Phoenix. 2004. An Analysis of Women's Involvement in Prostitution. Published in Dabney. 2004. Crime Types: A Text/Reader

18

An Analysis of Women's Involvement in Prostitution

JOANNA PHOENIX
University of Bath

Phoenix observes that there exists uncertainty about what possesses women to enter into and persist within the world of prostitution. Some scholars insist that prostitution is a form of gendered victimization whereby women's impoverished status in society forces them into

Unpublished paper prepared especially for this reader.

a life of prostitution and makes their exit unrealistic. Others view prostitution as a gendered survival strategy whereby entrepreneurial women utilize their involvements in the sex market as a means of achieving financial and personal independence. Phoenix uses lengthy interviews with twenty-one British streetwalkers to assess the legitimacy of these two competing orientations. These life histories reveal the presence of both gendered victimization and gendered survival strategies. Phoenix concludes that women experience their prostitution roles in contradictory ways; they see it as both a means of survival and a threat to their survival. Moreover, she documents a number of coping strategies that these women invoke en route to accommodating or making sense of this inherent contradiction. The prostitutes adopt a series of interchangeable identities. Sometimes they stress the financial aspects of their work and talk about "prostitutes-as-workers" or "prostitutes-as-commodified bodies." These mindsets construct men as sources of income that could be exploited via sex. When speaking about the pimp role, the women often invoke a "prostitution-as business-woman" or "prostitute-as-loving-partner" identity. These two competing world views construct men as a liability or expense, with the first rejecting the need for a pimp and the second rationalizing his presence in their lives. Still other times, the women invoke a "prostitute-as-victim" or "prostitute-as-survivor" mentality. These discussions frame men as a source of risk and stress that the prostitute must constantly confront or negotiate their antics. This article does well to capture the cognitive and behavioral aspects of street prostitution. It shows how these women act and think within a seemingly chaotic world, constantly struggling to impose and reimpose a sense of order or personal understanding to an inherently contradictory lifestyle.

INTRODUCTION

Centuries of prostitution-related research permit researchers to be fairly clear about one thing. Women who get and stay involved in prostitution tend to be women whose lives are torn apart by the aggregate effects of poverty and who often have been homeless, physically, sexually and emotionally abused by parents, partners or boyfriends, grew up in state care and in institutions and have had histories of absconding from foster placements and children's homes. Many have had drug and alcohol problems that compound the social and material adversity that they face (Carlen, 1996; Hoigard and Finstad, 1992). Others have already been in trouble with the law for petty property offences.

And yet research also tells another tale. Whilst poverty may drive women into prostitution, it is through prostitution that many women are able to secure a degree of control and stability within their personal and economic lives. Involvement in prostitution presents women with the opportunity to combine child care with full time work (i.e., prostitutes can choose their working hours, can work from home and can move in and out of work as they desire or need). It provides them with relatively higher amounts of income than they might otherwise have obtained. Hence it is that prostitutes have been talked about as "economic entrepreneurs" and prostitution as the resistance to relative poverty

and economic dependency on men—situations created by women's exclusion from the labor market.

Of course, recognising both these research tales raises some very interesting questions. Chief amongst these are: what are the contradictions inherent in involvement in prostitution? What type of problems does sustained involvement in prostitution present to the women so involved? How are these problems and/or contradictions accommodated (i.e. made sense of)?

The following draws on research data that was collected in a large British city at the end of the millennium. The research project investigated and theorized the conditions in which it was possible for women's sustained involvement in prostitution. The story told here is both a condensed version of that larger story (Phoenix, 1999a) and a description of the various ways in which women experienced their involvement in prostitution and the symbolic landscape that helped them understand the choices they made. The argument of this article is very simple: women experience their involvement in prostitution in contradictory ways (i.e. as both a means of survival and a threat to their survival) and that contradiction is "accommodated" (i.e. made sense of) at the symbolic level via the ways in which the women understand themselves and the men around them. The article is broken into two main sections. Firstly, the contradictions of involvement in prostitution are discussed. Secondly, the symbolic landscape that the respondents of this study inhabited is described. Before beginning the analysis however, it is important to note that in the British context, selling sex is not illegal (although many prostitution-related activities are, such as loitering or soliciting, "living off the immoral earnings of a prostitute" and so on).

