violating the White Slave Traffic Act. She was given a sentence of four years in prison and a fine of \$5,000, an extremely harsh sentence in a trial that had only one victim. The average sentence for Mann Act convictions in 1936 was twenty months.⁹⁴ Yet Scheible’s legal troubles did not cease with this verdict. The FBI handed her case over to the Treasury Department, which quickly launched an investigation into her wealth. Because she failed to pay taxes on her ill-gotten gains, Scheible was sentenced to an additional three years in jail.⁹⁵ Although the US attorney may have rejected how Scheible earned her wealth, Uncle Sam had no such qualms about taking his cut. The case against Mae Scheible quickly led the FBI to other Upper East Side call house madams, and the trajectory of their tribulations and trials mirrored that of Scheible.

Typesetter: Please reverse backward-facing quote

RACIAL AND SEXUAL DEVIANCY:
THE CASES OF JUNE REED AND LUCILE MALIN

During the Scheible investigation, FBI agents discovered that a former employee of Scheible—“Boots” Carter—had begun working for call house madam June Reed. Reed ran a similar operation: an exclusive call house with a twenty-dollar minimum price. As agents sought more information about Reed, they learned that she was a subject of a New York Police Department (NYPD) investigation and that the NYPD had installed a wiretap on her telephone in late November 1935.⁹⁶ The recorded conversations indicated that a pimp of one of her former employees was blackmailing Reed with evidence that she had violated the Mann Act. The NYPD handed the case over to the FBI after it concluded that “anything the police could do would be petty in comparison to any White Slave Traffic case which could be made against these parties.”⁹⁷ Meanwhile, gossip about the raid on Scheible’s home in October 1935 had spread quickly, and Reed worried that the FBI’s attention would turn toward her. When the FBI interviewed a former employee of Reed’s, her suspicions grew.

Reed resolved to leave New York during the holidays until the “heat” from the Scheible case had eased. She told her employees that they were welcome to join her in West Palm Beach, Florida, for a winter vacation if

⁹³ “Billie Scheible Is Found Guilty,” *Pittsburgh Press*, 8 April 1936.

⁹⁴ Langum, *Crossing the Line*, 168.

⁹⁵ R. J. Untrein to Director, Re: Mae Scheible, 18 May 1938, FBI 31-42481-115, FBI White Slave Files.

⁹⁶ Since 1934 Congress had made wire-tapping illegal, though the FBI continued to engage in it. For criticism of this policy, see “Can G-Men Violate the Law?,” *New Republic*, 1 April 1940, 429.

⁹⁷ E. A. Tamm, “Memorandum for the Director,” 19 October 1937, FBI 31-43024-90x, FBI White Slave Files.

they so desired, or they could join her back in New York in the new year.⁹⁸ Reed and her workers knew the dangers that Mann Act prosecution posed. Thus, when Reed loaned money to one of her employees to pay for the trip to Florida, that employee, Evelyn Olson, was, according to the investigating FBI special agent, Paul J. Cotter, “very careful to save her own money to pay her fare, so that the money she used for said fare, would not be that of Subject Reed.” Upon questioning by Cotter, Olson claimed that she was certain she was not violating the Mann Act, because “she thought that a girl had to be under age to be a victim in a Mann Act case,” and at twenty-six years old she was not underage.⁹⁹ Many of Reed’s employees decided to join her after spending Christmas with their families. All seemed well until the FBI raided their rented home in Florida and charged Reed and her male paramour with violating the Mann Act the very same week that Scheible was taken into custody—the first week of February 1936.

