

***Still* Stripping the illusion**

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**Strip Clubs are *still* incompatible with  
Women's Rights, Safety & Equality**

## About This Report

In 2008, pressure group, **OBJECT**, launched the '**Stripping the Illusion**' campaign. This successfully lobbied Parliament to ensure the law was changed to stop licensing strip clubs as 'leisure venues' and instead license them for what they are - part of the sex industry.

As a result, strip clubs in England and Wales have been licensed as 'Sexual Entertainment Venues', SEVs, for more than 10 years.

**Still Stripping the Illusion** is a report by Not Buying It. It shows how little has changed, despite legislation. The fact remains that where strip clubs operate there are always multiple harms and these harms cannot be mitigated.

## About Not Buying It

**Not Buying It** challenges the sexual exploitation of the porn and sex trade, working closely with survivors.

Our team includes individuals who were instrumental in ensuring an end to the licensing of strip clubs as 'leisure venues' and the introduction of SEV legislation. We have also been behind two successful high court challenges demonstrating councils breach equality law in their policy and licensing decisions around strip clubs. Hence, we are not only expert in the reality and harms of the strip industry but SEV legislation and equality law

For these reasons, we urge all councils to introduce a zero policy on all sex establishments, particularly for strip clubs – and ensure exit support for those already in the industry, both emotionally and practically.

# Inherent Harm



Lap dancing is *inherently* harmful:

**Being objectified and/or objectifying yourself** is harmful, *regardless of whether it is chosen*. Psychologists describe it as a form of insidious trauma<sup>1</sup>. Yet this is the very premise of strip clubs.

**Behaving sexually and exposing yourself for men in an exchange that is not based on mutual desire** is harmful. Doing this for men who have bought you to behave this way (often multiple times a night), for whom you have no desire/interest (and who might even repulse you) is psychologically damaging. Yet this too is the entire premise of strip clubs.

**Providing the 'girlfriend experience'** is equally part of the work. Women must sit with men, sometimes for hours on end, feigning interest and desire. **'You can never be your true self', 'it is all an act', 'having to .. hang on a punter's every word, act interested'**<sup>2,3</sup>. Many describe it as one of the hardest parts of the job, not least because they cannot dissociate.

**Emotional Rollercoaster.** Testimonies and research also indicate that lap dancers' initial feelings of 'empowerment' subside. Over time, 'loving stripping' can turn to disgust<sup>4</sup>. Even during the course of a shift, experiences can rapidly fluctuate from 'good' to 'bad'<sup>4</sup> making for a damaging roller coaster of emotions, particularly given that most dancers will be young - often teenagers at University living away from home for the first time.

## Multiple Mental Health Issues

An abundance of research and testimonies expose PTSD, addiction, extreme psychological distress, denial, 'higher loyalties' to the club, dissociation and split personalities<sup>5,6,7</sup> as common mental health issues associated with the industry. Indeed, lap dancers experience the same threats to their mental and physical wellbeing as women in street prostitution<sup>7</sup>.

## Multiple physical health issues<sup>7</sup>

Lap dancing gives rise to multiple physical health problems such as:

- Chronic back pain
- Leaky implants
- Eating disorders
- Skin disorders
- STIs

### More Information

- ▶ Lap Dancing Faq
- ▶ Video
- ▶ Mental & Physical Health

## Substance Abuse

**Research.** Studies indicate that alcohol and drug abuse is standard in the industry, if not integral to the job<sup>8</sup> - both by dancers and punters. This places women both in and outside of strip clubs at even more risk of assault. Research indicates considerable use of Class A drugs, initiated *after* entering the industry.

**Testimonies.** The problematic use of drugs/alcohol by performers and punters alike is testified to by numerous women who have left the strip trade<sup>9</sup>.

### More Information

- ▶ Substance Abuse

## Prior Abuse: Common

Lap dancing is often just part of a continuum of abuse. Already vulnerable women enter the industry and are then again trapped in an abusive situation.

**Testimonies.** Women testify how this prior abuse was a driving force in their entering the strip trade, how it meant they stayed trapped in the industry and potentially then went into prostitution<sup>10, 11, 12, 13,14</sup>.

**Disclosures.** It is reflected by many of those currently in, or supportive of the strip trade, who frequently disclose prior abuse, including childhood sexual abuse.