GENDERED SURVIVAL STRATEGY: PROSTITUTION AS A WAY TO A BETTER LIFE

Prostituting, as in the activity of selling sex, is above all else an economic activity: as with any economic activity, personal motivation is usually very clear—the desire for money. However, involvement in prostitution is much more than merely about money, if only because being involved in prostitution means being embroiled in activities that are potentially risky, quasi-legal and certainly criminalised. Most of the interviewees in this study discussed their involvement in prostitution as the opening of future possibilities for them *as women* in the face of ever-mounting social and material difficulties. Prostitution was seen as a way to survive: (i) poverty, (ii) housing difficulties, and (iii) violent relationships that were often the result of rejecting living a life that left them dependent on specific men (fathers, husbands or boyfriends) or on state welfare benefits.

In common with other working class women, the respondents had difficulty earning enough money to support themselves. They had few, if any educational qualifications, marketable skills or labor market experience. When they could

find work (and only 14 had), they were employed in the low-paid unskilled service sector or unskilled retail sector. Thirteen women had excluded themselves from the labor market altogether. Many of the women simply stated: "no one would employ me." Removing oneself from the formal labor market or failing to maintain an "ordinary" working history can have profound effects. For these women, it left them with three choices: they could become dependent on state welfare benefits, dependent on particular men, or provide themselves with income in ways that are typically illegally criminogenic.

Independence and the rejection of dependency was the central theme in all interviews—especially when talking about violent relationships. Most women explained their involvement in prostitution as being bound up with their rejection of being dependent on husbands, fathers, boyfriends or state welfare benefits. Those women who grew up in Local Authority Care rejected dependence on a state-structured care system. Others attributed their involvement in prostitution to the need to "sort out" pressing financial problems, multiple debt and so on and when asked, it was precisely their rejection of being dependent on specific men (who were abusive or who did not provide economically or who exploited the women) that created the economic difficulties to which prostitution had become the answer, because it often precipitated an immediate financial crisis. In general, these women constructed the dependency they experienced in their childhood pasts or in their adult intimate relationships as *the cause* of the violent abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and/or restrictions that they experienced. By the women's own accounts, to be economically and socially independent was the means by which they could avoid any future abuse.

In short, the respondents talked about their involvement in prostitution as being a means of securing their future economic and social survival. As working class women, they lived within a social and material context where their survival was, generally, contingent on particular men, the state or casual part-time low-paid employment (Glendinning and Millar, 1992). Given that these specific women had also rejected ways of living that left them dependent on someone or something else, involvement in prostitution was seen not simply as an economic activity, but more importantly as a survival strategy that would enable them to live the lives they wanted to, to provide for themselves and any dependents they might have and to fashion a new better future for themselves in the face of ever decreasing legitimate opportunities in their present.

GENDERED VICTIMISATION: PROSTITUTION AS A THREAT TO SURVIVAL

Involvement in prostitution also came to be seen by these women as a trap within which their survival was threatened. Each woman commented that being involved in prostitution had furthered her impoverishment, dramatically heightened her likelihood of being the victim of sexual and/or physical assault and increased her dependence on men (who, as pimps, were often violent).

The women discussed the tremendous economic risks inherent in engagement in prostitution regardless of whether they made the kind of money that allowed them to sort out their problems, sign off the social security register, obtain housing and leave their male partners. Specifically, they spoke of the great costs incurred through working such as the financial investments needed (for example, buying clothes and condoms, renting a flat, purchasing a mobile phone and paying for advertising). While it is true that many people have new expenditures when starting new work, for these women, the extra financial burdens involved in prostitution came at a time when their lives were already marked by extreme poverty and housing problems.

In addition, however, working from the streets brought with it its own unique financial problems and risks. All but two of the respondents had been convicted of a prostitution-related offence—typically loitering or soliciting. In most cases, the convictions had been punished with fines which became sentencing orthodoxy in 1983. This change in sentencing lead to an increase in the number of convictions and in the levels of fines which had the perverse result that *more*, not fewer, women were sent to prison not for prostitution-related offences, but for non-payment of fines (Matthews, 1986: 191).

