

Rachel's Story

We are much indebted to 'Rachel' for contacting us with her experience of the strip industry and subsequent slide into prostitution. According to a study in the USA, 1/3 of lap dancers are in abusive relationships, like Rachel when she started lap dancing.

Act I 'Groomed'

I am not an anomaly and I am not a cliché either. I am not a statistic and I am not a bitter gold digger who never 'made it' with a penchant for man hating.

I am an individual. Yet I am also a collective voice because my experience is not unique nor are my reasons for going down the path I did.

I came from a childhood where domestic violence divided our home, my mother financially and economically enslaved and bonded to a man who abused her and her children. It was not her free choice but she did her utmost given the circumstantial turmoil she was in. She finally managed to leave when I was seventeen, although the consequences of doing so nearly made us all street homeless and she was forced to downsize resulting in my own struggles with homelessness.

It was in the midst of our family battle brought on by the domestic violence that I fell victim to a grooming gang. I often went for walks late at night on my own in my early teens in order to escape the conflict at home. I lived in the suburbs of London and had no rational reason to be fearful of the empty streets, home was where the war was and I was an escapee.

The gang's polished and orchestrated grooming process was no stranger to my own subconscious blueprint as I had already normalised it due to my own childhood experiences. The brainwashing process of making my mother the enemy had already begun years earlier by my stepfather and the gang simply picked up where he left off by further sowing seeds of division. Without the emotional availability of my mother or the ability to tell her the truth of what was happening I sunk deeper into the mind control of a child prostitution ring. I had the added disadvantage of growing up outside the city which left me vulnerable and naïve when it came to how gangs operate.

I remained homeless due to the housing crisis and despite asking councils for help both in the midst of the domestic violence and after it, I was only ever placed in temporary hostel accommodation.

After knocking on every possible door for help with my situation and trying to work minimum wage catering and administrative jobs I started to feel hopeless. I wanted an education but without a home it wouldn't be possible for me to do this.

Like most children who grow up around domestic violence without intervention I followed the footsteps of my mother and ended up in an abusive relationship. Like all perpetrators it began with a listening ear and open arms on his part as well as mine but as soon as the attachment and investment was formed he pulled the rug out from under me and began breaking me down emotionally and psychologically. He made me feel worthless and like I was a non-person. He sexually controlled me. It was at this point at the age of eighteen that I decided to enter into the lap dancing industry.

I had watched the entire box set of “secret diary of a call girl” and the protagonist lived a great life didn’t she? She had good friends, a social life, a home of her own and career options that came with the financial freedom. She didn’t need a man. She was independent. She even loved her job as a call girl. Of course, she was a call girl and not a prostitute because it was **her choice**. She was sexually liberated and completely controlled her own outcomes. I wanted to be like her, besides it was only lap dancing I was going to do, it wasn’t as if I had to have sex with any of the men anyway so I didn’t see what the big deal was.

I told my boyfriend at the time about my decision, I thought he would finally accept me as he often complained that I wasn’t sexy enough and I never wore the right clothes and he wasn’t attracted to me. Instead of being happy about my decision it was used to further berate me but this time instead of the archetypal virgin I was then suddenly slashed of my previous standing as a “proper woman” and labelled “the whore”.

Along with my boyfriend’s rejection and history of grooming I took my anger and rolled it up into a ball that I wished to throw at the world for abandoning me, not hearing me, not helping me when I asked, not caring.

I equated money with the ultimate goal of freedom from abuse as I had watched my mother crumble under it’s control and I too had been subjected to financial rewards and punishments via my stepdad, the grooming gang and my boyfriend.

Act 2 The Strip Trade

The first strip club I worked in was in London's west end. I felt amazing and accomplished for getting through the audition process. I had needed to dance nude in front of the house mum, DJ, paying customers and other dancers without any pay but it didn't matter because this club was a big deal and if you got in here you were going to be rich!

A few weeks into working there I soon discovered it was the norm for customers to expect you to sit on their lap before you had any chance of making any commission via a dance. This provided them with complete control to touch you as they wanted and if they took it too far you could always find another one and start the process all over again. In theory you could call security but mostly the customers who behaved like this were the biggest spenders so the security were reluctant at best and hostile at worst if you ever complained.

After working in strip clubs a while I routinely saw dancers publicly humiliated for standing up for themselves against sexual assault albeit by hitting back or calling the security; punishments were given by means of fines, public shouting and name calling by house mums or managerial staff and at worst dancers were sacked despite they're supposed to have had self employed status.