**Research.** It is reflected by research suggesting prior abuse is normal in the strip trade<sup>15</sup>, so much so that:

**1/3 lap dancers in just a 6 month period experience Domestic Violence.** A high proportion of women are in abusive relationships *whilst* lap dancing<sup>16</sup> (1 in 3 according to one study over just a 6 month period - far higher than the 1 in 4 women who experience domestic violence during their entire lifetime).

**2/3 lap dancers were raped as children.** A high proportion of women in lap dancing have experienced childhood sexual abuse (2/3 according to one study<sup>17</sup>).

### More Information



Prior / Ongoing Abuse

## Regulation



Essentially, the way the strip industry makes money, is through sexual contact, close links to local brothels, and fraud. All regulation is circumvented by strip clubs<sup>18</sup>. This is undetectable and unstoppable.

### 'Should be called Lap Grinding, not Dancing' Survivor

**CCTV.** Invariably has multiple blind spots - often pointed out to dancers. Footage is often 'lost' or of low quality (so much so that a rape recorded on CCTV was insufficient evidence to lead to a conviction<sup>19</sup>). In a dimly lit room, with poor CCTV, how is it possible to see if there is touching when the rules allow women to get within a hair's breadth of contact?

**Security.** Are beholden to the club. Dancers often tip them to 'turn a blind eye'. Often they are the ones harassing women who pass by.

**Council Inspections.** Are equally meaningless. Bouncers on the door see inspectors walking down the street and radio through to the club. By the time inspectors 'rush in', there's not a breach in sight.

**Camden – a Case Study.** Camden Inspections have only ever exposed sexual touching once and never any other breaches. Yet Camden clubs are a litany of abuse - multiple counts of GBH, including near-fatal stabbings; mass fraud; rampant sexual contact, with sex acts on offer and pimps outside every club<sup>20</sup>.

### More Information



Video



Fraud



Camden Clubs



## Abuse & the Industry



Verbal, physical and sexual harassment and assault of lap dancers is standard and constant. This is carried out by punters and staff<sup>21</sup> alike. Assault<sup>22</sup> includes GBH<sup>23</sup>, stalking, rape<sup>24,25</sup> and gang rape<sup>26</sup>. Lap dancers have been ejaculated on<sup>27</sup>. They've been bottled.<sup>28</sup> Drunk, half-naked dancers have been dumped in the street<sup>29</sup>. Underage dancers<sup>30,31,32</sup>, non-payment<sup>33</sup>, prostitution and trafficking are also not uncommon. The culture of normalisation, denial and intimidation ensures reports are rarely made. Even with police intervention, women rarely press charges.

The violence associated with the industry extends to assaults by staff/punters on each other and on passers by. It includes arson<sup>34</sup>, mass brawls<sup>35,36</sup>, stabbings<sup>37,38</sup>, false imprisonment<sup>39</sup>, drink spiking<sup>40,41,42</sup>, extreme property damage<sup>43,44</sup> (including life threatening arson<sup>45</sup>). It includes hospitalisations<sup>46,47</sup>, near-fatal<sup>48,49</sup> and fatal<sup>50</sup> attacks. It includes lap dancers attacking each other due to the intense competition cultivated by the industry<sup>51,52,53</sup>. Even for the most serious incidences, the police might not be called<sup>49</sup> and/or the clubs might continue to operate<sup>49,49</sup>.

Incidences are so numerous that they are best exemplified on a club-by-club basis as recorded [here](#)<sup>54</sup>. This is only the tip of the iceberg - the vast majority of incidences will never see the light of day.

### More Information

- ▶ Abuse by Management
- ▶ UK Incidences

## Prostitution



Lap dancing fuels both the supply and demand for prostitution<sup>55</sup>. It 'grooms' women for the wider sex trade. Many women in clubs seek to prostitute themselves, others will move on to the wider sex industry. Trafficked women are also frequently suspected to be worked inside clubs.

Almost invariably, punters solicit lap dancers for sexual contact and sex acts inside clubs and for sex outside of them, whilst pimps are often outside touting for the local brothel.