Few of the interviewees could remember exactly how many times they had been arrested or the precise level of fines they either still had to pay or had paid in the course of their involvement in prostitution. However, my own observations in the court suggested fines tended to be in the region of £50–£100 (i.e. approximately $100–$200) per charge and that women often had three or more charges against them each time they went to court. Fining women involved in prostitution for their prostitution-related offences is paradoxical. Many of them simply did not have the financial resources to pay their fines. The obvious irony is that the criminal justice system, itself, created the conditions that both justified these women's continued involvement in prostitution as well as trapped them within it.

Perhaps the most dramatic way in which involvement in prostitution came to be understood as a form of gendered victimisation was in their experience of the practice of pimping—a practice which profoundly increased both their poverty, their homelessness and their likelihood of being victims of violence. All but two of the women had been pimped. Thirteen women recalled having most of their money taken from them under the threat of violence. They were left only with a "subsistence" allowance to get them through each day. Lois (aged 21) recalled being given only £2.50 (i.e. approximately $5.00) per day. Ruthie (aged 25) talked about having only £5.00 (i.e. approximately $10.00) each day in order to buy condoms and cigarettes.

In terms of violence, all of the women who had been pimped talked about regular episodes of violence. They recounted their fears of being murdered or of being punched, stabbed, raped or even shot by their pimps. One of the consequences was that the women believed that being pimped was inevitable and could not be escaped. All spoke of the impossibility of "just not giving him any

more money." Too much was at stake. Threatened with violence, controlled through housing and debt, often cut off from family and friends, the women believed that resistance was futile. Katrina (aged 20) summarised the interconnections between these issues. "We're not getting no money out of it. The only way we're going to get money is if we hide it. And if we get found out—the beatings! We usually get found out."

Risk pervades the life of most prostitute and non-prostitute women in late-twentieth-century Britain. For prostitute women, however, the manner in which they negotiated the risks they encountered in their struggle to survive had led to their rejection of traditional modes of living and towards their involvement in prostitution. In this context, though, such involvement became highly contradictory. The contradiction between narrating involvement in prostitution as something that enables survival and while also threatening that survival is so acute as to raise the question of how the individual women can possibly make sense of their involvement. The next section examines the processes by which the contradictory narrations and effects of prostitution are rendered meaningful.

PROSTITUTE-IDENTITIES AND THE ACCOMMODATION OF CONTRADICTION

It is important to emphasize that the paradox of involvement in prostitution occurs because there is a fundamental discontinuity between the effects of engagement in prostitution that the women recalled and the stories that they told about such engagement. Hence, the women claimed that involvement in prostitution alleviated their poverty, provided them with housing, helped them to live independently and gave them a means to fashion better lives for themselves. Yet, they *also* claimed that involvement in prostitution created their poverty, generated their housing difficulties, made them more dependent on men and/or families and jeopardized their social and material survival. But, in their recollections, the women indicated that as they could see no alternative to their current lifestyle, they had to live within that contradiction (i.e. they had to make sense of their lives within prostitution). It is argued here that prostitution comes to make sense (i.e. is rendered plausible and coherent) by, and within, the construction of a specific "prostitute-identity" which is underpinned by a shifting set of meanings for men, money and violence.

There are six contingent elements of the "prostitute-identity." They have been characterized as contingent because each element was made possible by the social and material context in which the women inhabited. These six elements are described in contradictory pairs. Following these descriptions, the shifting set of meanings of "men," "money" and "violence" that underpin each pair is also outlined.

Prostitutes-as-Workers, Prostitutes-as-Commodified Bodies

The first contingent element is the "prostitute-as-worker" identification in which all the respondents talked about themselves in relation to a generalised imaginary notion of "johns." Within this identification, prostitute-women were constructed primarily as rational economic agents pursuing monetary goals and, more specifically, as workers doing a job and getting paid for it. Prostitution was discussed as though it was a simple economic contract between prostitutes and their johns. This is evidenced in the euphemistic phrases used (i.e. "just making money," "doing business") and in the way the women described their involvement in prostitution, more generally. Lois (aged 21) said: "I'm doing a job. I was doing a job. Like any other person who goes out in the morning, goes to work, gets paid for it and goes home. That's what I do." Christina (aged 23) agreed: "It's a job. That's what you class it as—a job."

