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Aya Gruber

University of Colorado Law School

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The Troubling Alliance Between Feminism and Policing

Aya Gruber



On May 25, 2020, a [video](#) went viral depicting Amy Cooper, a White woman, calling the cops on Christian Cooper, a Black man, to tell them that an “African-American” man was “threatening” her. That same night in Minneapolis, police officer Derek Chauvin snuffed the life out of [George Floyd](#), who pleaded for mercy and cried out for his mother. Racial stress had already been brewing because of the coronavirus’s disparate impact on communities of color and several other high-profile killings of innocent African-Americans. Floyd’s killing boiled the racial stress into righteous anger, resulting in a worldwide political uprising. As protests brought overdue attention to the ubiquity of anti-Black violence, the media regularly recited a laundry list of recent racial outrages. Figuring prominently in a list that included the lynching-like murder of [Ahmaud Arbery](#), the deadly middle-of-the-night raid of [Breonna Taylor](#)’s home, and the horrific asphyxiation of Floyd was Amy Cooper’s call to the police. Her actions became an inseparable part of the contemporary libretto on racist policing.

The Amy Cooper video struck a nerve with a public becoming increasingly frustrated with what they saw as the tendency of White women—a group generally immune from policing, prosecution, and incarceration—to invoke state and private authority at whim. Pop-cultural proof of White women’s privilege and authoritarianism flooded the internet: “Karen” who “calls the manager;” [Patricia McCloskey](#) in front of her marbled mansion, one hand on her capri pant-clad hip, the other pointing a semiautomatic at passing protesters; the liberal friend whose “[White fragility](#)” causes heightened defensiveness. For years, critical race commentators questioned White women’s immunity to accountability for White supremacy and the underlying presumption that women, as a subordinated group vis-a-vis men, are allies to racial-justice and other left social movements, including feminism. After all, critics pointed out, in 2016, [more White women](#) voted for a confessed “pussy grabber” than the first female presidential nominee.

Here, I argue that the alliance between White women and policing currently under public scrutiny is not just a function of race-baiting, “security mom” politics—the type Trump advances [when he tweets](#), “Suburban Housewives of America . . . Biden will destroy your neighborhood and American dream.” The alliance also

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support for policing, prosecution, and imprisonment as also a function of *progressive* and feminist ideologies. In my recent book *The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of Women's Liberation in Mass Incarceration*, I trace the origins of the powerful “carceral feminist” instinct—the strong presumption that women’s equality is vindicated through criminal law enforcement. My intent is not to cast aspersions on feminism or even “White feminism” but, in the vein of James Forman Jr.’s *Locking Up Our Own* and Naomi Murakawa’s, *The First Civil Right*, to tell a complex story of feminism’s relationship to the American penal state so that we feminists can, in Murakawa’s words, “reexamine the scaffolding beneath our explanations for mass incarceration” in order to better fight it.

Women’s “Protection Agency”

That fateful morning when Christian Cooper, an avid birder, came upon Amy Cooper and her unrestrained pooch in Central Park’s “Ramble,” a 38-acre protected nature reserve and home to over 230 species of birds, he was already accustomed to such “scofflaw behavior,” as he called it. He asked Amy Cooper to leash her dog, and when she refused, he pulled out the dog treats he had taken to carrying to give dog owners extra incentive. Amy Cooper grabbed her dog by the collar but did not leash it, and Christian Cooper started recording a video of the encounter on his phone. In response, Amy Cooper—finger pointed at Christian Cooper’s face/phone—demanded that he stop recording, warning that she would call the cops. She added, in a one-upping tone, “I’m going to tell them an African-American man is threatening my life.” At first, Amy Cooper calmly told the police operator, “I’m in the Ramble and there’s a man, African-American, and he has a bike helmet, and he is recording me and threatening me and my dog.” But within a few seconds, as the dog choked against her grip, Amy Cooper adopted a breathless, frightened tone, pleading, “I’m being threatened by a man in the Ramble! Please send the cops immediately!”

In the power struggle with Christian Cooper, Amy Cooper had a weapon far more formidable than dog treats and a cell phone. She could freely call on the police to do her bidding. Amy Cooper *claimed*—many say *lied*—that she felt “scared” when Christian Cooper “confronted [her] in an area where there was no one else nearby.” However, what was wrong with Amy Cooper’s conduct was not just her ostensible lie. Indeed, she, like many who call the cops, may have truly harbored a fear of Christian Cooper, unreasonable and racialized as it might have been. What is striking is the casual ease with which she invoked a presumptively racist and potentially deadly police force. Amy Cooper later *admitted* to regarding the police as a personal “protection agency.”

