

License to cause harm? Sex entertainment venues and women's sense of safety in inner city centres

Jackie Patiniotis and Kay Standing consider how the effects of lap dancing clubs contribute to women's vulnerability in public spaces

A growing body of evidence looks at violence and harm caused to women working in lap dancing clubs. However, little attention has been paid to the wider impact of the licensing of sex entertainment venues (SEVs) on women's sense of safety and well-being in city centres where they are concentrated. This article contributes to the debate around the licensing of lap dancing clubs and gendered harm, using testimonies from a participatory photography research project facilitated by Sara Parker. Findings support feminist arguments that women's sense of safety and wellbeing in public spaces is compromised by the widespread use of sexualised imagery of women and girls in public spaces and by the growth of SEVs such as lap dancing clubs.

Licensing lap dancing clubs and gendered public space

The *Policing and Crime Act 2009* reclassified lap dancing clubs as 'sex entertainment venues' and allowed local authorities in England and Wales to have greater control over the licensing of clubs. These powers are not mandatory, and only apply where they are adopted by local councils. Whilst some have yet to consult, or have decided not to adopt a licensing policy, the majority of local authorities have chosen to adopt a licensing regime, resulting in a small number of councils imposing a 'nil policy', and a much

larger number choosing to grant licences with conditions attached. This localisation of licensing policy has led to an uneven spread of lap dancing clubs nationally, with a greater concentration of SEVs in some cities, leading to a promotion of a gendered night time economy in some areas and making some public spaces effectively 'no go' areas for women. The Royal Town Planning Institute (2007) recognises that 'in certain locations, lap dancing and exotic dancing clubs make women feel threatened and uncomfortable', however there is little evidence that the licensing of SEVs takes this aspect of gendered harm into account.

Whilst the focus has been on the harm caused to women working in clubs, there is evidence of the gendered harm caused by SEVs to women in general. Research undertaken by the Lileth Project on lap dancing in three London boroughs found a 50 per cent increase in reported rapes in the vicinity of the clubs, and also an increase in less measurable effects on women such as harassment and

fear of violence (Eden, 2007). Research has demonstrated that fear of assault and the consequent creation of no go areas for women relate directly to the activities of male customers of lap dancing clubs, and anti-social behaviours associated with the freeing up of the night-time economy (Higginson, 2012).

'We object': Feminist participatory action research

The aim of the research was to give women a means of 'speaking out' about issues relating to empowerment through the method of photography. Participants were members of a community based women's group in a city in the North West of England with a high concentration of SEVs in the city centre. The women were given cameras and took photographs of public spaces where they felt empowered or disempowered. They focused on the way sexualised images of women and sex

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entertainment impact on women's feelings of disempowerment, safety and value as gendered citizens. The photographs and accompanying comments support arguments that lap dancing clubs normalise the objectification of women,

undermine efforts to promote gender equality, and contribute to a climate in which violence against women and girls is legitimated through the stereotyping of women and girls as sexual objects available to meet male 'need' and 'entitlement' (End Violence Against Women, 2011).

Continuum of sexual violence

The findings support Liz Kelly's concept of a 'continuum of sexual violence' as a way of 'linking [the] more common everyday abuses women experience with less common experiences labelled as crimes' (Kelly, 1988). Rather



than focusing on different forms of violence and abuse as discrete issues, this continuum recognises commonalities between them as forms of violence against women which underpin male power and control. Thus, the women describe feeling frightened, disempowered, violated, embarrassed, unsafe (particularly if men are around), and avoid certain streets at night where they know there is a lap dancing club.

I avoid this street at night. I feel disempowered and angry and violated when I walk down this street, as there is a lap dancing club on it. The closer I get to that awful venue, the worse I feel. I feel some relief after I've passed it. It's worse when there are men around.

I feel embarrassed and uncomfortable as a woman

walking down this street. I used to feel sorry for the women who were coming to work as I left for home.

However, women also reported avoiding certain streets and feeling frightened in the day time, when the clubs

are closed. It is the existence of the clubs that causes women to feel alienated in public space at all times, and fearful of the threat of violence posed by the sexual objectification of women on display outside the clubs and acted out within them.

Women's avoidance tactics include crossing the street so as not to walk past a SEV, avoiding certain streets altogether, and no longer using bus stops that are situated near lap dancing clubs, as their vicinity makes them feel vulnerable and unsafe. Women also reported being harassed by men at bus stops, or of being harassed as passengers on a bus by men alighting at a bus stop, and women have reported an increase in this type of behaviour in areas where there are SEVs.

I feel disempowered, afraid and embarrassed when I pass this bus stop, as it is next to a lap dancing club. It's horrible having

to walk past the sniggering schoolboys who are laughing at the pornographic posters.

Attitudes and behaviours that in any other workplace or public environment would be considered to be sexual harassment and gender discrimination, are legitimised in clubs and are then carried into public space, creating 'no go' areas as women seek to minimise known and unknown risks to their safety and wellbeing.

Lap dancing clubs are places to which men go to affirm their sense of power and gender entitlement; notions which are rooted in traditional perceptions of masculinity, power and control (Banyard, 2010).

The boom in lap-dancing clubs and the sexual objectification of the dancers has nothing to do with 'desire' but everything to do with the preservation and reproduction of male power relations.
(Higginson, 2012)

The feelings of disempowerment expressed by all the women in the research therefore connect to tangible manifestations of gender inequality. If one half of the population is consistently objectified by the media and by the mainstreaming into our city centres of the sex industry, this must convey certain ideas about women having lesser social value than men (Banyard, 2010).

National and international equality legislation

All local authorities have a legal obligation under the *Public Sector Duty of the Equality Act 2010* to eliminate unlawful gender discrimination and harassment and to promote equality of opportunity between women and men. Article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) states that discrimination against women means:

any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

The findings of this research project indicate that the normalcy of the sex industry into public and commercial spaces causes harm to women's sense of safety and wellbeing and denies women their fundamental freedoms to access social, cultural and civic space.

The obvious presence of the sex and porn industries into our city centres has a negative impact on women's sense of self esteem, their value as citizens, and their safety. These are issues of discrimination and inequality which local authorities must consider when granting licences to SEVs. As the Fawcett Society (2012) argues, the appropriate number of lap dancing clubs in any area where women and men are valued equally and where gendered violence is not tolerated is zero, the granting of any licence to SEVs is therefore a licence to cause gendered harm. ■


We wish to acknowledge and honour the courage and commitment of the women who took part in this participatory action research. All are survivors of gender based abuse, and took part in the research as a means of objecting to women being portrayed and exploited as sexual objects, which makes them feel more vulnerable to harassment and violence, and which causes them to feel restricted in their use of public space.

The photography project was undertaken as a piece of feminist action research by members of the Joint Forum Women's Group in partnership with Liverpool John Moores University and was facilitated by Dr Sara Parker. Photographs were taken before the current licensing rules came into place.

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