Interestingly, the identification of prostitutes-as-workers is also seen in the way that the women described their involvement in prostitution as having nothing to do with sex. The interviewees could make such statements because they denuded their involvement in prostitution of its social setting. Such decontextualisation permitted them to reduce their engagement in prostitution to only a set of episodic, economic moments in a series of individual exchanges between men and women. As Janet (aged 37) said: "You don't have sex with [johns]! Fuck no! That's not sex, you don't even think of it as sex. That's money. It's a job." Others, such as Jasmine (aged 30) and Ingrid (aged 44) put it more succinctly: "It's not sex, it's work" and "You don't think it's sex with [johns]. You don't think of *that* as sex."

The second element in the "prostitute-identity" is a "prostitute-as-commodified-body" identification (as evident in sixteen respondents narratives). In this identification, the women talked about themselves in relation to particular (and anonymous) johns and a notion of "pimp-as-owner" and defined their bodies (especially their vaginas) as rentable objects. This was a subtlety nuanced identification; the women also talked about both controlling and not controlling their rentable vaginas.

The prostitute-as-commodified-bodies identification occurred primarily in relation to an understanding of johns as anonymous men who were interested only in gratifying their own sexual desires and were willing to pay money to do so. This is in direct contrast to the prostitutes-as-workers identification where the respondents talked about themselves in relation to a generalised, imaginary and decontextualised notion of "johns" as one part of a simple economic exchange. The prostitutes-as-commodified-bodies identification was constructed within a specific definition of what was being sold to johns. Instead of selling skill, expertise, time or companionship, these women talked about themselves as being providers of rentable vaginas.

> It hit me when I was 19 that I was actually a prostitute. I didn't really think about it before—it was just work. But then it hit me. I was actually

> selling myself. I was just a hole. I was nothing more than a body men paid to fuck. I was a prostitute. (Lois, aged 21)

The first nuance was in relation to a notion of owning and controlling the commodity (i.e. the rentable vaginas) which was possible through a symbolic separation of the women's bodies from their (assumed) selves. Other researchers have understood this separation as evidence of the emotional and psychological harm of involvement in prostitution (Hoigard and Finstad, 1992) and as specific strategies used by prostitutes to distance themselves from the socially stigmatised label "prostitutes" and thus refuse the negative personal characteristics associated with the label (McKeganey and Barnard, 1996). However, I argue that it is through the symbolic separation of their bodies and selves that the women were able to discuss themselves as owning and controlling (i.e. being ultimately able to dispose of) their rent-able vaginas. Ingrid (aged 44) and Patsy (aged 42) claimed, respectively: "The way I see it, there's me and my body and my body's just there to be sold" and "When I'm here, I'm me. But when I'm out there, I'm not there. I'm not there. I'm something else. I'm just a prostitute—I'm something I can sell."

The second nuance that occurred was in relation to a notion of owning, but not controlling their rentable vaginas. This second nuance was made possible by the *dissolution* of symbolic separation of body and self so that eight of the prostitute-women imagined that their selves had been lost to their continuously rented vaginas and via that, their johns had control over them. Witness Sammy's remarks: "In the end, you hate yourself for selling your body. They do what they want to you. Your body's an object and you've got no control over it."

The third nuance is noted in relation to a contextualised understanding of pimping practices. There was an unstated acceptance of one of the more "feudal" pimping practices—i.e. the buying and selling prostitutes between different pimps. Such an acceptance opened a space for four respondents in which they discussed themselves, in relation to a notion of pimps as owners. The fact that they had each been sold or traded at some point during their involvement in prostitution does not demonstrate this identification; nor do their comments that such practices were common place. But their reactions to and remarks about when they had been sold do. Each of the four women took issue, not with being treated like chattel property, but rather with how much money they had been sold for. The amount obtained represented to these women a symbolic measure of their worth as commodified bodies and rentable vaginas. As Barbara (aged 24) said: "Can you believe it? Kevin sold me to Steve for just fifty pounds! Fifty pounds!! I was worth more than that!"