The FBI had difficulty making a case against Reed because, unlike in the Scheible case, the prostitutes arrested in Florida who had allegedly been trafficked all pursued the opportunity to work with Reed and were what the FBI euphemistically called “reluctant witnesses.” Each of the sex workers interviewed by the FBI—Jean Moore, Evelyn Olson, Lydia Spencer, and Boots Carter—indicated that they had entered prostitution prior to having met Reed, and all of them had jumped at the opportunity to work in her house. Letters seized in the raid generally confirmed a warm and affectionate relationship between Reed and her employees.¹⁰⁰ Also, after their initial arrest, Florida police had imprisoned all the defendants and witnesses—men and women—together in one cell, where they quickly constructed a story designed to undermine the government’s case against Reed. Further complicating the government’s case, Reed hired one lawyer to represent both the witnesses (in the FBI’s parlance, the “victims” of Reed) and the defendants (Reed and her boyfriend). According to the FBI, this simple mistake of allowing the prostitutes to talk with Reed made the “witnesses antagonistic to the government.”¹⁰¹

Stymied, with no eager witnesses, the FBI had trouble building a strong case against Reed, and the investigation against her lingered. Her case did not go to trial until late October 1937, well over a year and a half after her initial arrest in Florida. By early October 1937 rumors circulated New York’s vice scene that Reed had “fixed” her case with the FBI by giving J. Edgar Hoover a check for \$20,000. When this gossip reached Hoover, he responded with anger, offended that a woman like Reed was besmirching his

⁹⁸ H. G. Maynor, “St. Louis, MO,” 4 December 1936, FBI 31-43024-65, p. 3, FBI White Slave Files.

⁹⁹ P. J. Cotter, “New York City,” 2 May 1936, FBI 31-43024-41, pages 10-11, FBI White Slave Files.

¹⁰⁰ P. J. Cotter, “New York City, NY,” 14 December 1935, FBI 31-43024-69, pp. 24-27, 35-40, FBI White Slave Files.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

integrity. He issued the following instructions to his New York agents: "See that everything is done to make this case stick. We must obtain a conviction. Also try to track down the source of the story of the 'fix.'"¹⁰² Agents concluded that Reed herself was probably the source of the rumor about fixing the FBI, although Reed denied it. She told agents that she had always assumed her case was proceeding slowly due to the interference of some "influential friend of hers" in Washington whom she refused to name.¹⁰³

To make their case against Reed "stick," agents and US Attorney Klein employed two strategies. They painted a picture of sexual depravity in Reed's call house to demonstrate her criminality and personal perversity, and they relied on NYPD wiretap evidence and the testimony of Grant Smith (the pimp of Sally Kelly, one of Reed's former employees), who had begun blackmailing Reed in December 1935. To blackmail Reed, Smith used the letters that Reed wrote to Kelly in the early fall of 1935. In the series of letters, Reed had asked Kelly to come to New York from Florida to work as a "model," and she promised an income of \$150 a week. Kelly, who at the time was fighting with Smith, jumped at the opportunity to get away and headed north in October. She worked in Reed's house for only a month before she grew homesick and unhappy because she was not earning as much as she thought she would. In November she returned to Florida and to Smith. Soon after, Smith wrote to Reed:

Dear Miss Rogers [Reed's pseudonym],

I have a letter in my possession that I am sure Mr. Dewey or [NYPD] Commissioner Valentine would be glad to get. It's a shame, the money Sally has spent running around to the places you have sent her. You, who have been driven from pillar to post, and with your record—bragging about paying coppers, with your so-called influence—violating the Mann Act. I am sure Commissioner Valentine or Mr. Dewey would like to get this letter. If you don't wire me \$200 within ten days, I will see that the proper authorities get this letter.¹⁰⁴

The NYPD wiretap captured Reed's attempt to get Smith to drop his blackmail scheme. She tried several approaches. She first tried to reason with him: "Why the first week she [Kelly] made \$150." She then attempted to appeal to his vanity: "You're supposed to be a racketeer, and that's not the code they use." Finally her anger got the better of her: "Why you fucking pimp, you can go fuck yourself, you rat bastard. You'll have that girl lying on her

¹⁰² Tamm, "Memorandum for the Director," 19 October 1937.

¹⁰³ R. E. Vitterli to Director Hoover, 7 November 1937, FBI 31-43024-115, White Slave Files.

