

STRIPPING THE ILLUSION

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT LAP DANCING

1. Why do you say lap dancing is part of the commercial sex industry and not the leisure industry?

Any industry that markets women as sex objects and in which the working practices of many clubs 'implicitly encourage men to expect and seek sexual services'¹ is part of the sex industry and not the leisure industry. These working practices include very high ratio performer to male customer ratios and women paying rent to work in clubs. There is intense competition in many clubs between performers for the attention of customers and it is in this context that the buying and selling of sex occurs in some clubs. This is confirmed both by personal testimonies and research.

"The fact is that if you break the rules, you make more money. If one dancer starts breaking the rules then the pressure is on others to do the same. Otherwise a bloke would think, Well, that dancer charged me £20 and stayed three feet away, but that one charged me just the same and she put her breasts in my mouth and sat on my crotch. Once you've been there a while, you learn that certain things are profitable, and no contact is the first rule you learn to break. Eventually you start to wonder, what is the difference between me and a prostitute?" 'Elena' quoted in 'I was an Object, not a Person, The Guardian 19.03.08

2. Why aren't lap dancing clubs licensed as part of the sex industry then?

Good question. A sex encounter establishment is where performances for visual sexual stimulation are provided. The problem is that because lap dancing clubs sell alcohol and provide music they have to obtain a Premises Licence - a one size fits all license also used for cafes and karaoke. Once they have this licence they are exempted from the SEE category, despite being part of the sex industry. Stripping the Illusion is aiming to close this loophole.

3. What would re-categorisation do?

Re-categorisation would give power back to local authorities and residents by putting lap dancing clubs in the same category as sex shops and sex cinemas. It would allow for better monitoring as many local authorities have taken their lead from licensing laws and do not differentiate between lap dancing clubs and other venues licensed with a Premises Licence. As a result many no longer monitor lap dancing clubs and do not know how many are in their area. Local authorities would be able to take decisions relating to the distance between performers and customers, the presence of 'private booths' in clubs and the number of clubs that can be licensed in a particular area.

It would allow local people a greater say as they would no longer have to tailor their views to fit around 'one size fits all' criteria or live within 100-200m of a club to have a say in licensing. This is important as many people are affected by lap dancing clubs (for example near their workplace) but are currently unable to have a say in licensing. Re-categorisation would also challenge the way that the sex industries have become so mainstreamed and send out a crucial message that buying a lap dance is not the same as buying a cappuccino.

"In order to end social inequality and to give all residents, workers and visitors the same opportunities to thrive and to use the late night economy, the DCMS will need to change its stance to recognise that adult venues need to be treated differently, and carefully monitored." Inappropriate Behaviour: Adult Venues and Licensing in London, Eaves Housing 2007

4. Lap dancing is harmless. Why aren't you worrying about more important things?

Lap dancing clubs encourage their customers, and wider society to see women as sex objects. They reinforce the idea that women are always sexually available, as long as you've got a bit of cash to spare. This has to be seen in the wider context of a society in which men still dominate the positions of power and where violence against women is endemic, with 1 in 4 women facing rape in her lifetime and 1 in 2 women facing sexual harassment, stalking or domestic violence. Those working with female victims of male violence believe that the mainstreaming of the sex industries legitimises the attitudes that ultimately lead to violence against women.

The fact that we are bombarded with sexist images of women in poses which stem from pornography, depicting women as always up for sex, no matter what, cannot be disconnected from endemic violence against women, low conviction rates, and the fact that the majority of people still think that women are at least partly to blame if they are sexually assaulted (Amnesty International, Sexual Assault Research 2005). For something to be harmless it would need to be proven that it has no effect whatsoever on these worrying statistics. Can you say with confidence that this is the case?

"The use of women in degrading entertainment exacerbates violence against women...lap dancing and similar clubs be regulated to ensure that local crimes against women do not increase" Women's National Commission (WNC) report to the UN Commission on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 2005

5. But isn't lap dancing empowering for women?

What kind of power are we talking about? Can sexual power get you equal pay, equal representation and an equal voice? You also have to look at *why* lap-dancing is seen as empowering. Why is it that in our society stripping off and posing to satisfy men is a key way we're told to empower ourselves? The porn industry has saturated mainstream culture so much that what is essentially a sexist and exploitative industry is now seen as 'normal' and 'empowering'. How can an industry which makes huge profits from manipulating men and sexually objectifying women be empowering?

The power relations inside lap dancing clubs aren't that simple either. Of course not every experience is the same, but if women have all the power in lap dancing clubs why do so many men admit that it is not just sexual titillation which keeps them coming to clubs but the power trip that they get from paying a performer to strip for them?

