

CEASE UK: a cross-partisan human rights charity standing against all forms of sexual exploitation by exposing the links and implicating objectification, hypersexualisation and the sex industry as key drivers

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## **CEASE UK Statement on Strip Clubs**

We, CEASE UK, declare that Strip Clubs are an important social driver sex inequality, sexual objectification and sexual harassment.

In Strip Clubs, men pay to sexually objectified and sexually harass women. These spaces celebrate sexism, perpetuate the damaging myth of women's unconditional sexual availability and foster male privilege and dominance.

We live in a nation that not only acknowledges the serious negative influence of sexual objectification, harassment and exploitation but also takes positive action towards their elimination. How then can we tolerate establishments that not only profit from these things but also normalise toxic attitudes and behaviours more broadly? We wouldn't consider licencing bars that overtly condoned racism- so why the double standard when it comes to sex inequality?

It's clear that Strip Clubs have no place in our modern world. Far from being just 'harmless fun', they systematically legitimise larger infrastructures of sexual exploitation and oppressive sex stereotypes. We therefore call on the government to ensure that, in line with the 2010 Equality Act, all Strip Clubs are shut down and that sufficient support services are put in place in order to help performers exit the industry.

### **Strip Clubs: a summary of their intrinsic and societal harms**

#### **Skewed power dynamics**

In Strip clubs, performers aren't treated as anything more than living pornography. The women's humanity is obliterated and she becomes a mere sex object who exists to be used.

*"Under a sexually objectifying gaze, women's bodies momentarily become the "property" of the observer – whether they have consented or not."*<sup>1</sup>

The process of turning a person into a commodity crowds out our innate feelings of empathy which explains the absence of fundamental principles of mutuality and respect that govern our social interactions.

<sup>1</sup> [How pornography removes empathy – and fosters harassment and abuse](#)

*"The sex industry makes money from fantasy and escape from the real world where men are held accountable for their behaviour."*<sup>2</sup>

### **Men on Top**

In Strip Clubs, sexual objectification distorts the power dynamic between the sexes, enshrining men's dominance over women. Men are the acting subjects: they pay the money and they 'call the shots'; the performers are mere objects. Being surrounded by sexually-objectified women who exist only to please and arouse customers makes men feel a dangerous combination of power and entitlement.

*"Strip clubs provide the perfect learning environment for sexually toxic attitudes and behaviors. Leering, jeering, sexual touching, and lap dancing are everyday occurrences in strip clubs throughout the world."*<sup>3</sup>

Strip Clubs deliberately create the illusion that the performers are there to fulfil the customers' sexual fantasies. This explains why they have strict rules about 'no contact' although these boundaries (necessary for legal reasons) are in reality always stretched and broken.

Two major studies into the UK strip industry have found that verbal abuse alongside groping and touching is the norm in the Strip Club industry.<sup>4</sup> In fact, "for many lap dancers, verbal, physical and sexual assault, constant propositioning for sex, sexual contact, sexual acts and sex" are often part and parcel of the job. Sometimes, this leads to police investigations and club closures, but mostly it's ignored or played down.

*"Every day someone forced me in some way- either licked, bit or poke me, sometimes even penetrated me, held me down, hurt me. Then there was the verbal degradation, by the customers and even ourselves."* Stella

### **Fantasy Women**

Performers in Strip Clubs turn themselves into sex objects by shutting down their sense of self and repressing their own instincts, feelings and desires. Performers are not some special breed of women except from the psychological stress of having to cope with the unnaturalness of being half-naked in front of strangers, enduring unwanted (near) sexual contact and providing foreplay in public. Pretending to enjoy themselves and to find punters attractive, the women are forced to mechanically override normal, self-protective instincts feelings of vulnerability, humiliation and revulsion.

*"It took longer to learn to hustle, to leave aside my humanity and erect that false facade of the happy whore, to become that simpering shallow shell of a woman we call a stripper: part air hostess, part sex slave."* Stella

The dehumanising process necessary to 'work' in Strip Clubs takes a heavy psychological toll, causing women to suffer a host of mental health problems. Dissociative disorders are commonplace, as are anxiety, depression and PTSD.