Men as Money

Both the prostitute-as-worker and prostitute-as-commodified-body identifications were made possible by the fusing together of the meanings for "men" and "money." Men were constructed as both income (i.e. sources of money) and as income which could only be generated through exchanging sex for money. The

construction of men as sources of money was an understanding of particular men (i.e. johns) which was applied to all men. This is most clearly seen in the women's repeated claims that "all men are johns." As Gail (aged 28) said: "To me, all men are [johns]. As far as I'm concerned I couldn't do it if it wasn't bought. And if it's not needed then why are we able to sell it."

Dominant discourses of male sexuality as a difficult to control, physical impulse provided the requisite ideological conditions in which the meanings for men and money could be fused together. The women portrayed male sexuality as a biologically driven, aggressive need, as "instrumental" rather than "expressive" and therefore they were able to characterise johns as any (and all) "normal" men doing only what "comes naturally." The john/prostitute relationship could, thus, be understood as though it was simply a routine economic exchange in which normal (i.e. ordinary, typical and not deviant) men buy "outlets" for their physical needs. Combined with this understanding of all men as johns was the women's belief that men as a group have easier access to and more money than women. This belief was most clear in the respondents' talk about men not having childcare problems and so having better access to legal and illegal ways of earning money.

Thus, the interviewees' identification as both workers *and* commodified-bodies was made possible by a reordering of the meanings of men and money whereby men came to represent income. Within such a symbolic landscape, the women were able to construct their prostituting as though it was nothing to do with sex and just routine economic exchange (with themselves in control of and the beneficiaries of that exchange) *and* as though it had everything to do with sex (with their rentable vaginas the object of that exchange). And, contradictorily, the same symbolic world permitted the women to tell stories in which men as johns (i.e. purchasers) and as pimps (i.e. owners) take control of prostitutes' commodified bodies. Hence, involvement in prostitution becomes a web of economic relationships over which the women believed they had control via ownership of their rentable bodies and absolutely no control or ownership as slaves to their pimps.

Prostitutes-as-Business-Women, Prostitutes-as-Loving-Partners

The identification of prostitutes-as-business-women occurred in seventeen of the twenty-one narratives. This identification was comprised of an understanding of prostitutes as being rational economic agents involved in weighing up the costs and benefits of particular courses of action, wherein individual women appraised themselves of, and in relation to, the respective financial and social costs accruing from being involved with men. This is an identification that is distinguished from the prostitute-as-worker identification for within the business woman identification the women talked about themselves as "smart." In common with Katz's (1988) "stick-up men" who deployed both rules and business metaphors when discussing the "business" of robbery, the women in this study positioned themselves as "smart women" working "the right way."

Such talk differed according to whether or not the women were being pimped at the time the interviews took place.

For the women who were not being pimped, being a business woman and working the "right way" meant maximizing income whilst reducing the possibility of exploitation. There were two fundamental rules: business women should not have any personal or intimate relationships with men; and, business women should not be naive about men. The women could demonstrate their business-like status by showing their willingness to accept these rules.

> I reckon if you work, you gotta stop being naive. You have to see men for what they are. [Do you mean johns?] No, I mean men. You have to be professional about how you see all men. They'll live off you if they can. (Olivia, aged 28)

In contrast, the women who were being pimped at the time of the interviews talked about a different rule. They said that working the right way meant minimizing the risk of violence that is associated with street work. The primary strategy used was to get a pimp. Hence, Anna (aged 36) made the following remark:

> The street's a dangerous place. If you're gonna be smart you have to have a man to protect ya and make sure no one kidnaps you or drives off with you. So what if you have to give him some money. (Anna, aged 36)

For these women, the pimp's dress and outward appearance were used to demonstrate their own business success:

> You want your [pimp] to look good, man. You want them to dress good, get nice cars and wicked gold. You give them your money so they can look good. I look at it as good advertising, you know? . . . If I were some stupid crackhead or something, I couldn't be earning the money I earn to make my man look good. (Katrina, aged 20)