¹⁰⁴ E. A. Tamm, "Memorandum for the Director," 5 February 1936, FBI 31-43024-13, p. 1, FBI White Slave Files.

back fucking for you all her life, you bastard, you can go fuck yourself.”¹⁰⁵ In the end she paid Smith, and he destroyed the letters and with them the only solid evidence that the FBI had of a Mann Act violation. Thus, the agents and the US attorney built their case around Smith’s testimony and the wiretapped recordings of the telephone conversation between Smith and Reed, and then, to shore up their case, they attacked her decency.¹⁰⁶

In building their case against Reed, FBI agents portrayed her as a “rather degraded type of individual,” alleging that Reed’s house catered to customers who had deviant sexual desires.¹⁰⁷ The lead agent on the case noted that Reed’s house “catered to black and white trade and also, on numerous occasions, ‘fairies’ were imported for the purpose of filling commercial [meaning moments of outsourced prostitution] dates with her clientele.”¹⁰⁸ In all likelihood, the agent overstated the degree of interracial and homosexual sex available at Reed’s establishment; if her business really “catered to the black and white trade”—a phrase that presumes white male clients and black female prostitutes—certainly she would have had an African American prostitute on staff, as Lucile Malin did (who will be addressed next). However, she did not. Yet as a madam of a house catering to the most exclusive clientele, Reed certainly tried to keep her customers happy, and she did what she could to satisfy their desires. Consequently, when she had a client who preferred young, school-aged black girls, Reed contacted Gail Rogers, a twenty-one-year-old African American prostitute from Harlem who looked much younger than her years and dressed the part for white customers to earn her twenty dollars (indicating that the client was probably charged forty dollars for the indulgence).¹⁰⁹ As Malcolm X noted, such arrangements were “a special facet of the Harlem night world . . . [where] Negroes catered to monied white people’s weird sexual tastes.”¹¹⁰ The clients of Reed’s house were so wealthy that they didn’t even need to venture into Harlem to satisfy their prurient desires. Similarly, Reed had a standing arrangement with Walter Spitzer, a Viennese call house operator in Greenwich Village who said of himself: “Due to some unexplainable trick of nature, I was born with feminine characteristics and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ B. F. Fitzsimons, “Jacksonville, FL,” 21 February 1936, FBI 31-43024-31, p. 17, FBI White Slave Files.

¹⁰⁷ P. J. Cotter, “Parole Report,” 3 November 1937, FBI 31-43024-109, pp. 1–2, FBI White Slave Files.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 11–12; For more on African American prostitution, see Cynthia Blair, *I’ve Got to Make My Livin’*: Black Women’s Sex Work in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); and Kevin Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

¹¹⁰ Quoted in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 297.

am what is commonly termed a "fairy."¹¹¹ Spitzer's call house featured both gay male and straight female prostitutes. Whenever Reed had a male client who preferred men, she asked Spitzer to send her "a fairy," for which Spitzer received a small tip, usually five dollars.¹¹² For the FBI, the fact that Reed catered to what the agency considered alternative sexualities was an obvious signifier of the type of depravity she peddled. Testimony at trial about Reed's support of what were seen as deviant sexualities (interracial and homosexual sex) served to construct a picture of her as a purveyor of perversity in the eyes of the jury, which took only twenty minutes to return a guilty verdict. She was convicted of violating the Mann Act and sentenced to serve four years in prison and pay a \$2,500 fine.

Deviant sexualities figured prominently in the investigation of the last New York City vice queen targeted by the FBI in 1936: Lucille Malin.¹¹³ Before Malin became a madam, she had enjoyed notoriety for her marriage to Jean (Gene) Malin, one of the most famous and celebrated female impersonators of the 1930s, who died in a freak automobile accident on Venice pier in California in August 1933.¹¹⁴ Jean Malin, whose shows prefigured the "pansy craze," was widely perceived to be homosexual. During the late 1920s, with Prohibition forcing New York City's nightlife into illegal speakeasies, the city's gay subculture captured the attention of club-goers who flocked to Times Square to watch drag shows performed by flamboyant (and presumably gay) men. Malin was one of the most famous and successful of these "pansies."¹¹⁵ His 1931 marriage to Lucille prompted the *New York Daily News* to publish the headline: "Jean Malin Marries Girl!"¹¹⁶ Lucille Malin had been associated with sexual deviance and New York's gay subculture long before the FBI drew back the curtains to her call house bedrooms.