Treating the police as cost-free protection downplays the harm that policing inflicts not only on suspects but also on *callers*. Amy Cooper eventually recognized many people “don’t have the luxury” to call the cops without negative consequences. Christian Cooper, indeed, appears to have adopted his dog-treat method of inducing leash-law compliance to avoid invoking state authority for minor scofflaw behavior. Consider the case of Ms. Monet, a concerned citizen. On June 1, in the midst of the George Floyd protests, Ms. Monet flagged down officers because looters were trying to enter a store owned by a White man in her Los Angeles neighborhood. The police arrived, promptly handcuffed the fifty-five-year-old Black good Samaritan, and shoved her up against a wall along with two family members. Meanwhile, local reporter Christina Gonzales tried to intervene live on air, frantically telling the cops they were detaining the wrong people and that the real looters were getting away. After the officers finally relented to Monet’s release—the looters long gone—she was surprisingly gracious. “I get it. I understand they’re tired. They’re worn out,” she commiserated, but added, “We’ve been worn out. I’m fifty-five. We’re tired too.”

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Amy Cooper's confrontation of Christian Cooper was just one in a large group of highly publicized Karen-calling-the-cops incidents that spotlighted how ostensibly female-protecting policing harms, stigmatizes, and even threatens the lives of the targets of that policing, who are disproportionately men of color. There was "BBQ Becky," caught on video demanding that the police aid her attempts to stop a Black family from grilling outside the designated grill area of a park. There was Yale student Sarah Braasch, who twice called the police on Black graduate students using the common room in her dorm. And just days before the Amy Cooper video and Floyd's homicide, around 8 a.m., a woman in Northern California reported to the police that "an African-American man is dancing in the street and clearly something is wrong with him." The police showed up, violently pinned down, and arrested Mali Watkins, who, clad in jogging attire, tried in vain to explain that he was dancing for exercise.

It might be comforting to imagine that the women who call the police on Black people are all deeply racist, MAGA-obsessed conservatives. But Amy Cooper is a self-proclaimed liberal Democrat and equalitarian, and Braasch said she "dedicated [her] life to fighting oppression in all of its many forms." They did what many commentators, including feminists, have repeatedly told women to do in the face of perceived threat: summon the police. Feminists have urged women to gain power over dominating men in a sexist society by invoking the police—an authoritarian organization that regularly dominates men. Indeed, Braasch explained her calls to the police as a reaction to "harass[ment] by persons standing outside of my dorm room door" that should be "regarded as a Me Too incident." A Medium post defended Braasch's actions because she was a sexual assault survivor and "hypervigilant" about threats.

Of course, the feminist policing program was born of concerns over serious violence against women, not BBQ infractions. However, throughout time, feminists have underestimated the potential for the women-police alliance to inflict harm on marginalized men and communities, reinforce larger hierarchies, and backfire on the women most vulnerable to both state and private violence. To be sure, critical race feminists have long publicized the police penchant to arrest, harass, and even beat poor women of color. However, in the mainstream feminist view, the primary way police mistreated women was by being dismissive of their reports and *failing to arrest* accused men. With this orientation, feminists' answer to the police mistreating women became pursuing *more* policing rather than rejecting the call-the-cops directive.

White Women Versus Black Men

Reacting to the Amy Cooper video, Professor Katheryn Russell-Brown remarked that it was particularly disturbing because "it tap[ped] into a long history of White women, in particular, falsely accusing Black men of crimes that leads to great harm." The video has been frequently discussed in conjunction with the 1955 Emmett Till case, in which a White woman lodged a false accusation of groping against a Black teen, who was then brutally executed by a White mob. The video also drew comparisons to the 1931 Scottsboro Boys case, in which two White women, Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, falsely accused several young Black men of gang rape, inciting a lynch mob.

This racial critique sits uncomfortably with #BelieveWomen sentiments and feminists' denial that women ever participate in law enforcement's infliction of pain on men by lodging false accusations, or even true but racialized claims of fear. Feminists have instead concentrated on how the historical *absence* of law enforcement caused harm to women. The narrative equation is simple: The past was sexist; crimes against women were underenforced; and thus, a feminist future depends on robust policing. However, throughout

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feminists, were not solely the passive objects of historical patriarchy. They exercised agency, constrained by sexist social mores though it might have been, to participate in the subordination of others.

From the very first feminist criminal law reforms at the turn of the century, it was clear that female-protecting policing often harmed marginalized people, including women. Feminist temperance reformers' [successful campaigns](#) to create statutory rape provisions outlawing underage sex and to broadly criminalize prostitution as “White slavery” crashed into the reality that antirape rhetoric and purported rape-law enforcement fueled an epidemic of lynching in the post-Civil War South. In a famous 1894 confrontation, antilynching activist Ida B. Wells [chastised](#) temperance leader Frances Willard for stirring up the Southern mob in her speeches supporting rape reform. Willard shot back that Wells, who called into question the “[moral reputation](#)” of White accusers, was anti-woman for labeling women liars.

