

## Keeping Women Down and Out: The Strip Club Boom and the Reinforcement of Male Dominance

**I**n the Western world in the past decade there has been a rapid expansion of the strip club industry, particularly in the form of lap-dancing clubs: the industry is currently estimated to be worth US\$75 billion worldwide (Montgomery 2005). Some writers in the field of gender studies have defended the practice of stripping, arguing that stripping should be understood as socially transgressive, an exercise of women's agency, or a form of empowerment for women.<sup>1</sup> These arguments exemplify the decontextualized individualism that is common to many defenses of the sex industry. However, the tradition of women dancing to sexually excite men (usually followed by the men's commercial sexual use of the women) is a historical practice of many cultures, as seen, for instance, in the *auletrides* of classical Greece (Murray and Wilson 2004) and the dancing girls of Lahore, who are prostituted by their families from adolescence on (Saeed 2001). This practice does not signify women's equality. The harmful Western practice of stripping (see Jeffreys 2004), too, I will argue here, signifies sexual inequality. This article will examine the context in which stripping takes place, looking at who owns and controls the industry and who benefits most from it, in order to expose some weaknesses in the argument that stripping can be a positive career for women. It will look at the evidence that suggests that both national and international crime gangs run the most profitable sectors of the industry, and it will show how, as the industry both expands and becomes more exploitative to create greater profits, the trafficking of women and girls into debt bondage has become a staple way of sourcing strippers in Europe and North America. Rather than empowering women, the strip club boom, as this article will contend, helps to compensate men for lost privileges.

<sup>1</sup> See Hanna 1998; Schweitzer 2000; Liepe-Levinson 2002; Egan 2006.

**The strip club boom**

Striptease is not a new phenomenon in the West. However, during the twentieth century, the practice was gradually decensored, becoming increasingly explicit in the amount of nudity and touching permitted, from tableaux vivants, in which women were not permitted to move and were made to wear skin-colored coverings, to the lap dancing of the present day. In lap dancing, women are usually naked and use their genitals to massage the penises of clothed men while seated on their laps in private booths. Customers in this recently expanding industry are likely to have been trained and encouraged in the commercial sexual use of women through the decensorship of the pornography industry from the 1960s onward. The pornography industry in the 1960s and 1970s experienced huge growth and became strong enough, through large profits, to fight legal cases and make its product more accessible (Lane 2001). Many of the strip clubs and chains that opened during this boom are owned by men who got rich through pornography, such as the Hustler chain of Larry Flynt.

In the 1980s, striptease moved into a new phase, beginning in the United States. Prior to that time, it was traditional for clubs to pay women to dance: Dawn Passar, a former stripper who now organizes the Exotic Dancers' Alliance, explains that when she first danced in San Francisco, at the well-known Mitchell Brothers O'Farrell Theatre, "the girls would make minimum wage an hour and tips" (Passar, n.d.). However, in the mid-1980s the Market Street Cinema in the same city introduced "stage fees"—dancers were required to pay management in order to dance in the club, making a living through tips from private dances. This arrangement spread to the other venues, creating a profound change that enabled the venue owners to increase their profits considerably. Managers were now charging the dancers instead of paying them. From this point on, the amount of the stage fee rose very quickly, reaching the point at which women sometimes could dance all evening with no net profit for themselves or could even take a loss. This new principle that workers should pay to work, and the consequent new level of profitability for owners, stimulated the strip club boom. One media report estimated the U.S. industry to be worth much more than baseball: "\$4 billion a year is spent by men on baseball, the national pastime. Compare that to \$15 billion a year spent by men at strip clubs" (Sawyer and Weir 2006).

**The feminist debate**

In response to this boom in strip clubs, it might be expected that there would be a lively feminist discussion of the issue, but this is not so. Feminist

critiques of stripping are thin on the ground; instead, there are many articles and books influenced by poststructuralism and queer theory that represent stripping as an exemplification of Judith Butler's ideas on the transgression of gender through the performance of femininity and masculinity. Katherine Liepe-Levinson, for instance, uses Butler's work in her own book, from the Routledge series *Gender in Performance*, in which she argues that strip shows involve "social transgressiveness" because female dancers "play desired sex-object roles as they openly defy the expectations of the double standard" (Liepe-Levinson 2002, 4).