In the summer of 1936 a client of Malin's with revenge on his mind called the New York office of the FBI to accuse her of white slavery. The client, Henry A. Alker Jr., informed the FBI that Malin maintained luxurious apartments filled with beautiful prostitutes to service members of the New York Stock Exchange and out-of-state brokers. He claimed that James Donohue, one of the Woolworth heirs, financed Malin's call houses and

¹¹¹ Ibid. For more on the prevalence and politics of the term "fairy," see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 47-63.

¹¹² P. J. Cotter, "New York City, NY," 3 November 1937, FBI 31-43024-108, pp. 6-9, FBI White Slave Files.

¹¹³ Malin was also known as Christine Williams, née Lucille Hyman. At the time of her arrest she also used the pseudonyms Martha Farrell and Jeanette Forbes.

¹¹⁴ For more on the career of Jean (Gene) Malin, see Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 314-28; for more on the phenomenal popularity of female impersonators in the early twentieth century, see Sharon Ullman, *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 49-61.

¹¹⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 309-21.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 315.

was intimately involved in their operations. When pressed, Alker admitted that he had balked at paying what he saw as Malin's "exorbitant" fees after a visit to her house, causing her to contact his father-in-law and threaten his marriage.¹¹⁷ Alker sought retaliation because he was angered that Malin had revealed his taste for prostitution and his resistance to paying for the privilege, which cast doubt on his self-discipline, his sense of masculine honor in paying his debts, and the stability of his marriage. Hoover ignored themes of revenge that had motivated the denunciation and scrawled, "We should press this case as it looks like it might be a good one.—JEH" on a summary of Alker's claim.¹¹⁸

A brief investigation into Malin's operations revealed that with Scheible in jail, Malin had become the largest and most prosperous call house operator in New York City.¹¹⁹ On average she had twelve girls working in her Upper East Side apartment, including some African American women and some prostitutes who were, according to the FBI, "alleged to be Lesbians."¹²⁰ In November 1936 FBI agents and NYPD police conducted a spectacular raid of her home in front of tipped-off journalists, arresting Malin and five sex workers, including one who "was clad in expensive evening clothes and an ermine wrap and [who] returned to the Malin brothel in a Rolls Royce automobile" just as the raid was being concluded.¹²¹

Aware of the fate of Scheible, Malin immediately admitted to running a twenty-dollar-minimum call house and violating the White Slave Traffic Act. US Attorney Seymour Klein suggested to Hoover that given Malin's cooperation, the FBI should suspend its investigation into her call house activities.¹²² Malin may have expected to get off with a fine for her cooperation in pleading guilty, but Judge William Hondy disappointed her by sentencing her to serve one year in jail and pay a \$1,000 fine. When he read her sentence journalists reported that she cried, "It's not fair! It's not fair!" as she was taken out of the courtroom.¹²³

¹¹⁷ E. A. Tamm, "Memorandum for the Director," 28 September 1936, FBI 31-43441-21, FBI White Slave Files.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ "Memorandum," 8 November 1936, FBI 31-43441-38, FBI White Slave Files.

¹²⁰ M. C. Spear, "Memorandum for the Director," 14 March 1936, FBI 31-43441-2, FBI White Slave Files.

¹²¹ "Memorandum," 8 November 1936, FBI 31-43441-38, FBI White Slave Files.

¹²² R. Whitley to the Director, 18 November 1936, FBI 31-43441-44, FBI White Slave Files.

