

The Pimping of Prostitution: An Excerpt

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The following is an excerpt from author Julie Bindel's "The Pimping of Prostitution," which was recently published by Palgrave Macmillan. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.

A number of the sex trade survivors have told me horror stories about being labeled as mentally ill, liars, fraudsters, fantasists and masochists. It's ugly but unsurprising. Over the years, I have witnessed survivors being bullied, harassed, vilified, libeled and slandered by pro-prostitution activists and representatives of the sex trade.

One example comes to mind. As a regular contributor to national newspapers, I pitched the idea of a profile interview with Rachel Moran, pegged to the success of her bestselling book ["Paid For: My Journey Through Prostitution"] and of her work in the genesis of the survivor movement in the Republic of Ireland. The young feminist journalist who was covering as section editor of a prestigious UK daily replied with a "no" to the piece, saying that "there were rumblings about its authenticity in more than a few quarters...". I asked from where but she never replied.

Sabrina Valisce understands the way the pro-sex work lobby operates. After all, Valisce was involved with the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective as a volunteer for 24 years. She campaigned to bring in the new law that decriminalized brothels and street prostitution, because she genuinely believed that it would be better for the women and afford them more freedom. Because the pro-prostitution lobby relies on misinformation, mythology and plain old PR, it is particularly galling to them when one of their own crosses over to the other side.

Valisce tells me about an event she was speaking at in Townsville at the *Prostitution Narratives* book launch when a senior member of Scarlet Alliance (the Australian pro-prostitution lobby group), made every attempt she could to silence her. "She stood on a chair, towering over an audience who wanted to hear me; booing, interrupting and bellowing," recalls Valisce. "I didn't feel anger or even annoyance. I strangely identified with her. (I thought) she's scared. I can see it because I've felt that same defensiveness. 'Don't take my livelihood. I've got nothing else. I've got nowhere else to turn to.' I looked at her and smiled, nodded and said, 'I understand.' It wasn't a designed response. It was instinct."

Valisce then invited the Scarlet Alliance member and the other pro-prostitution women accompanying her (to) talk after the event. "One approached me and we had a very good conversation. Three others physically circled me. It was a bizarre feeling. Then they approached and it was yelling all at once, voices drowning each other out."

"They live permanently on the defensive, but they can't take understanding with disagreement of the solutions to the problems. This certainly wasn't the only incidence of bullying, nor even close to the worst. It was the moment I realized how on edge I'd lived for so long and how little I missed the life."

Mau has also been bullied by the pro-lobbyists and accused of having made up her entire story about being a sex trade survivor. "The lobbyists connected with me on Twitter and tried to make me look crazy. We have a group of sex workers here in Germany," says Mau. "They have an internet presence where they wrote I was fake. They say this about everybody who says the truth about prostitution."

Soon, Mau realised that many journalists believed the pro-prostitution lobbyists' story that she had constructed her history of prostitution. "The German journalists won't contact me because they think I'm a fake. If you search the internet you get the information that I'm a fake," says Mau. "They sent me emails pretending they are a radio station and want to interview me, and they hope I will give them my telephone number. I didn't give it."

"*Der Spiegel* contacted me," says Mau, "and after interviewing me for an article about the sex trade, wanted proof that I exist, which is difficult for me because I couldn't give my name or my telephone number. It's very mean what the lobby does. You cannot prove that you exist and that you've been a prostitute. There is no sheet of paper that says you're a prostitute."

Fighting for the 'right' to sell sex

Three pro-prostitution activists, Terri-Jean Bedford (who had previously run escort agencies), scholar Amy Lebovitch and Valerie Scott, took the Canadian government to court, arguing that its laws on prostitution were unconstitutional. The three women were campaigning to remove all laws pertaining to the sex trade.

Bridget Perrier was at the court, and after the ruling Bedford flicked her riding crop (Bedford ran a BDSM practice), which delighted the many journalists who were there to cover the story. Perrier produced a bent coat hanger, which she called her "pimp stick", telling the journalists that she had been beaten by her pimp with such an implement every day.

At court with Perrier was her adopted daughter Angel, whose mother had been murdered by Pickton. "Terri-Jean was too cowardly to go after me, so instead she went after an 18-year-old whose mother had been murdered by a serial killer of prostituted women," says Perrier. "But I taught my kid well. My kid told her, 'Over my mum's dead body will we agree that legalizing prostitution is good for women.'

"Angel said she would lobby to make sure it wouldn't be legitimized, and Terri-Jean even went as far as to put her hand on my child. After she was done chastising my child she went to one of our survivors, a girl who had been sexually tortured from the age of 11 until 25. She walked up to her and said, 'Why are you crying, this is a victorious day for us.' I remember our girl looking at her, and there was a picture of our girl and Terri-Jean in the papers, and this survivor put her finger right in Terri-Jean's face and said, 'Like hell it will!'