The mere presence of a strip club in the high street also signals the utter normality and absolute right of men to buy women sexually, further fuelling demand:

**UK Home Office report**<sup>56</sup> The *majority* of lap dancers also sell sex. The longer a woman has been stripping, the more likely it is she will be selling sex.

**USA**<sup>57</sup> 40% of lap dancers sell sex. 90% started *after* starting stripping.

**1/3 punters buy sex in strip clubs.** Significant numbers of punters buy prostitution in strip clubs<sup>58</sup>. A Scottish study indicates 1/3 of men who buy sex do so via strip clubs<sup>59</sup>.

**Undercover scrutiny.** Undercover investigation of strip clubs by the police, Trading Standards, Private Investigators and journalists invariably show strippers seeking to prostitute themselves and punters' constant soliciting for sex<sup>60</sup>.

**Testimonies.** Numerous testimonies from whistle blowers support this, as do reviews by punters<sup>60</sup>.

Metropolitan Police:

'There are Sex Touts outside every Camden strip club'<sup>61</sup>

'Bella' from Bristol:

'Lap dancing 'groomed' me for the wider sex industry'<sup>55</sup>

Bristol Woman in the sex trade:

'We were sent into the Bristol strip clubs from the local brothels to pick up punters. Every woman I've known who first went into stripping has ended up in prostitution ... 75% ended up with drug problems working on the streets'<sup>55</sup>

Iceland and Israel have shut down the entire strip industry because of its clear links with prostitution.

## More Information

- ▶ [Faq](#)
- ▶ [Video](#)

## Punter Attitudes



Although little research has focused on strip club clientele, that which has indicates the misogynistic attitudes of customers.

Indeed, according to one report, 80% of men visit strip clubs for a 'voyeuristic experience'. The report continues: 'They are one of the very few places where men need not have any concerns about, or be sanctioned for, openly objectifying women'<sup>62</sup>. More than half the men in this study indicated they used

strip clubs to **escape the normal codes of conduct** which otherwise 'restrain' them.

The attitudes of strip club customers is best exemplified by their own words:

'It's like a place where 'equality never happened' <sup>63</sup>

'It's great to have that kind of power and control' <sup>64</sup>

'with all this sexual harassment stuff going around these days, men need somewhere to go where they can act like they want' <sup>65</sup>

'You can go in there and 'shop for a piece of meat'' <sup>63</sup>

It is irrelevant whether punters had these attitudes before they stepped through the door – these are the attitudes the strip industry aggressively cultivates, normalises and promotes.

## Wider Attitudes

There is an epidemic of male violence against women. This happens *because* of men's attitudes. It has been known for decades that this abuse is directly linked to objectification and men's sense of sexual entitlement over women<sup>66</sup>. But this is exactly the attitudes strip clubs promote. Indeed, it is the entire premise of the industry.

- [Brain Scans show objectified women are viewed as objects, not humans](#)
- [Men with macho attitudes 6 times more likely to harass women](#)
- [75% rapists say sexual entitlement is their prime motivator](#)
- [Sex buyers more abusive towards women](#)
- [Objectification linked to severe intimate partner violence](#)

## More Information

- ▶ [Punter Attitudes](#)
- ▶ [Wider Attitudes](#)

## Women's Attitudes

It should be noted that strip clubs also damage women's attitudes towards men:

**Research.** Even research based primarily on questionnaires (hardly the best way to gather evidence of harm) suggests the impact on lap dancers is so great that 1 in 3 'have lost all respect for men'<sup>67</sup>.

**Testimonies** Even while in the industry, women attest to how it has led them to 'hating' and 'despising' men – often to the point of being unable to have healthy, or indeed any, relations with men<sup>10, 68</sup>.

The intense competition that clubs foster between lap dancers also breeds **poor relations between women** – to the extent that fights between lap dancers are not uncommon<sup>51,52,53</sup>.

## No Go Zones

Studies and testimonies from across the world<sup>69</sup>, indicate that women feel, and often *are*, **less safe in the vicinity of strip clubs** - sometimes to the point of avoiding the local area entirely, regardless of whether the club is open or overtly advertises. This form of self-enforced curfew is arguably a breach of human rights<sup>70</sup>.

In addition, the mere knowledge that a strip club operates makes many women feel that their function as a **sexual object and men's sexual rights** over them are being reinforced and legitimised - another reason for avoidance.