¹²³ "Lucille Malin Fined, Sent to Jail for a Year," *New York Daily News*, 8 December 1936. Even with the Malin case concluded, the FBI continued to follow her career as a madam well into the 1950s. When she bought a house in Florida in 1948, the FBI conducted another investigation into a White Slave Traffic Act violation (which never went to trial). The investigation focused on the fact that Malin's houses were known to cater "almost exclusively to sex perverts" and that she herself was a lesbian in a relationship with a twenty-one-year-old ex-WAC musician. Edward Schmidt to Director Hoover and Ass. Director A. Rosen, 8 March 1948, FBI 31-43441-x, FBI White Slave Files.

Malin's long participation in the marginal world of homosexual New York may have prompted her quick plea of guilty in the 1936 case. Polly Adler, a contemporary of Malin's, noted that in her brothels throughout the 1930s it was increasingly necessary to meet the desires of wealthy clients who wanted same-sex experiences. As a result, by 1935, she wrote, she was running a "co-educational bordello" that served male and female customers.¹²⁴ When Adler was arrested by the NYPD in March 1935, she quickly pled guilty to protect her customers' secrets, which could have come out through cross-examination in a trial.¹²⁵ Similarly, Malin would have had both customers and employees to protect from the harsh light of the courtroom.

DEPRAVED EARNINGS

The FBI's focus on the wealth that Scheible, Reed, and Malin generated in their Upper East Side call houses had a particular resonance in Depression era New York.¹²⁶ As Polly Adler explained in her autobiography, if a high-class madam wanted to retain her wealthy customers in the 1930s, she had to take advantage of decreasing rents and move to the tony Upper East Side, leaving areas like the West Side where rich clients began to fear being kidnapped and were starting to refuse to go.¹²⁷ But traversing class boundaries in this way made the madams targets of the FBI. In the spring of 1936 one of Adler's customers, a policeman, warned her to get out of the "silk stocking district" because the FBI was launching an investigation into her brothel. She immediately closed up her house and relocated downtown, thus avoiding the fate of Scheible, Reed, and Malin.¹²⁸ The FBI's new campaign was primarily targeted at vice that they perceived as hiding behind wealth.

The FBI's cases against the vice queens repeatedly emphasized the seemingly incredible amount of money they earned from their exploitation of the sexual labor of other women. For example, the FBI noted that Reed charged twenty dollars minimum for a date and one hundred dollars to book a prostitute overnight; some dates could easily cost as much

¹²⁴ Adler, *A House Is Not a Home*, 228.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹²⁶ Scheible's house was located at 74th and Park, Reed conducted her business at 55th and Park, and Malin's house was at 56th and 2nd Avenue. The Depression had driven down prices in the Upper East Side, resulting in many "expensive apartments to be had at reasonable rates" (*ibid.*, 210).

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 240–41. Adler's new call house was located at 55th and Madison, one block from Reed's house.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 288; case 31-44249, roll 195A, FBI White Slave Microfilm Files, Record Group 65, Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation—FBI Headquarters Case Files, Classification 31, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Thank you to Debby Applegate for sharing this source.

as one thousand dollars for a single engagement.¹²⁹ Reporters covering the Malin case noted that FBI agents gave them detailed descriptions of her swanky abode. A November 1936 article in the *New York Daily News* reported: "Mrs. Malin's luxurious establishment, wherein a number of exquisite blondes and brunettes, together with a few sepia beauties, disported themselves for the exclusive entertainment of the moneyed men, made the institutions conducted by Polly Adler and Mae Scheible look like East Side flop joints, the G-Men said."¹³⁰ In a country grappling with the Great Depression, such wealth and its origins struck many in the FBI as a criminal perversion. In each of the three cases, the FBI sought to hold the women accountable for tax evasion by turning them over to the Treasury Department.¹³¹ Meanwhile, journalists capitalized on the voyeuristic and sensationalist appetites of their readers with reports of extreme wealth and luxury. While Hoover sought to paint a picture of criminal deviancy, the press highlighted lurid fantasy, conspicuous consumption, and desire.