"I've had the pro-lobby take my children's pictures from Facebook and put 'Bridget's future hooker', says Perrier. "I've had the (pro-prostitution) lobby attack me, send me pictures of little girls having intercourse with grown men. I couldn't stop looking at the pictures because the mama in me wanted to climb through the pictures to rescue the little girls. These are babies, four-year-olds."

Valisce left prostitution in early 2011 and moved to the Gold Coast from New Zealand, seeking a new direction in life. Confused and depressed, when Valisce's neighbour asked her to perform webcam prostitution she politely declined. "I felt like I had 'whore' stamped on my forehead. How did she know to ask me? I now know being female was the only reason," says Valisce. Afterwards, the neighbor would shout insults such as "The bitch is home" whenever she saw her. "My final exiting involves multiple stories like this. I exited first emotionally, then physically and lastly intellectually and psychologically," says Valisce. "I feel like I'm still exiting because my self-view still battles to be whole."

Alice was prostituted in Queensland at the age of 22. "I had never heard of the term 'gaslighting' until I went public with my story about my time as a prostitute," says Alice. "Gaslighting is something I have experienced incessantly throughout my life—beginning with the perpetrators of the child commercial sexual exploitation that started when I was five, right

through to adulthood from various other abusers and violent persons. But never in a million years did I expect to encounter that same behavior from people after learning I am a survivor of the sex trade.”

“The opposition and behavior exhibited towards me by the pro-sex trade lobby since going public about having worked in the industry caught even my pessimistic, catastrophising self completely off guard,” says Alice. “I can now say with complete confidence that the pro-sex industry lobby is a bigger, more heartless and far crueler beast than even the most insipid of mental illnesses I have developed as a result of all the trauma I have endured.”

Soon after Alice went public with her criticisms of the sex trade and her personal experiences within it, the pro-prostitution lobby instantly began to label her a SWERF (Sex Worker Exclusionary Radical Feminist), claiming that she hated women in prostitution. “The pro-sex trade lobby continually question my background and claim I am lying about having worked in the sex industry,” says Alice. “Those who don’t deem me a liar, say that I am ‘naive’, ‘foolish’ and am ‘being pimped out and used’ by abolitionists to further their cause. Others have accused me of making a profit from the publication of my story and say that I am stealing from survivors and women currently in the industry.”

At the World’s Oldest Oppression Conference in Melbourne, Australia, in April 2016 a number of protesters turned up outside the venue handing out flyers containing propaganda about the sex trade and the so-called benefits those who choose to become involved in ‘sex work’ would experience. One protester’s placard read “Why be Poor?” Pro-lobbyists had attempted to get the conference cancelled before it happened on the grounds that discussion of the harms of the sex trade, which the lobby claimed were false, would be dangerous for those women who choose to be in prostitution.

I have also heard stories from survivors about the pro lobby turning up at abolitionist events and attempting to persuade women who had exited prostitution to re-enter, using the arguments that the survivors must have had exceptionally rare bad experiences of sex buyers and pimps, and that they should work for one of the ‘good’ brothels.

“At one event, not even 10 minutes after speaking about the incredible trauma the sex industry has left me with,” says Alice, “a woman came up to me and started a conversation (in which she) was acknowledging the terrible working conditions that existed within the brothels of the area that we were in (a place where prostitution was legalized and regulated). For her, terrible working conditions didn’t include abusive clients and employers, or the rampant drug abuse common as a coping method for the ongoing trauma.”

“No, to her, terrible working conditions were comprised of the fact that because prostitution was legalized within regulated brothels, anyone who worked there had to hand over a portion of their earnings to their employers. Incorrectly assuming that was where I had worked within Australia’s sex industry, this woman assured me that ‘conditions are much better down in New South Wales and I really encourage you to come down and give (sex work) another go’. I was completely shocked—had she not listened to my story 10 minutes earlier? I found out later that the woman I was talking to had recently left her position as the president of Australia’s leading sex-worker union—a position she’d held for almost a decade.

I have witnessed the abuse and slander towards Moran on more than one occasion. Moran describes her treatment at the hands of the pro-prostitution lobby as “soul sickening”.

This pattern repeats itself in the lives of all the publicly visible survivors. At a Berlin press conference to launch her book, the first question asked of Moran was: “What do you say to those who claim you have made everything up?”

“It’s little wonder that younger, more vulnerable women are hounded out of speaking publicly. It’s a deliberate strategy of the pro-lobbyists of course, and these young women cannot take the stress,” says Moran. “I’m glad I came to this activism in my mid-thirties with over a decade out of prostitution under my belt. I’ll be hounded out of nothing and I’m well able to handle the stress.”

The sex trade survivor movement will continue to flourish, despite the efforts of the pimps and pro-prostitution lobbyists. One thing I came to understand, during the time I spent with the survivor abolitionists, is how hopeful, how optimistic these women are, despite the numerous barriers and hurdles they face.

“I’m here to make a difference,” (said) one survivor who I met in Minnesota. “To speak for the worthless. When I cry today it’s from healing, it’s from overcoming. From surviving.”

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