Dahlia Schweitzer also argues that stripping is transgressive. Striptease, in her view, enables women to reverse roles and have power over men: "With men the suckers, and women pocketing the cash, the striptease becomes a reversal of society's conventional male/female roles. Striptease is, at its core, a form of role removal" in which women are "clearly in charge" (Schweitzer 2000, 71). In arguing that "by removing her clothes, the stripper disrupts years of patriarchal hegemony" (72), Schweitzer gives the impression that a pro-stripping line is the correct feminist position. Anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna, however, takes the approach of pure American liberal individualism. She both researches and writes in the field of dance studies and now serves as an expert witness on behalf of the strip club industry in cases in which local authorities seek to exercise control over the clubs. She argues that attempts to limit strip clubs and activities in the United States violate First Amendment rights to freedom of communication, concluding that "it is time to cease stripping the First Amendment, corsetting the exotic dancer and patron, and tying up the community and to promote equality of opportunity for everyone" (1998, 21).

Interestingly, however, Katherine Frank, who worked as a stripper to get funding for graduate school and to research her PhD dissertation on strip clubs and their patrons, is critical of the notion that stripping is transgressive. She seeks to create a "feminist politics of stripping" and writes of how she performs femininity through the practice but also argues that the male buyers are not aware of the performance and "hold very normative views about gender roles." She is forced to ask whether the transgression works, wondering "what is the effect of my double-agent approach to womanhood on the men who gaze up at me? The hard truth is that I cannot predict or prescribe how my performances will be interpreted" (Frank 2002b, 200).

This form of literature on strip clubs, much of it written by women who have experience in the industry, tends to stress the agency that women who strip are able to exercise. Frank, now an academic, says that she had increased feelings of self-efficacy when dancing, although she acknowledges

in her writing that the fact that she was known to be a graduate student and had other work options is likely to have made her personal experience atypical. Frank is well aware that there are constraints on the exercise of agency; she speaks, for example, of stripping being “deeply intertwined with gendered and sexual positionings and power relations” (Frank 2002a, 4). But she is quite positive about what stripping offers to women. Frank speaks, for instance, of the “potential economic and personal rewards” and the “radical political potential of mixing money, sexuality, and the public sphere” so that “sex work cannot be dismissed as a possible form of feminist resistance or an exercise in female agency” (16). Of strippers, she writes that “we open spaces of resistance within the heteronormative culture of the strip club and elsewhere” (2002b, 206). The constraints themselves—such as the structural dimensions of the industry; the exploitative and abusive practices of strip club owners, managers, and clients; and restrictions on how much money is made by women who strip and what precisely they have to do to get it—are scarcely mentioned.

Although there is now a considerable feminist literature looking at the psychological and physical effects that women experience from being prostituted (Jeffreys 1997, 2004; Farley et al. 2003), this has not been the case for stripping, where there is little analysis of its harms.<sup>2</sup> Scholarship has only just begun to discuss the effects of the strip club boom on women who aren’t strippers, such as those residing in the neighborhoods where the clubs are located and those seeking equality in the business world, where in some sectors the majority of deals are made in strip clubs that exclude female patrons (Morgan and Martin 2006). A literature is just beginning to develop on the gains that the male buyers make from their involvement in the strip club industry (Erickson and Tewksbury 2000; Frank 2003). Most significantly, there has been a conspicuous gap in the literature in relation to the context in which the stripping takes place. Structural factors, such as who is in control and who makes the profits, have been central to much research on other aspects of the sex industry, such as prostitution, trafficking, and pornography (Barry 1995; Taylor and Jamieson 1999). The sex industry is now being considered, for example, as an important aspect of globalization (Jeffreys 1999; Poulin 2005). Stripping, however, has not been approached from a political economy viewpoint. The feminist literature does not discuss who is developing this industry and who benefits from it.