The FBI justified the campaign against the vice queens by claiming that it was rescuing young victims of the prostitution racket who had been deceived into a life of sin and degradation. But the young women who worked in these brothels occupied a position at the summit of sex work. They benefited from the profitability, safety, and luxury offered within these unique brothels and call houses. As mentioned earlier, the average brothel-based prostitute in Portland, Oregon, charged two dollars per sex act in 1932, and her cut amounted to one dollar. Similarly, the women who worked the Connecticut sex circuit in 1936, many of them from New York City, typically charged between two and four dollars per act.¹³² The women in Scheible's and Malin's houses charged a minimum of twenty dollars per sex act (earning ten dollars), and they frequently could charge significantly more. These women pursued work in these brothels and knew that they could easily be replaced. That the women were generally happy with their working conditions is demonstrated by the fact that the FBI had trouble finding sex workers willing to testify against the vice queens and universally described these workers as "reluctant" or "hostile" witnesses. US Attorney Klein had to look for creative ways to build cases against the elite madams. The sex workers' reluctance to testify did not, however, prevent the FBI from labeling them "white slaves," resuscitating a Progressive Era white slavery trope that celebrated a "conception of female weakness and male domination [that] left no room for the possibility that prostitutes might

¹²⁹ P. J. Cotter, "New York City, NY," 14 December 1935, FBI 31-43024-69, p. 2, FBI White Slave Files.

¹³⁰ Norma Abrams, "Nab Lucille Malin as Vice Queen," *New York Daily News*, 9 November 1936.

¹³¹ "Bad News for Vice Queen," *Washington Herald*, 25 September 1937; Cotter, "New York City, NY," 3 November 1937.

¹³² Pliley, *Policing Sexuality*, 191.

consciously or aggressively choose their activities.”¹³³ Journalists celebrated the rescue of these white slaves, describing them in one particularly pulpy account as “women in terror, pitiable, half-naked white slaves impaled on the alters [*sic*] of lust.”¹³⁴ Any understanding of the sex workers’ own agency was swept aside in the FBI’s refusal to acknowledge that Upper East Side brothels positioned these women at the pinnacle of the sex work hierarchy. Silencing all counternarratives, the FBI constructed its own image of white slavery as the exploitation and coercion of women and the defilement of innocence.

The FBI’s narrative of the investigations thus reduced the vice queens to venal madams whose primary motivation of greed distorted their femininity. These women dominated the men in their lives (who were all but invisible in both the investigations and the press reports of the cases), and they sold their sisters’ most precious belonging—their bodies. They accumulated vast wealth while the rest of the country suffered depravation. Throughout the investigations and trials, the madams were painted as outcasts, and the FBI’s G-men emerged as defenders of respectability. Writing about the FBI in the 1930s, historian Claire Bond Potter notes, “Criminality and federal police reform were both produced through gendered and racialized systems of meaning.”¹³⁵ Hoover’s goal was to contrast the honorable and moral actions of the FBI agents, who upheld the imperatives of the moral state, to the deviant, perverse women who profited from the sexual acts of other women while offering interracial and homosexual temptations to clients.

Missing in the FBI portrayals of high-end prostitution were the vice queens’ many respectable partners and patrons, whose respectability was carefully protected by the FBI. Wealthy men who patronized the vice queens’ establishments saw no punishment—social or legal—for their complicity in breaking the law. The FBI carefully protected these men, their marriages, and their right to purchase sex. Those who indirectly profited from call houses and their illegality were also protected. Adler wrote of the endless bribes that cut into her bottom line: bribes to landlords, elevator boys, club owners, policemen, lawyers, politicians, doctors, cooks, maids, and so on. Quoting another madam, she wrote: “I, as the madam am the outcast . . . but my partners rake in a profit and still stay respectable. What’s more is that I help them stay that way” by providing a place for them to conduct business and by giving them a target to “clean up” when election time comes around.¹³⁶ By narrowing the focus of investigation to the perverse vice queens, the FBI implicitly condoned

¹³³ Marlene D. Beckman, “The White Slave Traffic Act: Historical Impact of a Federal Crime Policy on Women,” in *Criminal Justice Politics and Women: The Aftermath of Legally Mandated Change*, ed. Claudine Schreiber and Clarice Feinman (New York: Haworth Press, 1985), 85–101, 86.

