

The Regulatory Dance: Sexual Consumption in the Night Time Economy

Initial Findings

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Summary

Three broad aims guided the project. 1) to examine the supply of dancers, their experiences of dancing and their working conditions; 2) to explore how industry management have 'mainstreamed' lap dancing; and 3) to uncover the competing interests between erotic dance businesses, law enforcement and licensing processes. A survey of 197 dancers and 35 interviews, plus interviews with regulators (n=15) and clubs owners, managers and other workers (n=20) provide a 360 degree overview of the current UK lap dancing industry. ***These findings report mainly from the survey and interviews with dancers.***

The research shows that lap dancing continues to be a popular employment option for some women who are working in low paid, unskilled jobs, but are motivated by the opportunity for future mobility. Dancers were attracted to the work because of its 'flexibility' and instant remuneration, resulting in a steady flow of labour supply. However, these exact characteristics also posed problems as dancing remained precarious in terms of a stable income, high overheads, no employee protection, and a competitive environment. Coupled with fewer customers and expenditure during the recession, dancing proved to be a difficult job without guaranteed income.

We found no evidence or anecdotes of forced labour or trafficking of women in the research. However, some migrant workers reported high fees for agencies and accommodation. Although 'extra services' were reported anecdotally by dancers, there was no evidence of lap dancing having connections to organised prostitution.

Lap dancing clubs and strip pubs are workplaces, but regulatory assessments, criteria and licensing process

do not examine the industry from this perspective. As a result, dancers are open to financial exploitation, disciplinary measures and few employment rights. Many of the women felt that they didn't have access to knowledge about what the council imposed rules were and which had been instituted by the club.

Key Points

- The continuous supply of dancers, rather than the demand for erotic dance, accounted for the expansion of the industry.
- The overwhelming majority of women were satisfied with their jobs as dancers, although they also identified negative elements.
- Advantages included: choosing own hours; getting money instantly; earning more than in other roles; being independent; combining fun with work.
- Disadvantages included: never knowing how much money they would make; keeping the job secret; customers being rude/abusive; competing with other dancers.
- Most women felt safe at work, although nearly half reported frequent verbal harassment and unwanted touching from customers.
- Only a minority of women were solely dancing, most combined dancing with other work and education.
- Dancing was used as a strategy to enable and facilitate career prospects and security in the future.
- Dancers' status as 'self employed' workers resulted in exploitation as they had no rights or recognition in the workplace.
- Overheads were high: house fees, commission on dances, and fines (often arbitrary) for breaking 'house rules' reduced capacity to earn and most dancers had left a shift not making any money.
- The current focus on licensing does not consider the welfare or working conditions of the dancers.

Legal & Policy Context

The research comes at a pivotal time in which all Local Authorities are re-writing their policy on licensing lap dancing as a result of changes introduced under the Policing and Crime Act, 2010. A new classification of

Sex Entertainment Venue (SEV) has been introduced, aligning lap dancing clubs with the same licensing process as sex shops and cinemas. Further changes essentially give Local Authorities greater powers to control the number of clubs, by using quotas or introducing 'nil policies' which aim to remove existing clubs or prohibit new licences. New powers also mean that Licensing Committees have the ability to impose certain conditions on licences to dictate how they operate. We hope these findings can influence Local Authorities to take note of the issues dancers have raised regarding their experiences in this workplace. The localisation of licensing decision-making will produce an uneven geography of lap dancing, creating some regions where there are no clubs and others where there are several venues.

Methodology

The project used triangulated methods to illicit a broad range of data.

Survey: An interviewer administered survey was conducted with 197 dancers, mainly currently working in two cities, one in the North and one in the South. However their experiences spanned across 45 towns and cities in the UK and 16 other locations worldwide. We asked dancers about the last four clubs they had worked in, to ensure a national picture of clubs was captured, as well as a range in quality or experiences.

Interviews: Qualitative interviews were conducted with 35 dancers, 15 regulators (police, health and safety, licensing and enforcement officers) and 20 club owners, managers, 'house mums' and other club workers.

Observations: Researchers visited 20 clubs and strip pubs, observing practices, reading workplace documents and looking at facilities. Informally talking with dancers and managers was key to access and understanding the complexities of the industry.

Visual Methods: Working with photographer Liz Lock and three dancers, images of the work spaces were taken to provide a visual dimension to the data.

Socio-demographics of the Dancers

Who are the dancers?

- *Age:* 60% were aged between 22 and 29. The age range between dancers spanned from 18-53 years.
- *Age started dancing:* 74% started dancing when they were under 25 years old.
- *Relationship status:* Half of the dancers were single (45.5%), but the other half were in some form of relationship with someone with whom lived (21.4%) or did not live (20.2%). Only 9.5 % of the dancers were married.
- *Mothers:* Only 13.5% of dancers surveyed had children. No dancer had more than two children.
- *Nationality:* British nationals constituted over half the dancers surveyed (60.5%); EU nationals, 28.6% (largest group being Romanians); 9.6% non-EU nationals (mainly Brazilian).
- *Education:* All of the dancers had some education and had finished school with some qualifications. 73% had completed at least Further Education, while 23% had completed an undergraduate degree.
- One third of dancers were currently students. Of these 60% were in full time education; 25% in part time education and the remainder taking evening classes.
- *Other work:* A minority of 40.2% were solely dancing. All others were in education (14.2%), another form of work (32.6%) or both other forms of work and education (10.6%).

Why did they start dancing?

- The reasons that dancers gave for leaving jobs prior to dancing varied widely. The largest proportion (21.4%) stated that they simply wanted to become a dancer. A further 16.1% said that they were seeking better pay than their previous position. Escaping boring or stressful work also featured highly.
- Dancers mainly found work in their first club through friends (41.1%) or the Internet.

