

OBJECT AND FAWCETT SOCIETY

Press release from the Fawcett Society (1) and Object (2)
Embargoed until 00:01 on Friday 15 August 2008

GOVERNMENT URGED TO REFORM LICENSING OF LAP DANCING CLUBS

As a consultation on the licensing of lap dancing clubs today draws to a close (3), the Government is being urged to enact urgent reforms (4). Object and the Fawcett Society are calling on the Home Office to introduce legislation in the next Parliamentary session that would allow local authorities to license lap dancing clubs as Sex Encounter Establishments – venues that provide visual sexual entertainment (5).

A legal loophole means that since the introduction of the Licensing Act 2003 lap dancing clubs currently require only a Premises Licence (for the sale of alcohol) to operate, despite being part of the commercial sex industry. The number of lap dancing clubs across the UK is estimated to have doubled since 2004 (6).

Licensing lap dancing clubs as Sex Encounter Establishments will give local authorities the same licensing powers as apply to sex shops and sex cinemas, including vital powers to regulate where, when and on what terms lap dancing clubs may be established (7).

Dr. Sasha Rakoff, Object Director said:

“Many local authorities have added their voice to growing calls for an end to licensing of lap dancing clubs as cafes. Current licensing has acted as a floodgate to the industry whilst making it difficult for local authorities and local people to have a say in this process. It has helped normalise lap dancing clubs and attitudes that encourage seeing women as sex objects, not people.

“The solution to this problem does not lie in tinkering with the Licensing Act 2003 or in planning controls. The solution lies in licensing lap dancing clubs for what they are: venues that provide visual entertainment for sexual stimulation – in other words, sex encounter establishments. We call on the Government to restore democracy to the licensing process and send out a powerful message that buying a lap dance is not the same as buying a cappuccino”.

Kat Banyard, Campaigns Officer at the Fawcett Society, said:

“A lax licensing regime has led to the proliferation of lapdance clubs in UK. Straight-jacketed by the Licensing Act 2003, local authorities have been powerless to stop the spread. They are compelled to license lapdance clubs like cafés - despite having a very different social impact. Lapdance clubs fuel a sexist culture of treating women as sex objects. Areas surrounding lapdance clubs can become ‘no-go’ areas for women.

“The only viable solution is to license lapdance clubs as Sex Encounter Establishments. This would untie the hands of local authorities and enable them to fulfill their duties under the Gender Equality Duty. Alongside local authorities across the country we urge the Government to enact reform and give local communities a voice.”

For more information please contact Kat Banyard on 020 7253 2598 or 07775 855037 or Anna van Heeswijk, Object Campaigns Officer on 07732 075835

Notes to editors

- (1) The Fawcett Society is the UK's leading campaign for women's rights. www.fawcettsociety.org.uk
- (2) Object is a women's rights organisation which campaigns against the objectification of women in the media and popular culture. www.object.org.uk
- (3) The Consultation was undertaken on June 18th 2008 by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport on behalf of Gerry Sutcliffe MP, Minister for Sport and Licensing. Every local authority in England and Wales was written to for their views on the licensing of lap dancing clubs and given until Friday 15th August to respond. See <http://www.lacors.gov.uk/lacors/ContentDetails.aspx?id=19616> for more details.
- (4) An open letter in The Times today calls for lap dancing clubs to be licensed as Sex Encounter Establishments. Signatories include Geoffrey Theobald OBE, Chairman of LACORS; Cllr Chris White, Local Government Association; Oxford City Council; Cllr Gill Mitchell, Brighton and Hove City Council; Cllr Barbara Weed, Warwick District Council; Cllr Bill Turner, London Borough of Tower Hamlets; Cllr Tracy Ismail, London Borough of Islington; Eastbourne City Council; Burnley Borough Council; Spelthorne Borough Council
- (5) The Sex Encounter Establishment category currently applies only in London and is used to license peep shows. Lap dancing clubs are able to exempt themselves from this category by first obtaining a Premises Licence.
- (6) The first UK lap dancing club, For Your Eyes Only, opened in 1995 and by 2004 approximately 150 clubs operated across the UK. Today that figure has risen to an estimated 300 clubs.
- (7) The Government is being urged to follow legislative reforms outlined in an unopposed Ten-Minute Rule Bill introduced in Parliament by Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods MP on June 18th 2008. This called for countrywide extension of the Sex Encounter Establishment category and removal of an exemption from this category for Premises Licence holders. <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080618/debtext/80618-0004.htm>