"Lap dancing is about creating a situation whereby the men feel they are doing you a favour - that's the way the game is set up, so all the power is with the customer ... [she believes that] for men who visit lap dancing clubs, enjoyment derives primarily from handing over the money, not from the dance itself" 'Elena' quoted in 'I was an Object, not a Person, The Guardian 19.03.08

6. Aren't you being prudish in having a problem with the sex industry and lap dancing?

Just like we don't accuse anti-McDonalds protestors of being 'anti-food', challenging the normalisation of the sex industry doesn't mean you have a problem with sex! We don't have a problem with nudity, we have a problem with how the mainstreaming of lap dancing clubs reinforces the idea that a woman can be bought and sold to provide sexual services of some kind.

Recent research into men who buy sex in East London ³ highlighted that men were put off from sexually exploiting women when they started considering them as people. Viewing women as people and not as objects is a crucial step in changing attitudes. Challenging lap dancing is not about challenging sexual expression, it is about pointing out the danger of continuing to represent women as sex objects who are always gagging for it in a culture in which sexual violence is so common.

"The lack of respect paid to women who sell sex was evident in the negative and derogatory attitude of some of the buyers. Perhaps most interesting was the suggestion in one interview that viewing women as people was itself a deterrent. This illustrates conclusively that men can and do change their attitudes towards buying sex and a key avenue to achieve this is through recognition of women's subjectivity and the contributions men (even as individuals) can make to reducing gender inequality. Coy, Kelly and Horvath (2007) *It's just like going to the supermarket: Men buying sex in East London* Report for Safe Exit

7. Lap dancing clubs are about fantasy, we know the difference between fantasy and reality so what's the problem?

When we are bombarded with images and messages from a young age that reinforce and legitimise one kind of 'fantasy' as if it represents the only way to view sex and sexuality, this has an impact on all sexual relations. When this 'fantasy' involves the buying and selling of women as commodities and reinforces the idea that women can be bought and sold as easily as a cup of coffee this impacts on the way that women are viewed in society. When we live in a society in which sexual violence against women is endemic, and women are not represented in positions of power and influence, this 'fantasy' becomes more disturbing. The levels of sexual harassment that occur in lap dancing clubs are well documented – and is evidence that this 'fantasy' sometimes hides a darker reality.

"I think every dancer has some kind of story to tell. It's that kind of environment where guys feel that they can. We're out there, we're vulnerable, and they can. We walk around by the customers and a lot of people would grab our arses, that happens constantly. There's rules there, but rules are always being bent. Quoted in Wesley, J.K. (2002) Growing up sexualised: Issues of Power and Violence in the lives of Female Erotic Dancers, Violence Against Women, 8, 1182.

8. What about civil liberties? Isn't it our right to go to lap dancing clubs if we want to?

We are not calling for lap dancing clubs to be banned. We are calling for them to be recognised for what they are, which is part of the sex industry. This campaign is about *defending* civil liberties by taking the power out of the hands of the lap dancing clubs and putting it back into the hands of local people. The sex industry is a multi-billion pound industry with extensive access to the media and advertising. This campaign aims to give a platform to the voices not usually heard, voices which tell the story of the negative realities of lap dancing, the impact that sexist attitudes reinforced in lap dancing clubs have on performers, on women having to walk past clubs at night, women who work with colleagues who take clients to clubs and more generally how all women are viewed in wider society.

'Often client after-work meetings became visits to strip clubs and I knew senior guys who had told HR they wanted a new junior team member and that she must be slim, blond and pretty...one guy refused to work with me because he said my breasts were off-putting and management responded by asking me if I had done anything to provoke this' Kate, Former City of London worker, Sexism and the City Manifesto, Fawcett Society 2008

9. Pole dancing is taught in gyms and even by some councils as a form of exercise. Why the fuss about lap dancing?

Pole dancing is becoming normal because 'pornification' is happening so effectively. It has been very profitable for the sex industry to branch out through things like stripping and the marketing of pole dancing as exercise. The industry is very clever about its marketing and media promotion. Celebrity endorsement and media glamorisation have helped to disconnect pole and lap dancing from the sex industry in many people's minds. Object is re-connecting the two - we need to challenge the demand for objectifying women and girls at a younger and younger age.

10. Shouldn't people be allowed to make their own moral judgements about lap dancing?

Of course they should. But challenging the normalisation of lap dancing is a *social* issue, not a moral issue. Lap dancing clubs have a far reaching social impact and this gets overlooked in the debates which focus on the morality of lap dancing. Lap dancing clubs reinforce sexist attitudes, are linked to sexual harassment both in and out of clubs and run counter to efforts to promote gender equality. Talking about this is raising a social question, not a moral question.

object.org.uk

² Coy, Kelly and Horvath (2007) *It's just like going to the supermarket: Men buying sex in East London* Report for Safe Exit