“ fines upwards to
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chewing gum on the job.

From the moment you sign the dancers contract you are subject to rigorous policing of what to wear, say, where you can and can't sit and how many times you perform on stage nude or semi nude for free. The policing is enforced by a system of fines of £50 upwards to £200 for minor instances of

Before you start a shift you are obligated to pay it forward from £80-£250 in advance for your house fees: they say this is because you are self employed and therefore are paying for the stage time and freedom of working within the club. The rules and regulations you must follow do not mirror that of a self employment contract and the financial control operates as a system to keep dancers forever in debt and coerced into continuing with an otherwise exploitative set up.

The first club I worked in, I was sexually assaulted by a security guard within a private booth area on camera. I had been drinking my first and only drink of the evening in order to loosen me up for performing on stage. I was nervous, young and completely new at the job. I trusted the security guard to watch my drink backstage as I went on to perform. I came off, took a few sips and within twenty minutes I could not see properly and proceeded to black out.

“ I was sexually
assaulted by a
security guard ”

The security guard took me upstairs to the empty private booth, telling other members of staff he would look after me.

I drifted in and out of consciousness and remember the security guard telling me to sit in the corner whilst he assaulted me.

The next day I went to the police station where they took over ten hours to drug test me and do a rape test. They found bruising on my upper inner thigh area next to my groin. Unfortunately due to the time it took the police to do the drug test the results were inconclusive as any drugs would have escaped my system by then.

The case went to court and despite CCTV footage showing the security guard leaning over me repeatedly it was lost due to lack of evidence. The judge confirmed that it was hard to decipher what was taking place on the CCTV as they were timer operated only and did not run consistently therefore there were gaps in the footage.

I later found out from other dancers that this particular security guard had done the same thing to at least three other women working within the club but instead of sacking him they had moved him on to another club and offered the women assaulted "free house fee" for a week not to go to the police.

I ask the questions; why was no ambulance called on each occasion that myself and other women were found to be unconscious or semi conscious? Why was standard procedure not followed whereby two members of staff stayed with myself and other victims as opposed to this predatory security guard? Why did the police not take my claims seriously as I had to attend three police stations at the time before they even agreed to drug test and rape test me?

Overall I feel as though the system had completely failed me.

" The culture of strip clubs is one of rape and sexual assault as the norm "

The culture of strip clubs is one of rape and sexual assault as the norm. Prostitution went on in another club I worked as they had specifically designated a downstairs VIP suite free of any staff safeguarding or observations, dimly lit and without CCTV for that very purpose. It was common knowledge it went on and that the waiters would take tips as

bribes to recommend certain dancers therefore undercutting the competition.

Propositioning by customers happened on average ten times per shift. Sexual assault by customers happened on average once per every three customers.

This along with the financial control and entrapment, repetitive use of language which infantilised us kept me here a lot longer than I wished to be.

" Sexual assaults happened on average once every three customers "

The grooming process had gone up a notch and I was speeding into the fast lane about to crash.

Women in strip clubs are deliberately referred to as "girls" by the "house mum" and other staff. You are made to feel like you are all just a misfit family in it together because the rest of society most definitely stigmatised you so at least you were amongst your own.

We were all directly encouraged to lean on our "house mum" emotionally and to "tell her if we ever wanted to talk about something" This encouraged dependence and enforced further control as often times the house mum would be lovely and encouraging one minute and then harsh and bullying the next if you did not make her enough money or tip. I witnessed one house mum go through dancers bags and interrogate them for not sharing their tips with the club as it was "against the rules"

You were never to question "the boss" and he always maintained a shadowy air of authority that everyone knew not to challenge. He was deliberately unapproachable and aloof for this purpose.

As I write and as I have studied, I am realising more and more the parallels that strip clubs have with cults and how they control people. It isn't overt physical abuse but more a long process of grooming and mind control within a system, its purpose to make you believe you have free will and choice when in fact your choices are severely limited.

Most women I have met who worked in the sex industry did so under false pretences albeit previous grooming, financial coercion, homelessness or abuse. Most will never admit this even to themselves; I didn't, because to admit you are in need of help is admitting defeat in a world which abandons you. I am yet to meet the "happy hooker" that the media is so keen to fictionalise and propagandise with the help of some third wave feminists. It was a hard lesson for me to realise that Billie Pipers character in "the secret diary of a call girl" does not exist even if it was based on a "true story".