Many women turn to alcohol and drugs in order to anesetise themselves from the demands of the 'job', which only increases their vulnerability and risk-taking. It's also common for women in Strip Slubs to feel acutely self-conscious about thier body as a result of constantly being judged as a sex object, which can lead to body shame, eating disorders and the decision to undergo cosmetic surgery.<sup>5</sup>

*"The one and only time I went to a strip club, a lady giving me a lap dance whispered the words "I hate my life" while leaning over me right next to my ear. No joke."*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> **Girls Gone Skank: The Sexualization of Girls in American Culture, 2008** Patrice A. Oppliger

<sup>3</sup> [Inextricably Bound: Strip Clubs, Prostitution, and Sex Trafficking, July 2017 Digital Commons: D. Bryant](#)

<sup>4</sup> [3 Bindel 'Profitable Exploits: Lap Dancing in the UK' : 7 & 4 Sanders et al 'The Regulatory Dance: Sexual consumption in the night time economy Initial Findings:](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Psychotherapy with Women Who Have Worked in the "Sex Industry"](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Strip Clubs Suck](#)

## Double Standards

Given the #metoo movement and the progress we have made in acknowledging the profoundly harmful consequences of sexual objectification and sexual harassment both to the wellbeing of individual women and girls and to the wider cause of sex equality, why is it that Strip Clubs have not come under increased scrutiny? The answer centres on the notion of free choice: the idea that women who work in Strip Clubs freely choose what they do, and either like it or at least don't seem to mind it.

Firstly, we need to ask *why* it is that some women choose to work in Strip Clubs. There are usually a number of different factors at play:

1. **Vulnerability.** The overwhelming majority of women who choose to work in strip club have had negative experiences of sex. Many have suffered systematic sexual abuse or exploitation, often in childhood; others experienced rape or were caught in abusive relationships. These experiences erode women's sexual boundaries. The process of a woman's body being abused as an object opens up the way for it to be commercially commoditised. This explains why many women feel (at least initially) empowered by sexual-objectification: they feel more control than they do in situations of rape and sexual abuse.  
  
*"Every dancer I met had experienced some kind of abuse in life .. emotionally, physically or sexually." Sammy, Strip Club Performer*
2. **Financial need.** Women who work in strip clubs are often young and impoverished, and are therefore attracted by the prospect of quick ready money. Strip Club work often at least promises more than other minimum-wage jobs; cash becomes both the incentive to work and the sole motivation to continue, even when things become difficult.
3. **Hypersexualised culture.** Popular culture is hugely influenced by the sex industry. From advertising to pop music, girls are surrounded by the message that their worth lies in their sex appeal. It's little wonder that so many internalise this ideology and become conditioned to associate their sexual desirability with self-esteem, particularly if they have been inured to objectification by previous negative experiences.

Secondly, we have to ask: if something is *known* to be harmful, does individual choice trump a person's right to be kept safe and well?

Due to hypersexualisation and the normalisation of Strip Clubs, most women don't recognise the profound long-term harms of risks of working there before they start.

*"As a vulnerable and impressionable young female I was not aware of the damaging implications this would have upon my development and self image over the years." Anon, Strip Club Performer*

Once the women are in the industry, many find it hard to exit. What's more, women will often resort to powerful psychological strategies to defend their choices, rooted in a desire to feel more in control of a situation in which they are fundamentally disempowered.

*"When you are in prostitution you internalise the violence. You hear the same repulsive things over and over when you are being called a slut, a whore, stupid or disgusting. But still, you defend your 'free choice' and say that prostitution is just ordinary work, because realising the truth is so depleting. Tanja Rahm*

Would we respect a desperate individual's choice to sell herself into slavery? To stay with an abusive partner? To sell her organs for cash? Even in our neoliberal world, individual rights have limitations because we recognise the importance of protecting the most vulnerable in society from exploitation.

