

## Radfems, racism, and the problem with "pimps"

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I was re-reading Iceberg Slim recently (as you do), and wondering what exactly it is the anti-sex brigade mean when they go around calling people "pimps".

I've been called a pimp before. By Julie Bindel, to my face, and I laughed because it is so ridiculous: I have never profited off of anyone's erotic capital but my own... and arguably Billie Piper's, though that makes me no more and perhaps significantly less pimp-like than (say) her agent and the show's producers.

I don't get particularly offended by such obviously over the top labels. But the word itself has started to crop up more and more in the arguments surrounding sex work and the proposed laws regarding prostitution. Take for example in Ireland, where the widespread assumption is that all sex workers are a) women and b) "pimped". Both of these are demonstrably and flagrantly not true, and yet are found in virtually any media coverage of the topic which is heavily influenced by an unholy coalition of extreme religious groups and extreme radfem ideologues.

The side issue dogging the proposed changes, that is, the discourse about what exactly constitutes trafficking and who exactly is trafficked, is of course pretty openly racist - both the words and the imagery. This has been covered in some detail and extremely well by eg. Laura Agustin, whose work on the topic I highly recommend. *Typical "trafficking" propaganda: shades of White Slavery all over the place.* Anyway, back to the concept of "pimp". Now we all know, or think we know, what a pimp is, and much of this archetype comes from highly fictionalised misrepresentations of Mr Slim's own work.



Go on, you know exactly what people mean by the word. What "pimp" implies. A man who runs women, lures them with money and romance, then turns them out to whoring, often beaten, always drug-addicted.

And he is black.

Starting to sound like casual use of "pimp" is dog-whistle racism, isn't it?

For the life of me I have never met a person even remotely like the stereotypical pimp, and yet I "know" they exist, largely because I have been told so over and over again. I've met streetwalkers, both drug-addicted and not; escorts and call girls, same; not one ever had what popular imagination would classify as a "pimp," but then I keep getting told I'm not representative, so maybe the literally hundreds of men and women, cis and trans sex workers I've met are just

"not representative" too?

Occasionally you also hear talk of the "Eastern European gangmaster", but for some reason the class- and racially- evocative term "pimp" comes up far, far more often. Could that be because plain xenophobia just doesn't inspire the troops in quite the same way bald racism does?

Independent sex workers who organise their own affairs and work solo. Roommates who share a flat and both happen to sell sex. Managers running escorts agencies with a dozen or so girls they mostly interact with by text. Massage parlour owners. Women whose house is used by other sex workers, so technically I guess are madams. People who set up message boards and internet forums where clients and sex workers talk among themselves and with each other. All of these are people who get called "pimps" by the anti-sex lobby.

A guy in a crushed velvet suit on a street corner, keeping his girls high and working the neighbourhood? Not so many of those to the pound.

But, let's say he really is out there, because we all keep getting told he is. This working-class black man in the loud clothes who is sexually and physically aggressive and probably has a criminal record. This "pimp".

Do you think his choice of work isn't somehow constrained by society too? That he wouldn't rather be earning money some other way? Because anyone with any sense can surely suss out that a lot of activities, both legal and illegal, would be far more profit and far less hassle than running girls.



*Iceberg Slim: hustling because it's not as if you were going to save him and his mother from poverty, were you?*

This is the reality of waged work, all waged work, whether sex is involved or not. No one, but no one, has "free choice". If you think otherwise, remind yourself what you wanted to be when you grew up, and reflect on how exactly you ended up where you are now. Did you freely select from all career choices in the world, ever? Or did you choose as best you could from the options offered by your abilities and (more crucially) your circumstances? You know, like Iceberg Slim did?

Some folks seem especially resistant to acknowledging the truth about work, so I'll underline it some more. Entire towns in the North weren't full of miners because everyone there just happened to have the aptitude and preference for that sole job, but because it was the only job going. NE Scotland isn't full of fishermen because they have a particular concentration of people whose life's dream was to catch fish, but because that's what the job market offers. Everyone's outcome is the product of limited choices, from streetwalkers to the Queen. And no one's suggesting she needs to be "rescued" from her lack of career options.

**If you want to improve someone's options, you address the things that constrain their choices in the first place. Poverty, addiction, education, to name a few. Not take away the only choices they have.**

The pimp as we perceive him is a low-end tough. He's not exactly a criminal mastermind. And unlike a lot of the people who talk about "pimps" and whatnot, I know criminals. I have seen that life up close and fucking personal. I have lived in their neighbourhoods and their houses, and even in their families. I know that anyone who runs a business in the way the supposed pimp supposedly does is making little money, if any. What's 50% of that £10 anal bareback the anti-sex lobby claim is available in red lights everywhere? A fiver? Yeah, that sounds logical. Now pull the other one.

I know that his power - again, if he exists, because even when I was living in Cracktown, Pinellas County I saw shit that would stop your heart but I never once saw a "pimp" - is a power of an extremely limited kind. The power of someone with few and possibly no other options.

The anti-sex lobby's fantasy use of the term "pimp" is bogus and it is racist. Anyone who claims otherwise is being purposely disingenuous for the sake of striking fear into white, English-speaking, middle-class people.