How much do they dance and where?

- *Length of time working:* 70.9% had been working for less than 5 years but some dancers spoke of the 'five year myth': that is, dancers stated they would only work for five years but often ended up working for longer.
- *Number of clubs:* Respondents had danced in between 1 and 35 clubs. Most women had worked in only 1-2 clubs. Women that had danced in more than ten clubs tended to have worked for agencies who had sent them to a number of different pubs and clubs.
- *Shifts:* Most dancers worked between 3 and 5 shifts a week (62.6%). A small minority, 12.9% worked 6 or more shifts per week.
- *Earnings:* Women generally reported earnings going down from the first club they worked in to the current club at the time of the survey. Earnings ranged from £0-£800. The average earnings per shift in the first club that women worked in was £284, while the average that women currently reported was £232.

What do they think about dancing?

- *Job satisfaction:* Dancers were asked to rate their job satisfaction as a mark out of 10. Most dancers reported high levels of job satisfaction. Almost three quarters (74.1%) stated their job satisfaction as between 7 and 10 out of 10. No dancers said that their job satisfaction was 0-2.
- *Respect:* Dancers were also asked how respected they felt within the workplace. This time, the majority (53%) were neutral, stating that they neither felt respected nor disrespected.
- *Safety:* 80% of dancers felt safe at work and supported by managers where there was a dispute with a customer. However, there were significant differences between clubs and women often moved to a different venue if they felt unsafe.

Positive feelings about work

Dancers were given a list of options and asked to select advantages of the job. The top five were:

- 87.6% - ability to choose their hours

- 81.8% - get money straight away
- 80.3% - earn more money than in other roles
- 76.6% - be independent
- 72.5% - combines fun and work

When asked what dancers liked most about dancing as a job, the most frequently cited answer was clear, "Money!":

Earn VERY good money in the short term. £100-£200 a night. My favourites are Tues, Wed, Thurs - that's the business guys.

Fun, socialising and sociability were also frequently stated, alongside money, as key factors for engaging in dancing:

I love it... I love the socialising, the glamour. You meet some really decent guys as well. It does shine a light on many things in many different ways. You get regulars and that makes the job so much easier. In the club I work in now no-one has ever been rude or racist towards me. Never.

It was felt that dancing also offered the opportunity to self-improve and to learn new skills:

It keeps you fit. Gives you bravery. It makes you a very a good psychologist.

Helps me to handle men, to be more feminine, to take care of myself and my appearance. It's like an art, not just dancing.

Fully independent, flexible hours, social job, confidence as a woman. Self esteem.

Flexibility was frequently mentioned and sometimes in combination with both earning potential and sociability:

[You can] work when you want. Only have to work three days a week, still earn more than in five days a week. I like night work. It's just social. You have a laugh, even when it's crap, it's like going on a night out.

I can choose my holidays, like if I just want to go away, I don't have to wait. Money. It's the same feeling like when I go out to a club.

Negative feelings about work

Dancers were given a list of options and asked whether any of them represented things they felt were the worst part of their job. The top five were:

- 59.1% - I never know how much money I will earn
- 47.4% - I have to keep my job a secret
- 40.1% - Customers are rude or abusive towards me
- 30.7% - I have lost respect for men
- 27.7% - I feel I have to compete with the other dancers

Dancers were also asked an open question about what they liked least about the job. Inappropriate customer behaviour, including abusive language, touching or soliciting sex, was consistently cited by dancers as one of the more negative elements of the job.

Working Conditions

Independent Contractors

The dancers are defined as self employed, with no contract or obligation to the club. This flexibility is one of the main attractions as the impression is given that the dancers are in control of their labour. However, the internal operations of many clubs mean that they have to follow strict, often arbitrary house rules, and usually sign a code of conduct which transfers power to managers so they can discipline dancers.

Financial Exploitation: Fees, Fines & Commission

- Dancers had to pay 'house fees' ranging from £0-£200, though it usually was around £20-30 in the North and around £80 in the South. On dancer explains: *In the clubs the house fees are so enormous it puts you in such a stressful position to start up with; it's not a good attitude to go and start working from.*
- Commission on private dances ranged from 0-66%, though it was usually 30% commission on each dance. In the North, a 3 minute dance usually cost £10, with the dancer taking away £7.
- 56% reported paying tax or National Insurance at some point in their dancing history.
- 70% reported losing money at work.

- 61% of dancers had been fined at some point in their dancing career. The highest reported fine was £100 for a missed shift. The most common fines were for chewing gum, using mobile phone on the floor and lateness.
- 50% reported working in clubs where there was an internal tipping systems to DJs, waitresses, bar staff and house mums, which in effect acted as an additional fee.
- There was confusion over whether the code of conduct they signed was a contract.

Improving Conditions

Insurance: Very few dancers had work related insurance. Some vaguely knew that they needed it, but others had never thought about it and no-one had ever spoken to them about it.

Security: In order to improve security, panic alarms, more CCTV and doormen were cited as important. Similarly, many felt that the way in which private booths were set up also endangered them and also allowed standards to be lowered by dancers offering more than is allowed in the dances.

Change in Licensing. There was a strong feeling that the legal changes introduced under SEV licensing would not help the industry be safer or a good place to work:

Councils and any other people who are going to pass legislation need to understand that we do need things to change....but what they're doing at the minute is changing it for the worse, because it's just going to push it underground, because there are more illegal clubs opening where they're run by people that we don't want them to be run by.

Further Information:

The official report, including regulators and club managers findings, will be available through the ESRC and on the above link at the end of September 2011.

A research summary video and a visual findings leaflet are available here:

<http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/research/projects/regulatory-dance.php>

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