Thirdly, we have to consider that the existence of Strip Clubs is harmful to *all* women, not just to performers. In the area around Strip Clubs, drunk and sexually-aroused men spill out onto the street, carrying with them their antisocial,

threatening and sexually-harassing behaviour. This creates a 'no go zone' in the local community, forcing women- and particularly underage girls, ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups- to avoid the area.<sup>7</sup>

*It's like open rules here, cat calling, harassment and open hostility.*<sup>8</sup>

A report by the Lilith Project on lap-dancing in Camden Town found that "in the three years before and after the opening of four large lap-dancing clubs in the area, incidents of rape in Camden rose by 50%, while sexual assault rose by 57%."<sup>9</sup>

*"If you allow some women to be bought and sold for men's sexual arousal or entertainment, then you compromise the position of all women in a community."* **Meagan Tyler**<sup>10</sup>

Strip Clubs are at utterly odds with sex equality more generally, since they're a place where women are treated as sex objects that men are entitled to use, buy and control. They set up an environment that legitimizes the larger infrastructures of sexual exploitation and stereotypes oppressing women.<sup>11</sup>

## Shady Industry

Strip Clubs are the more acceptable face of the sex industry, placing themselves openly in towns and cities up and down the country. But beneath the facade, Strip Clubs are often very different from other respectable establishments such as bars and nightclubs.

*Exploitation:* Unlike the management staff, performers in Strip Clubs are usually forced to be self-employed, with limited employment rights and insecure contracts. It can be hard for the women to make much money, since competition is stiff and they have to pay expenses, a fee to the club and fines out of their earnings. This financial pressure means performers often resort to 'rule breaking', providing illegal 'extras' in private booths- for example, offering sexual contact, or performing sexual acts- for extra cash.<sup>12</sup>

*Rule-breaking:* The CCTV, bouncers and 'House Mums' that give the impression Strip Club managers are looking out for the women often fail to offer any real protection. Wanting to protect their reputation in order to avoid losing their licence, Strip Clubs are incentivised to play down reports of rule breaking activity (anything from reported sex acts to sexual assault and harassment). CCTV can be wiped and has 'blind spots'; bouncers and 'House Mums' can turn a blind eye; and because of the type of contract women have (and because many don't declare their earnings), Management knows it doesn't have to respect their working rights.<sup>13</sup>

*"It seems almost impossible to think a man who assaults a dancer in a strip club would be arrested. Bringing in the police would only make the club look bad and chase away other customers."*

*Criminality:* Studies show that in Strip Clubs, there's often widespread use of drugs, drug dealing, drink spiking, underage dancers, suspected trafficking, prostitution, sexual harassment and assaults. The venues are attractive 'safe' venues for organised crime to flourish. According to a report by Dan O'Bryant: "No strip club survives where the promise of sex acts in back rooms, VIP rooms, or local hotels is not realized."<sup>14</sup>

*"People don't realize that 70% of sex trafficking victims are trafficked into the commercial sex industry, that means they are working in the strip clubs, they're working on the porn sites, they're working for escort agencies...we can't turn a blind eye to that."* Harmony Grillo

<sup>7</sup> [Strip Clubs Create 'No Go Zones'](#)

<sup>8</sup> [No harm done? 'Sexual entertainment districts' make the city a more threatening place for women](#)

<sup>9</sup> ['I was seen as an object, not a person': The Guardian](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Stop Glamorizing Sexual Exploitation in Strip Clubs - Hustlers Movie](#)

<sup>11</sup> [No, "Hustlers" is Not Empowering for Women](#)

<sup>12</sup> ["Behind the Curtain": Strip Clubs and the Management of Competition for Tips - Liz Mount, 2018](#)

<sup>13</sup> [What happens at a Lap Dancing Club?](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Inextricably Bound: Strip Clubs, Prostitution, and Sex Trafficking](#)

Strip Clubs are premised on men being able to buy access to women's sexualised bodies. They nurture men's sexual entitlement and dominance over women, which leads to sexual harassment, coercion and violence. As well as harming performers within the industry, Strip Clubs hurt sex equality and women's rights and drive the demand for prostitution and sex trafficking.

*"With workplace sexual violence and sexual harassment standards, how can we validate strip clubs as legitimate businesses who can provide support and protection to their employees? How can we acknowledge the harms of sex trafficking, sexual violence, and sexual abuse, while failing to acknowledge the hosts and perpetrators of such things?"<sup>15</sup>*

<sup>15</sup> [No, "Hustlers" is Not Empowering for Women](#)