Councils must pay heed to the fact that claims by individuals of 'positive experiences' or 'feeling more safe' in the vicinity of a strip club **do not 'balance out'** the experiences of others of harassment, abuse and assault – or the fear of it.

### More Information



No Go Zones

## The Law



Councils across the country routinely breach both strip club (SEV) licensing legislation and equality law<sup>71,72,73</sup>. They appear to have little or no understanding of the most basic tenants of SEV legislation whether in the formation of policy or its implementation. At the same time, councils are routinely misdirected by the lawyers who represent strip clubs.

## SEV legislation

Councils frequently breach SEV (strip club) legislation both through creating unlawful policies and through making unlawful licensing decision.

### Policy

Councils frequently and unlawfully:

- **Write policy around existing clubs**
- **Do not appreciating the absolute right to create a 'Zero Policy' (no clubs appropriate anywhere)**
- **Exclude existing clubs from their own SEV policy, even from a zero policy**

### Licensing Decisions

Councils consistently show no understanding of their sweeping powers to refuse to license or relicense existing clubs on the grounds of locality or that:

- **There need be no change in locality**
- **There need be no material changes whatsoever**
- **No evidence (of harm or anything else) is required**
- **Strip clubs cannot challenge such a decision except via the High Court (a very difficult route, which invariably fails)**

## Equality Law

Councils are legally bound by the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) in all their policies and licensing decisions. Under this they must seek to:

- ‘Eliminate harassment, discrimination and victimisation’ of women
- ‘Foster good relations’ between the sexes

This applies within strip clubs, in their vicinity *and* in wider society.

There have now been two successful High Court challenges<sup>74</sup> against one council, Sheffield. These highlight how councils across the UK are failing to comply with equality law. This includes wrongly dismissing objections to clubs as ‘moralistic’ as well as not properly considering the PSED (for instance through a poor Equality Impact Assessment’ – a common practice of Councils UK wide).

According to the Judge in both cases:

**“.. [The Council] had wrongly ignored objections based on the potential impact of gender equality, treating them as moral objections and irrelevant”**

And in the words of the lead solicitor:

**“A local Authority .. must look long and hard at the adverse impact on gender equality of letting such an enterprise exist AT ALL.**

**Otherwise, it will be acting unlawfully and will be subject to legal challenge”<sup>75</sup>**

## Workplace Harassment

It should also be noted that business use of strip clubs is clearly a form of workplace sexual harassment. **Further, the mere use of, and discussions about, strip clubs by individuals has been ruled as a form of sexual harassment, if a business is supportive or acquiescent to such conduct<sup>76</sup>.**

This makes it even more shocking that strip clubs discounts were offered to delegates at the 2008 Conservative party conference<sup>77</sup>, with the Bolton

Conservatives hosting ‘men only’ events with strippers as recently as 201<sup>78</sup>. University staff have also reportedly claimed expenses for strip club visits, again as recently as 2018<sup>79</sup>.

### More Information

▶ Legal Briefing

## Who Are You Listening to?



*No one* in lap dancing can be open, or often acknowledge even to themselves, what really happens or its inherent harms. This denial is an essential self-preservation mechanism.

**Testimonies.** This denial is testified to by numerous women who have exited the strip trade<sup>80</sup>.

**Research.** Denial, condemning objectors and ‘higher loyalties’ to strip clubs has long been recognised by researchers from as long ago as 1992<sup>5</sup>. Ten years later, similar research added ‘cognitive and emotional dissonance’ to the list<sup>6</sup>.

**Actions.** Denial is clearly demonstrated by the actions of those in the strip trade. Industry workers, its supporters, the trade unions that represent lap dancers deny even irrefutable evidence of extreme sexual contact, sex acts and mass fraud and defend clubs even after sexual assault and rape<sup>81, 82</sup>.



## MYTHS

Many of the justifications for keeping strip clubs open (and the supposedly dire consequences of closing them) are based on misinformation and fear mongering<sup>83</sup>:

### Unemployment



Employment should not be a consideration for decisions on SEVs, however it should be noted that **strip clubs actually keep women out of paid work**<sup>84</sup>.