Indeed, history rarely reveals clear villains and heroes. “The heart-rending cry of the White woman” as [Frederick Douglass](#) put it, was not just a matter of Southern women being gratuitously racist. It was also a function of these women’s socially and sexually subordinate status. White women’s alliance with law enforcement stemmed from not just racism and racial privilege but also women’s need for power and protection in a society that significantly restricted their social, sexual, and economic liberty. When Bates and Price falsely accused the Scottsboro Boys, they did not wield the weapon of criminal authority simply to cement their racial superiority. Rather, an accepted theory is that Bates and Price were sex workers who lied to protect themselves from prosecution under the 1910 White Slavery Act—a law championed by temperance feminists.

The weapon of criminal law has always been a double-edged sword. Early paternalistic criminalization regimes reflected and reinforced women’s subordinate gender status and even landed women in jail “for their own good.” In fact, the “peculiar paradox [in] early feminist sexual politics,” according to historian [Jane Larson](#), was that “it turned out to be mostly girls rather than men who were placed in state custody in order to prevent underage sex.” In later decades, mainstream feminists sometimes, though infrequently, acknowledged that harsh rape punishments to protect women’s prized virtue could be sexist as well as racist. When the issue of the death penalty for adult rape finally reached the Supreme Court in the 1970s, progressives regarded *opposing* capital punishment as the feminist position. In 1977, then-lawyer Ruth Bader Ginsburg filed an American Civil Liberties Union amicus brief calling the death penalty for rape a legacy of Reconstruction-era racial terror and “a vestige of an ancient, patriarchal view of women as the property of men.”

Cementing the Alliance

Notwithstanding the troubling pedigree of female-protective policing, mainstream “second-wave” feminists in the latter decades of twentieth century aggressively pursued criminalization programs to protect women from violence. For example, in the 1980s and ’90s, the battered women’s movement waged a wildly successful campaign to strengthen criminal law and law enforcement to combat domestic violence (DV). The DV criminalization program was all the more remarkable because most of the early battered women’s activists in the 1970s were deeply anti-authoritarian. Organizers of shelters viewed the criminal system as an institution of “domination based on race, class, and sex,” as activist [Susan Schechter](#) called it. Feminists in the welfare rights movement and Black feminists characterized battering as a matter of economic precarity and White supremacy. They regarded police as the “fascist” state incarnate.

antipoverty and Black feminists' contention that economic insecurity and racial inequality underlay violence. By the late '70s, the mantra was, "wife beating crosses all boundaries of economic class, race, national origin, or educational background," as celebrated activist Del Martin remarked. Once feminists established battering as a matter of sexist men, rather than structural and social factors, criminal law emerged as a preferred solution. Feminist lawyers brought class action [lawsuits](#) to compel police officers who responded to DV calls to arrest, rather than mediate disputes, and police departments quickly adopted the pro-arrest program.

Activists paid little heed to warnings that police were rarely saviors to poor people of color. "I think White women talked more as if the courts belonged to us [all women] and therefore should work for us," one activist of color [remarked](#), "where we [women of color] always saw it as belonging to someone else and talked more about how to keep it from hurting us." Even the deeply anti-authoritarian shelter feminists went along with the law enforcement program, eventually seeing police as a free security agency. One shelter administrator, [noting](#) that "we depend very, very heavily on [the police] for security," characterized the police as responsive and helpful. She surmised, "It's as if once the woman has made a commitment to do something, they are more willing to work with her."

However, for many battered women, protective policing was not cost-free. The state of California [compared DV arrest data](#) from 1988, before mandatory arrest policies, to data from 1998. It found that the arrests of men rose by 60 percent, but women's arrests rose by 400 percent. Stripping police of discretion, it turned out, countered their masculinist instinct *not* to arrest women. And of course, this newfound willingness to arrest women disproportionately impacted Black women. By the 1990s, several large-scale [policing studies](#) revealed that the arrest program, while sometimes a winning proposition of middle-class White women, often increased violence against poor women of color. Still, many feminist activists ignored the dark side of law enforcement, instead [opting for the racist argument](#) that the regime should be tougher in Black neighborhoods because in "subcultures of ghettoized people, where imprisonment is all too common, a few hours in jail may be seen as only minor irritation, or even a [rite] of passage."

We are currently in a moment of radical awareness about the troubling history and present of American policing and the carceral state. This awareness has increasingly extended to critical reflection on women's reliance on the police for protection from threats, both real and imagined. Recently, White women have placed their bodies between riot officers and Blacks Lives Matter protesters, capitalizing on their privileged position with police. But once the protests end, it is likely fearful women will continue to reflexively call the cops, and police departments will continue to tout their role as women's protectors.

The time to end the feminist-police alliance is now.

Aya Gruber: Professor of Law at the University of Colorado Law School. Her most recent book, [The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of Women's Liberation in Mass Incarceration](#), was published in May of 2020.

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