In contrast, in nine of the twenty-one women's narratives was an identification of prostitutes-as-loving-partners making choices and taking courses of action based on the love they felt for the men they were involved with, rather than rules for business success. This identification was constructed in relation to the specific relationships the respondents had with men who financially exploited them (rather than within generalised notions of particular categories of men—i.e. "pimp," "partner," etc.). The women talked about themselves as willing to sacrifice their earnings, their safety and their security for their partners. The women were symbolically transforming their relationships with (often violent and) exploitative men from "business" relationships, or even abusive relationships, into intimate, loving, romantic and *above all else* non-prostitution related relationships (Phoenix, 1999b). Andrea's remarks below demonstrate the manner in which she erased the possibility of the violent relationship she experienced as being a relationship which was specific to her involvement in prostitution:

> I don't suppose he really was a [pimp] . . . I think he's the only person I ever really loved. Even now I sometimes get upset over it, coz I did love him. I was willing to give him everything I'd got—body soul, EVERYTHING. (Andrea, aged 27)

The prostitute-as-loving-partner identification was also made possible by the way in which the women drew on dominant notions of how romantic love is experienced by women as being a sublimation of their desires and a centralizing of their partner's desires (Person, 1988; Sayers, 1986).

> To tell you the truth, I was that besotted [i.e. in loved] with him that I'd give him everything. I'd give him the fucking world. I'd give him all my money and he'd beat me up. But I carried on giving him my money. You do, don't you when you love some one? (Ruthie, aged 25)

Men as Expense

The prostitutes-as-business-women and prostitutes-as-loving-partners identifications were made possible by a men-as-expense symbolic landscape where men were defined in relation to money because involvement with them was seen as necessitating payment in the form of "opportunity costs" (i.e. values which must be given up in order to achieve something) and "hidden costs" (i.e. values which are unknown at the time of calculation). The men-as-expense symbolic nexus was a construction of involvement with men in general rather than involvement with men in the context of engagement in prostitution. Hence, Sophie (aged 28) made the comment: "If you get involved with a man—ANY MAN—there's always a price to pay. There's always responsibility to give him money or something. You never can get away with it for free."

Throughout all the respondents' talk there were differences drawn between the actual opportunity cost incurred by relationships with different categories of men. Involvement with pimps, boyfriends and the police were described as necessitating an opportunity cost in that the women understood involvement with all these men as providing them with "sanctuary" from prostitution or protection from prostitution-related risks, but at different and specific prices.

Most of the women spoke about boyfriends with whom they were or had been involved and who gave them sanctuary from prostitution through financially supporting them. But the women described such involvement as costing them their independence and it was their unwillingness to pay this price that, they believed, lead to the break up of those relationships. Similarly, involvement with policemen was seen as offering the women protection from prostitution-related violence, especially against violence from pimps. All but five respondents said that policemen, *as men* who are not frightened of pimps, were the only people who could really provide the help the women needed. Indeed, two women recalled that it was only after the intervention of the police that they were able to leave their pimps. But here, the police did not arrest the pimps, rather they arrested the women and took them to hostels or other helping agencies. The price for this was understood as being both provision of information to the

police, and more importantly, being "indebted" to the particular policeman who provided the help. Lastly, in relation to pimps, more than half of the interviewees talked of making calculations about the quality of protection that pimps could offer them (against violence from johns or intimidation by other pimps) in exchange for the financial exploitation to which they would have to submit. This was most clearly seen in the women's discussions of "big, bad pimps."

> Once they know who you're working for and what status he's got—like who's the baddest, who's the hardest, who's got the gun and who hasn't. You have only to mention his name and that was that. People leave you alone. Other [pimps] and other girls just leave you be. They don't meddle because he's psychotic! He's notorious! He's one very sick and twisted individual. People are afraid of him. (Anna, aged 36)

Of course, the obvious irony is that, although the women understood involvement with their pimps as a form of opportunity cost, providing them with protection, in reality, these pimps provided them with little protection and, in fact, exposed to them further violence and certainly to further financial exploitation.

