

'It was a frame up': Undercover female police and abortion in New York, 1913-1924



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Context

Abortion was criminalized in the late-nineteenth century and remained illegal until reform in the 1960s and 70s. Yet, its meaning, significance, and practice remained contested, and women procured abortions throughout criminalisation.

Between 1913 and 1924, female detectives, police officers, and police matrons in New York City worked undercover to prosecute suspected abortionists.

These investigations particularly targeted female, middle-aged, immigrant midwives.

Disguised as women seeking abortions, these officers approached suspected abortionists often using their native language, submitted to examination, and then arrested and testified against these practitioners.



Illustration of Detective Isabella Goodwin going undercover from *The Sun* (11 Aug. 1912), 8.

Women Undercover

These women investigated numerous criminals, including number-runners, fake medical practitioners, spiritualists, and abortionists. When going undercover, women adopted disguises to affect different classes and nationalities. Little discussed in the historiography, the contemporary New York press widely reported on these cases.

Considering female policing of abortion, my project demonstrates the construction of women who procured abortions and the abortionist, as well as the gendering of policing, and cultures of surveillance.

CITY AND COUNTY OF NEW YORK, ss.:
Defendant being duly examined before the undersigned, according to law, on the annexed charge; and being informed that it is his right to make a statement in relation to the charge against him; that the statement is designed to enable him if he see fit to answer the charge and explain the facts alleged against him; that he is at liberty to waive making a statement, and that his waiver cannot be used against him on the trial.

Question. What is your name?
Answer. Mollie Weiser

Question. How old are you?
Answer. 47 years

Question. Where were you born?
Answer. Austria

Question. Where do you live, and how long have you resided there?
Answer. 702-5 av 7 years

Question. What is your business or profession?
Answer. Midwife

New York, New York Municipal Archives, Case 115299, Box 1344, File 320, Affidavit Ada Brady v. Mollie Weiser

Research Questions

- Police women presented their attempts to procure abortions in police and court testimony. How do these illuminate other women's abortion experiences?
- Why were women seen as especially suited for undercover work? What does it say about these women's professional and personal identities?
- In posing undercover, these women constructed and inhabited a social 'other': who was this? How did they create - and then subvert - community with alleged female abortionists?
- Historians have discussed the gendering of the welfare state: what does this tell us of the gendering of the formation of the legislative, and carceral state?

Form No. 195-13
AFFIDAVIT-PLAIN
FIRST DIVISION
CITY AND COUNTY OF NEW YORK, ss.: City Magistrates' Court, Third District
Ada Brady
of No. Special Squad No 2 Det. Bureau Street, aged over 21 years, occupation Police officer being duly sworn, deposes and says, that on the 27th day of April, 1917, 19, at The City of New York, in the County of New York, Mollie Weiser (now here)

New York, New York Municipal Archives, Case 115299, Box 1344, File 320, Affidavit Ada Brady v. Mollie Weiser

Sources and New Material

Abortion was illegal and these women worked undercover, however the following material documents this practice:

- New York District Attorney Records; affidavits, testimony, evidence
- Trial transcripts of the County of New York
- Contemporary newspaper coverage
- Personal and public writings from female police officers

Select Bibliography: N. Beisel, and T. Kay, 'Abortion, Race, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century America', *American Sociological Review*, 69 (2004), 498-518. • L. A. Jackson, *Women Police : Gender, Welfare and Surveillance in the Twentieth Century*, Gender in History (Manchester, 2006). • L. Reagan, 'Linking Midwives and Abortion in the Progressive Era', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 69 (1995), 569-98.