This article presents an examination, mainly from media reports, of the context of stripping, looking at who owns the industry, the involvement

<sup>2</sup> A notable exception is Kelly Holsopple’s *Strip Club Testimony* (1998).

of organized crime in it, and the trafficking of women that supplies it. It looks, further, at the harms suffered by the women who strip within this exploitative context and uses a combination of the little research that does exist and material from strip club industry magazines and sex work organizations. The impact of strip clubs on equality between the sexes is then surveyed through the experiences both of the male buyers and of the women in the world of business who are confronting a new glass ceiling created by their male colleagues' use of strip clubs. This article will consider only strip clubs catering to heterosexual men, the predominant form of the industry.

### **The context of the strip club industry**

Strippers do not work independently. The practice of striptease generally takes place in strip clubs, which are often part of national or international business chains. Because of the high profit levels in the business, the strip club industry is expanding. In the United States in 2005 there were an estimated three thousand clubs employing three hundred thousand women (Stossel 2005). In 2002 there were two hundred lap-dancing clubs in the United Kingdom (Jones, Shears, and Hillier 2003). A 2003 media report estimates the annual turnover of UK lap-dancing clubs at £300 million, commenting that "they are one of the fastest growing elements in the UK's leisure services industry" (Jones, Shears, and Hillier 2003, 215). The strip club industry is estimated to be worth £22.1 million yearly to the Scottish economy alone (Currie 2006, 11). The industry in the United States is estimated to be worth \$15 billion, constituting about one-fifth of the US\$75 billion world market (Montgomery 2005, C1).

Spearmint Rhino, the American strip club chain owned by John Gray, now also has clubs in the United Kingdom, Russia (Moscow), and Australia. British investigative journalist Adrian Gatton reports that the club on Tottenham Court Road in London makes profits of more than £3 per minute. In 2001, a year after it opened, this club made a "tax profit of more than £1.75 million from sales of £7.8 million, equivalent to takings of £150,000 a week" (Gatton 2003). During the Christmas holiday season, the revenues were £300,000 each week. Gatton points out that a busy city pub would normally take in around £20,000 in a good week, which explains why many pubs in the United Kingdom have been converted to strip clubs in recent years. Spearmint Rhino clubs in the United Kingdom operate in the common style of lap-dancing clubs, with dancers paying £80 per night to work and the club taking 35 percent of the dancers' earnings from customers (Gatton 2003).

According to the work of investigative journalists in the United Kingdom and the United States, strip clubs are likely to have criminal connections, with media reports suggesting that some strip club owners and managers are associated with organized crime (Blackhurst and Gatton 2002; Gatton 2003). The owners of strip clubs are careful to represent themselves as upstanding members of the community in their sponsorship of football teams, donations to charity, and so on. The owners of upmarket clubs promote them as elegant destinations for socially elite men. However, there are indications, despite all attempts to maintain the veneer of respectability, that strip club owners have disreputable associations. One indication is the number of unexplained deaths and injuries sustained by the owners, managers, and associates of these clubs. The manager of Spearmint Rhino UK was viciously attacked while walking from the Tottenham Court Road club to its parking lot in 2002: “Two men came up behind, struck him on the head with a machete and knocked Mr. Cadwell to the ground. He somehow fought back but was stabbed at least twice, one blow puncturing a lung.” No one was charged, and the police “suspect this was no ordinary street robbery, that Mr. Cadwell was targeted by associates of a notorious north London crime family in a feud with his company” (Blackhurst and Gatton 2002, 20). Another unexplained death occurred in California in September 1990, when a twenty-one-year-old woman who had been riding with Cadwell in his helicopter was killed. She was the girlfriend of Cadwell’s close friend David Amos, and the incident was described by Blackhurst and Gatton as follows: “She stepped out of the helicopter as it stood on the tarmac at Long Beach Airport to greet Mr. Amos, who was waiting for her, and walked into the still turning tail rotor blades” (20). The police investigation concluded that the death was an accident. In 2001 Amos was convicted of the 1989 machine-gun killing of a strip club boss in Los Angeles. He was close to a member of the Bonnano Mafia family in New York and had paid a hit man to shoot Horace McKenna at his home (20). An attack similar to that on Cadwell took place in Edinburgh in 2005. The manager of one of Scotland’s biggest lap-dancing bars “was stabbed as he locked up for night” (Hamilton 2005, 37). *Sunday Mail* reporter Jane Hamilton also notes that “police believe he may have been caught up in a feud between the capital’s gangsters” (37).