In contrast, involvement with men as partners was described by the women as incurring "hidden costs." In two cases, the hidden cost was initial entrance into prostitution. Both women talked about "having the knickers charmed off" them and being talked into engaging in prostitution. The cost was hidden because it only emerged after their relationships with these men were established. More commonly, however, was the women's understanding of the cost of *maintaining* their intimate relationships as being their *continued* involvement in prostitution. As Anna (aged 36) stated: "There's a lot of pressure. You have to do it, coz you need the money yourself. Then you get mixed up with someone and you have to do it again to help him, to keep a hold of him."

Prostitutes-as-Victims, Prostitutes-as-Survivors

In all but one of the respondents' narratives, and regardless of their specific prostitution-related experiences, was an identification of prostitutes-as-victims. Drawing on discourses of "victimhood" whereby victims are seen as being "blameless" and "not responsible" for the fate that befalls them (Walklate, 1989), these twenty interviewees talked about themselves as individuals who were unable to control the events of their lives and who were controlled by others that hurt, mistreated or injured them.

Most of the women discussed how past events (especially sexual and/or physical abuse) had "turned" them into prostitutes because, as a result of such events, all they now knew "was how to be used and abused." Witness Margie:

> I didn't have a clue then. All I knew was how to be raped, and how to be attacked and how to be beaten up and that's all I knew. By the time he put me on the game I was already a victim, I was just a born victim. (Margie, aged 37)

Their identification as victims was also seen in the way that the women recounted the injurious actions of others (usually their pimps) as displacing any agency they may have had. Barbara's comments exemplify this: "I did as I was told. You have to, otherwise you're dead. When they've got a gun pointed to your head, you do as you're told."

In contrast, in eighteen women's accounts there was also an identification of prostitutes-as-survivors in which the women talked about themselves as successfully surviving and negotiating the risks they encountered, as battling for control over their own money (in relation to pimps) and their own physical well-being (in relation to johns).

All but two of these eighteen women described themselves as "lucky" and such talk suggests their survivor-identity. Witness Georgie's characterisation of herself when she was being pimped by her last boyfriend: "I guess I was one of the lucky ones, I had clothes. I could pay my rent. I wasn't as bad off as some. I suppose I was lucky and because of that I've survived."

Interestingly, it was in their talk of luckiness and being survivors that the paradoxical nature of prostitution becomes especially clear.

> I get treated a lot better than most, as luck would have it. I keep some of my money, but only for the fact that he knows I've been to prison coz I killed someone. He knows what I'm capable of. And he knows I'll always make sure I survive. (Katrina, aged 21)
>
> There's two sorts of prostitutes. There's the ones that are out there for themselves, and there's the ones that are working for their guy. I'll give anyone credit for standing out on the streets, doing it for themselves, taking their money home. But I can't understand anyone that can stand out there and, then, give it all to some man. [But you were in that situation for over two years.] Yea. But at least I got out of it. I survived. In the end, I'm one of the lucky ones. I'm strong. (Lois, aged 21)

Both of these women (Lois and Katrina) were strident in presenting their engagement in prostitution as a trap threatening their physical, material and social survival. They both talked about being forced to prostitute through fear of death, about being pimped by men who were sadistic and brutal, who had battered and raped them. And yet, here, both women identified as being survivors.

Men as Risk

The prostitute-as-victim and prostitute-as-survivor identifications were made possible by the dissolving of the symbolic boundaries between "normal" and "abnormal" men so that all men with whom the respondents had (or might have) a relationship with became both (i) boyfriends *and* potential pimps; and (ii) ordinary men doing what comes naturally *and* abnormal dangerous men. The meanings for "men," "violence" and "danger" were fused together so that all men became "risky," "dangerous" (in the sense of individuals who threatened the women's overall social, material and, occasionally, physical safety)

