

Darna

Testimony from Darna to Camden Council Mon 25 Nov 2019 against the relicensing of 3 of its strip clubs:

I am a sex trade survivor who experienced various settings of the industry, including strip clubs. Strip clubs should never be licensed or otherwise treated as legitimate businesses in a country that prohibits third parties' prostitution-related activities, such as owning or managing a brothel, pimping, and pandering.

In theory, a strip club was meant to be an entertainment house that contains an alcohol bar and a stage where women are dancing in minimal clothing. This is a pervasive concept that fosters a hostile atmosphere towards the women in the club and probably the women in general, yet if the strip clubs were like that in reality - I would not call for closing them by legal means. Tools like education and public relations might be more suitable in this case.

But that is not the case. In practice, every single strip club functions as a brothel for all intents and purposes. The strip clubs don't even have a business model that allows women to make a living from merely dancing. The strippers are always freelancers and not the employees of the clubs; typically, they are required to pay a daily fee for their "right" to dance. Hence, the dance is not the service itself but rather the promotional tool. The real service is "Lap Dance," in the best-case scenario.

"Lap Dance" does not include full sex (penetration), but it is sexual contact for all intents and purposes. The punters grope you, touching all parts of your body, including the private ones, squeezing you, breathing on your face. In this situation, you are expected not only to suppress the physical recoil - a normal human response to a stranger's touch - but also forge sexual desire.

In the long run, the strippers are in danger of developing the same traumatic symptoms like the women in the "conventional" prostitution that is not hiding behind misleading definitions. My claim is supported by research-based and therapists' evidence. Still, first and foremost, it is backed by the stories of my friends who needed rehabilitation after strip clubs, just like after any other field of prostitution.

Not coincidentally, one of the arguments against closing the strip clubs is that "in this case, women will move to less safe prostitution". When, for one reason or another any other enterprise closes - no one is claiming that workers are likely to deteriorate into prostitution. Only strippers are in danger of entering prostitution, and in fact, many of them end up in prostitution without the strip clubs closing. In some clubs, "sex services" by strippers are sold in the house. In others, the strippers make deals with punters within the club, but the act itself takes place elsewhere. In both cases, the club owners act as *de facto* pimps, who repeatedly manage to get under the law enforcement radar.

The claim that strip clubs offer jobs to destitute women is outrageous. When these are the jobs offered to us, this means that we have fewer decent employment options. If instead of a strip club, a dance club

or a pub was set up then, women would have jobs that didn't end up giving you PTSD, depression, substance abuse, and STDs.

Also, the claim that licensing strip clubs is in the best interest of the strippers is very manipulative even if the strip club owners manage to hide behind the backs of some strippers who claim to want to be there. Humans in general and women, in particular, tend to deal with extreme violence through denial and suppression of feelings. Many violent, dangerous, and unimaginable practices are justified by those who are trapped there with no alternatives. Sect members, victims of domestic violence, people who sold themselves into slavery through debt bondage - all of these may cling to their life frame for lack of alternatives, real or perceived. I'm afraid everyone knows very well how the psychology of people subject to daily violence works. If you asked me 10 years ago whether I am willing to be a stripper, or an "escort" – I would have said this is the best choice for me, because of the enormous amount of money paid to me.

It took me seven years of moving away from the source of harm and occupational, social, and psychological rehabilitation to admit that the sex trade is devastating for every woman, even those who make good money. This money, by the way, is never saved and not used for economic mobility. It is wasted on various compensation behaviours, always leaving us weak and anxious about losing "the job."

You, as decision-makers and policymakers, must remember that you have a commitment to creating communities where women have real work, rather than 'brothel work'. Moreover, you have a responsibility to young girls who are still not there. You can no longer help my survivor friends or me; in our case, the damage is already done. That said, you can create a better life and a better community for my daughters. Like your own daughters, they don't deserve to be sold to punters.