

Joan Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family, and the Law in Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001).

The erring female captured late nineteenth century philanthropic attention and the scientific gaze of reformers and 'psy' professionals in the early twentieth century. In recent decades the erring female has recaptured the attention of feminist social historians. Joan Sangster's *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family and the Law in Ontario, 1920-1960* is a prime example of this renewed interest in understanding the connection between expert knowledge, forms of governing and gender.

Sangster's main concern is the differential treatment females received under the law in the area of familial and sexual regulation between 1920 to 1960 in Ontario, Canada. Drawing on journals, government documents, newspapers, and correctional case files, her study explores several key issues that drew girls and women into criminal and juvenile courts both as victim and offender in the early to mid twentieth century. The book is organized thematically, including chapter discussions on: incest and sexual abuse; wife assault; prostitution; female delinquency; and the sexual regulation of Aboriginal women before the law. In *Regulating Girls and Women* Sangster finds women and girls, in particular those of marginalized race and/or class positions, at the intersection of sexuality, family and the law. Consequently, they found themselves the object of scrutiny by experts imbued with the power to regulate and discipline them. Sangster claims that a sexual double standard betrayed the treatment of girls and women who came before the courts and adjudicated (in)justice for their own good. In her study this can be seen at the level of regulation and the power of law, as well as in, as Sangster puts it, "moments of transgressive disagreement when women queried whether they were really on the receiving end of 'justice'" (204). Sangster reveals the race, class, and gender interconnections that shape(d) both the construction of the female offender and her regulation in the context of changing social and legal definitions of "normal" versus "criminal" sexual and family relations. Sangster demonstrates that discourses and practices reinforce the sexual/social order, but through various social actors they defined "the very nature of sexual 'order' and 'disorder' against which women were measured in the criminal justice system" (199).

Sangster's analysis is based in the traditions of materialism and feminism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction. To understand the ways in which women, sexuality, and the family intersected with legal regulation in 20th century Ontario, Sangster draws on premises of critical legal thinking; that is, "the plurality of law, the need for constant cross-examination of its fabrication and its meaning, and the idea that law is only comprehensible in its social, economic, and political contexts" (194). In this way, she represents law not as a monolith-

ic text but as a combination of discourses, practices, personnel, and strategies that worked together to regulate and punish errant female sexuality. Sangster suggests, the plurality of law and complexity of the modern state notwithstanding, that “we can still identify concentrations of power that both unobtrusively and more vigorously protected dominant ideologies and interests” (203). In attending to discourse she does not lose sight of the material contexts in which discourses are employed. In a similar vein, attending to structural social oppressions she attends to the ways in which discourse mediates social practice.

Sangster contends that a continuum of sexual regulation existed whereby different definitions and rationales, imbued by class, race and gender relations, shifted the focus of concern and the methods used to censure women who were deemed sexually deviant. An excellent example of this process is the Female Refuges Act (FRA) which enabled the incarceration of erring females deemed problematic for sexual promiscuity, illegitimate pregnancies, and/or venereal disease. As Sangster puts it, “‘dissolute’ [a key term used in the FRA] was equated with errant sexuality” (116). She argues that notions of racial difference were integral to how gender and sexuality were regulated. Through the FRA this racialization took two main forms: punishment of white girls for their involvement with men of colour, and punishment of First Nations women for presumed immorality and promiscuity.

Sangster’s attention to racialization and difference in the form of sexual criminalization experienced by First Nations women, their legacy of abuse and colonialization is one of the most significant contributions of this book. She argues that the ideological construction of race that naturalized the hegemony of middle-class “white” family forms served to translate, interpret, and legitimate the gender order, political economy, and culture of Canadian society. She goes on to explain:

Discourses on sexuality, laden with power, constituted class, gender, and race as they were lived out by women in conflict with the law. Censures of sexuality may have been subject to human agency, redefinition over time, or negotiation and context, but these contexts were highly sensitive to the dominant relations of class, gender, and colonial power (203).

In paying close attention to the conflicts that brought women and girls into the legal arena, Sangster examines not only how law regulated the erring female, but her attempts to use or defy law. In so doing, Sangster highlights both dominant claims made by legal and medical authorities, as well as the muted voices of those disqualified from dominant discourse (and she acknowledges that the former are more easily heard). Two examples among the many Sangster presents are illustrative of the power of expert knowledges in forms of governing and the gendered character of this process. In one case a girl’s story was rejected when a medical exam proved her hymen was intact. She had repeatedly run away and was sent to the Ontario Training School for Girls for incorrigibility. The

Children's Aid Society claimed that "'she was as much to blame as her father' for tension in the family" (162-3). In another case, a young Afro-Canadian woman's claims that she had been raped by a group of boys in a downtown church were silenced. "She was dismissed as a wild storyteller; after all, said the psychiatrist, 'this is probably a fabrication [otherwise] the minister [whom she told] would have investigated'" (163).

The strongest parts of the book are those in which the author articulates how power/knowledge relations are at work in the lives of women who come before the court. Drawing extensively on case files Sangster provides an account rich in theoretical interpretation. One of the book's greatest strengths is also a drawback. The breadth of her examination is both revealing and limiting. I was left wanting more, especially in Chapter Six, "Native Women, Sexuality and the Law" where Sangster outlines the ways in which sexual regulation of First Nations women was shaped through law by race and the politics of colonialism. As a reader I became caught up in the vivid details of legal, familial, and sexual encounters. I found myself waiting for a return to the theoretical connections so clearly and convincingly laid out in the introduction. For instance, how does age intersect with gender? What are the differences between regulating girls and regulating women? Though she explores this best in her chapter, "Promiscuity and Prostitution," the book could have benefited from further unpacking of the category age, and its relation to class and race.

Sangster's study is timely in the current socio-legal climate with legislation like Alberta's Protection of Children Involved in Prostitution and similar bills recently passed in other provinces, and in the wake of recent cases of femicide such as the murder of Gillian Hadley in Ontario. A more substantial comment on the significance of her research for current debates could have been made. Although Sangster situates her work as providing "second thoughts on current debates," the book does not return to its contemporary point of departure – the regulation of sexually precocious young females in the name of protection (1). How does her study shed light on the ways legal reforms, such as the recent safe houses for child prostitutes, facilitate or hinder women's ability to confront oppression?

Regulating Girls and Women makes a significant contribution to the theoretical and substantive literature in women's history and socio-legal studies. Supporting evidence for Sangster's claims can be found in the works of Carolyn Strange, Mariana Valverde, Karen Dubinsky and others who have documented the regulation of women and girls. The book's clarity of style and well articulated analysis make it a useful text for upper level courses in women's studies, sociology, and women's history. This is a valuable book and useful addition to a growing socio-legal scholarship in women's history.

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