“ to admit you are in need of help is admitting defeat in a world which abandons you ”

I myself am a writer and even the truth needs embellishments when you are making an entire television series, that's just how writing works, nothing is a direct copy of reality when in the realms of entertainment.

“ to finalise my testimony I want to tell you about the pimps .. ”

To finalise my testimony I want to tell you about the pimps. The Albanian and Romanian men who frequented the strip clubs just before closing time to keep an eye on their girls and to scout for potential prey. After all by closing you could see who made the most money, who was tired, who had

worked hard and who was without representation.

I did not fear these men because I am English and English girls do not get trafficked. I dismissed their advances and swore at them to leave me alone. By this point I was cocky and I felt that I was invincible, perhaps a coping mechanism to shield me from reality.

Act 3 Prostitution

I met a new man on the cusp of my transition towards prostitution. I had had enough of not making enough money in strip clubs and being made to feel powerless. I decided to take matters into my own hands and go self employed like the call girl I had watched on TV.

“brothels and escort agencies - the same mechanisms of control and coercion as within strip clubs ”

The industry went from dark to pitch black and I endured sleep deprivation within brothels working fifteen hour shifts, forced rape and repeated victimisation, although all the same mechanisms of financial control and coercion that existed within the strip clubs also existed within the brothels and escort agencies; fifty percent of my earnings went to the "house" to pay my "house fee" and although I was in hell it felt like home.

Security here too operated as 'observe and not do' unless of course the financial standing of the house was at risk as opposed to the women who worked in it. They mostly observed with very little interjection unless told to do so by the boss; usually if a woman had "misbehaved"; rarely if a low paying customer was being violent, unsafe or otherwise abusive and *absolutely never* if a high paying customer was violent. But mostly they did nothing.

Very rarely I felt allowed or accepted to refuse a customer or kick one out due to violence as the occurrence of violence was so high that I would be refusing everyone if I operated my own free choice in whom I slept with. I can safely say that all the women within prostitution are trafficked regardless of if they know it or not. My new boyfriend fed me ideas of my own flat and independence and encouraged my entry into prostitution whilst reaping the financial rewards of being my only supporter and confident as by that point I was totally isolated and threatened with street homelessness on a constant basis due to job insecurity and financial unpredictability.

Act 4 freedom

I am happy to say that I made it out the other end alive and thriving and I continue to take my life back by means of therapy, education and goal setting. I have a good support network around me now and I am on better terms with my mother as I see the struggles she went through and my heart goes out to her.

I am angry at the mass brainwashing that is taking place to girls and women here in the UK and coupled with the lack of early intervention it has an effect of colossal Stockholm syndrome that nobody wants to address.

Well I am here to address the elephant in the room:

The sex industry operates as a wedge under the doorway for women and girls. The same group of people benefit financially both from legalised strip clubs and tolerated brothels.

The definition of human trafficking or modern slavery is the recruitment of persons under the use of force, threat, coercion, deception or fraud. It is the abuse of power or a position of vulnerability or offering payments or benefits for the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation is inclusive of prostitution, sexual exploitation, forced labour or services.

"Strip clubs are legalised trafficking institutions "

Strip clubs are legalised trafficking institutions with the end goal of moulding the perfect manipulatable prostitute to put money in the pockets of the criminal gangs who feed key members of councils, police, MP's and other authorities with bribes.

This is evident in the tip toeing around strip clubs with slack council rules on how they operate such as the "three metre rule" meaning each dancer must always remain three metres away from a customer whilst dancing to prevent sexual assault and exploitation; It is common knowledge that none of these rules are enforced unless a member of the council comes to inspect the establishment with prior invitation and warning to the club. We had this happen a few times where our house mum told us to adhere to the three metre rule and be on our best behaviour as the local council representative had announced his visit that evening.

The fact remains you cannot paint a piece of excrement gold and call it what it isn't because the smell will still remain and it's origins will seep into the veneer.

In this day and age I am disgusted at both the culture of acceptance and the legalisation of modern slavery by our very own councils and government.

I am calling for an abolishment of this archaic practice and a cleansing of our attitudes towards women as people.

In fact I remember being very young, in a dress at kings cross station waiting for my friend once and a man approached me and thought I was a sex worker.

This is not normal. It needs to stop.