and/or "suspect" (in the sense of individuals could not be trusted). This meant that the women were unable to take anything in their relationships with men for granted, at the same time as necessarily having to recognise *and* ignore the potential threats and risks inherent in their relations with men in order to continue with their day-to-day lives. The conflation of men with danger is most evident in the women's talk about "pimps" who posed the specific threat of violence and financial exploitation. Earlier it was noted that the term "pimp" was used by the women in three distinct ways. Until this point, the term pimp has been used as a descriptive label. However, "pimps" also occupied a crucial and pivotal symbolic space in that the term was used in an imaginary fashion to represent the archetypal dangers of involvement in prostitution. At various points in all the narratives, the respondents separated "pimps" from boyfriends. "Pimps" were sadistically violent men who would rape, kidnap and entrap women, taking all their money and from whom there was no escape, no resistance no sanctuary. In the construction of this symbolic category, the women drew on discourses of criminal men which situated such men as "outsiders" in relation to ordinary morality (Katz, 1988) and on discourses of masculinity which essentialised male violence so that "pimps" were constructed as men who are always and already violent. Hence, Helena (aged 35) was able to comment: "Pimps are not like other men. They ain't got no heart. They only ever want money." Similarly, Anna (aged 36) stated:

> After I killed my [pimp], I realised that it weren't really his fault that he was like that. [Like what?] Well, raping me and beating up on me, making me have sex with dogs and shit, taking all my money. Some men are just like that. I think it's in their nature. The one thing I've learned is that you gotta steer clear of [pimps]. It's just too dangerous to get involved with them. (Anna, aged 36)

And yet, the distinction between "pimps" and other men (and especially other men as boyfriends) was also dissolved. Part of the set of meanings in which men represented "risk" was an understanding of men as being "suspect" (i.e. not trustworthy). Boyfriends were especially suspect because the women could never trust or be sure that the individual boyfriend they were involved with was not, in fact, a pimp. In other words, there was a notable construction of *all* partners with whom the women had relationships as being *also* (at least potentially) pimps. Witness the following:

> You gotta watch having boyfriends, coz he'll [pimp] ya if you're not careful. In the end you think, boyfriend, [pimp], boyfriend, [pimp], what's the difference? All boyfriends will [pimp] you in the end. (Barbara, aged 24)

Boyfriends became potential pimps, the respondents believed, because of the women's engagement in prostitution. The women believed that they turned their boyfriends into pimps by being willing to share their money with them.

> . . . it was my fault that he turned into my [pimp]. I'd give him money. I mean, he started getting violent, coz he started to want more and he was spending all my money on drink and drugs. I completely changed him. (Michelle, aged 33)

At the same time as dissolving the boundary between boyfriends and pimps, the above extract (and others like it) demonstrate that the women also resurrected that boundary. Boyfriends became pimps when they got "greedy." Put another way, for many interviewees, the difference between boyfriends and pimps was not a matter of economics or economic exploitation because they understood all relationships as having an exchange of money (and not necessarily an equal sharing of the total resources of the couple). Rather, the difference was whether or not the women believed that their boyfriends were taking more money then they were "due" (Phoenix, 1999b).

The simultaneously expressed prostitute-as-victim *and* prostitute-as-survivor identifications were made possible by a restructuring of the meanings of men and violence wherein men came to represent risk. Within such a symbolic landscape, the interviewees were able to construct their relationships with johns, boyfriends and pimps as being risky and, therefore, were able to locate themselves as victims *and* survivors of these relationships. Moreover, the men-as-risk symbolic landscape permitted the women to tell contradictory stories of engagement in prostitution as being both a specific form of victimisation *and* a means to survive once the battle had been won.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has explored a different aspect of prostitution than that explored within most of the previous 150 years of research. It has sought to examine the interconnections between women's socio-economic position and the stories they tell about being prostitutes in order to understand what that involvement means to them. And, if this analysis can tell us anything, it tells us that women's engagement in prostitution cannot be understood without a recognition of their material conditions and how those conditions give shape to a particular and necessary reordering of the meanings of men, money and violence. When women's accounts are analyzed the question that arises is how their stories, which appear to lack a coherent rationale, *can* make sense. To this end, in describing the conditions in which engagement in prostitution becomes possible, this chapter has argued at the symbolic level, the contradictions of prostitution are resolved into a "calm unity of coherent thought" (Foucault, 1972: 155) via the symbolic strategies by which the women were located as workers and commodified bodies, as business women and loving partners and as victims and survivors (and the shifting meanings of men, money and violence that underpinned those strategies).