¹³⁴ John M. Byers, “G-Men War on Vice Rings,” *Front Page Detective*, February 1937.

¹³⁵ Potter, *War on Crime*, 7.

¹³⁶ Adler, *A House Is Not a Home*, 302.

the actions of whole networks of individuals who profited from vice; the FBI allowed patrons and various profiteers to uphold the fiction of respectability while providing journalists with sensationalistic fodder about the madams' sexual depravity.

After the convictions of Mae Scheible and Lucille Malin, the publicity arm of the FBI provided case summaries to journalists like Courtney Ryley Cooper. These press statements described the extremely profitable nature of the vice queens' despicable business practices while emphasizing their depravity and their unfeminine natures. The FBI's discussion of Scheible's case, for instance, focused on how she cheated customers and employees alike. It painted a picture of her uncontrollable greed and her corrupting influence on the police, purporting to demonstrate how she manipulated the men around her with proclamations of love while operating as a "shrewd call house madam."¹³⁷ The write-up for Malin's case emphasized her wealth. It noted that her apartment cost \$10,000 a year and was "lavishly furnished, containing French beds and giving every appearance of being modeled like a French brothel." The facts that she promoted interracial sex by keeping two African American women on staff for white clients and that she lured employees with promises of the opportunity to meet rich future husbands were taken as evidence of her deviant nature. Most damning of all, the FBI argued that Lucille Malin and Mae Scheible colluded during Scheible's trial. Believing that Scheible would not be found guilty, Malin proposed that the two vice queens join forces. According to the FBI, the combination of Malin's connections to the wealthiest New Yorkers and Scheible's business acumen would have produced an extremely profitable enterprise, and only the timely intervention of the G-men disrupted the plans of these greedy and powerful women to prey upon another generation of young women.

By reintroducing familiar tropes of white slavery into his vice investigations of the late 1930s, Hoover handed the media easily contained narratives of greed, exploitation, deviance, and criminality that were highly gendered. This helped Hoover keep his G-men in the public spotlight. The raids of the vice queens in 1936 show how the FBI deployed a set image of masculine respectability—personified by the G-men—against the deviancy of the criminal underworld—personified by the vice queens—to underline Hoover's narrative of the FBI's protection of female innocence. The telling of these stories repeatedly erased the sexual agency of the "victims," and the FBI reinvented them as either victims of unrealistic dreams (thwarted love) or victims of greedy and duplicitous employers. Thus, even victims who could not claim sexual innocence were reimagined to be innocent in both the sexual and legal senses; without agency they could not be culpable. None of the "rescued" sex workers faced any charges, though they were usually held in custody as material witnesses during the trials.

¹³⁷ "I.C. #31-42481 Mrs. Mae Scheible, with alias," 4.

Simplifying the stories of the vice queens for media consumption served Hoover's need for positive publicity. In his conversation with Courtney Ryley Cooper about Linda Robertson's defense of her sex work, Hoover commented, "And something else: do you notice that nowhere is there even a mention of the question of morals? The job pays well, that's enough." Even if the letter was proven to be a hoax, Hoover fretted that "the viewpoint, however, represents the outlook of thousands upon thousands of silly girls, and that is what worries me."¹³⁸ Hoover's campaign against the vice queens constructed the wealthy madams as the bad guys, middle-class FBI agents as the heroes, and "silly girls" as rescued white slaves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JESSICA PLILEY is an assistant professor of women's and gender history at Texas State University in San Marcos. Her book, *Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI*, explores the centrality of America's first anti-sex trafficking law to the growth of the FBI before World War II and was published by Harvard University Press in 2014.

¹³⁸ Cooper, *Designs in Scarlet*, 4–5.