Lap dancers are not paid to work, instead they must pay up front to work in a strip club. These 'House Fees' can be up to £200. So, women have *lost* money - are in debt to the club - before they even start working.

'It's a form of Debt Bondage' Cassy<sup>11</sup>

Lap dancers then **work for free in the club except during private dances**, which can go for as little as £10 (particularly with '2-for-1 specials'). On top of this, strip clubs invariably have far too many lap dancers to punters, making private dances hard to come by (and so too the chance for women to even recoup their debt let alone actually make money).

Lap dancers are also **fined, frequently**<sup>2,11,67</sup> (often on the flimsiest of excuses such as 'chewing gum' or 'not smiling enough').

Women must also **pay commission, of up to 66%** so they are losing money yet again by giving a portion of their takings back to the club.

So, lap dancers can work a 7hr all-night shift and not make a penny – or *still* be in debt to the club. In fact, according to one study:

### 70% lap dancers lose money at work<sup>67</sup>

We are currently seeing record levels of employment and entire sectors, such as hospitality and leisure, facing extreme staff shortages. Everyone currently working in a strip club could easily be redeployed in these workplaces, where similar skills are involved. **The owner of Bristol's strip clubs already appears to have trained up lap dancers as (topless) waitresses**<sup>84</sup>.

Former lap dancers could even work in exactly the same venues re-purposed as night clubs, bars, restaurants. Councils can, and should, signpost women to any alternative training or support required when they stop licensing strip clubs.

### 'Going Underground'



It is invariably stated that the industry will 'go underground' if licensed strip clubs are shut. However, the exact opposite is true. **Strip clubs feed the underground industry, not their closure.**

'Private Parties'. Strip club operators often organise women to attend 'private parties'<sup>1919,85</sup>. When the strip clubs close, the 'parties' stop. **Bristol's strip club operator even openly advertises**<sup>86</sup> naked women as entertainment for private parties in men's homes.

**Prostitution.** As detailed above, there is overwhelming evidence that it is the *presence* of strip clubs that fuel prostitution *not* closing them.

'Underground strip clubs'. It has even been argued that 'underground strip clubs' will materialise if there are no licensed strip clubs.

## 'Choice'



The argument that women 'choose' lap dancing is actually irrelevant, because the same harms are experienced regardless of whether it is chosen. Even if women haven't been coerced into it or chosen it due, in part, to prior abuse, the 'choice' argument is negated. That's because there can be no genuinely free or informed choice<sup>87</sup> when we groom girls from a young age to objectify themselves, when the myth of 'harmless, well regulated, empowering, fun' is constantly regurgitated, when they have no idea of the harms and when those who do speak out are aggressively dismissed and smeared<sup>88</sup>.

## 'flexible. Independent Work'

It is often stated lap dancing is a flexible, healthy lifestyle for 'independent workers' who are in full control of every aspect of their lives. But in reality, **strip clubs control every aspect of lap dancers' work** - their time (which nights they work, as well as how they spend their time at work), their earnings, their appearance.

And how 'flexible' is it to work an exhausting all-night shift (possibly making no money) and then study, go to a second job or take on caring responsibilities the next day?

In terms of it being a **healthy lifestyle**, in the words of one former dancer:

'The job entails minimal exercise (most of us aren't doing athletics around a pole), with most of our time spent sitting around, drinking (drugs are also often involved). There's an endless and expensive grooming routine (including full body shaving leading to ingrowing pubic hairs), eating at 6AM at the local McDonalds after an all-night shift and a night-time pattern of work often coupled with day-time responsibilities. It couldn't be more *unhealthy!*'

## Threat & intimidation



It is particularly concerning how threat and intimidation is routinely used to smear and discredit all who speak out and censor the truth or any debate. **In Bristol<sup>88</sup>**, this has included **cyber stalking** of a local women and an incendiary petition (based entirely on fear mongering and misinformation) which **targets public figures such as MPs** – which clearly puts them at risk.

## To Conclude

The evidence of the harm of the strip industry is overwhelming. Much of this harm is inherent so it can never be mitigated, whilst attempts to mitigate other harms are routinely and covertly circumvented, leaving councils with no meaningful way to detect breaches in regulation. All this, means **councils cannot possibly abide by the law or ensure safeguarding when licensing the strip industry.**

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