John Gray’s Spearmint Rhino is the most successful international strip club chain. These clubs go to particular lengths to establish themselves as upmarket venues popular with business executives for entertaining clients and not just as strip joints. Gray, however, is a controversial figure. He has been convicted six times in the United States, for offenses ranging

from carrying a concealed weapon to writing bad checks, for which he received a suspended sentence, sixty-eight months' probation, and periods in jail (Blackhurst and Gatton 2002, 20). According to an *Evening Standard* (London) investigation, although "born John Leldon Gray . . . he has used the names, John Luciano, John Luciano Gianni and Johnny Win" (20). The *Evening Standard* article makes the interesting point that "oddly, there is also a John L. Gray, born in February 1957 and linked to two Spearmint Rhino addresses and one of Mr. Gray's home addresses, who is registered in the United States as 'deceased'" (20). Journalists in different countries are clearly interested in the connections between organized crime and the strip club industry but have to be careful about what they say in case of libel claims.

There are also clear connections between organized crime and the strip club industry in Queensland, Australia (Whittaker and Callinan 1999, 5). Crime figures are able to dominate ownership of the lap-dancing clubs in the state without their own names officially appearing anywhere. The apparent owners of the clubs are "often 'cleanskins' put up by the faceless men in the background" (5). According to a report in the *Courier Mail* on Queensland strip clubs, former bankrupts, loan sharks, and convicted drug dealers run the industry through secret stakes in clubs that are officially operated by nephews, for instance, who do not have convictions to their names. Thus one convicted criminal, who figured in an inquiry into police corruption conducted in the state, is described in the same newspaper report as the "godfather" of the industry, but his name is not listed in company records (5). In Sydney, the Hells Angels motorcycle gang was connected to so many shootings in or outside the strip clubs that a special police strike force has been set up to investigate the violence (Kennedy 2006, 5).

Arguments about women gaining agency and empowerment through stripping need to be considered in the context of organized crime's extensive involvement in the industry. Employers and managers involved in organized crime are men who bully, threaten, and kill to gain their profits. This needs to be factored in as a powerful form of inequality between the sex entrepreneurs and the women they exploit. It is interesting to note that one of the arguments made for legalizing the prostitution industry in many countries where brothels are still illegal is that legalization will drive out organized crime, which presumably thrives only because the industry, being illegal, is driven underground. But strip clubs are legal everywhere, and men connected with organized crime are running them and collecting the considerable profits.

An approach of decontextualized individualism is inappropriate for analysis of stripping because, unlike the women who strip, the club owners

and entrepreneurs are very organized nationally and internationally. They are not operating simply as individuals. Many are involved in networks of organized crime. But even those for whom there is no evidence of such involvement organize with one another to influence—and, in many cases, bribe—politicians and to engage lawyers and experts who can devise means of avoiding regulation and defeating community activism against their enterprises. These legal networks are linked through membership associations and online resources such as the U.S. newsletter of the Association of Club Executives, *Strip-magazine* in Europe, and the Eros Foundation in Australia. As a result of their careful efforts to achieve respectability—through sex exhibitions, stripping competitions, support for charities, and the cultivation of positive coverage in the media—strip clubs have experienced a remarkable normalization. Prominent figures of the UK establishment, including Margaret Thatcher, Prince Harry, and Tony Blair's son Euan, have all been recorded as patronizing the clubs in 2005 and 2006. Thatcher, for example, was a guest at a Tory Party fund-raiser in Peter Stringfellow's London club in April 2005 (Tyke 2005). Euan Blair was observed “spending the evening in the Hustler club late in November while on work experience in Paris” in 2005 (Tyke 2006). In April 2006, Prince Harry was observed at a lap-dancing club: “He (Harry) and a group of mates arrived at Spearmint Rhino at Colnbrook near Slough, Berkshire, at 3 am. . . . Harry grabbed a seat near the topless dancers—and stripper Mariella Butkute sat on his lap” (Rousewell 2006). Meanwhile, the industry is promoted in the business pages of newspapers, in how-to books, and, presently, in some academic disciplines such as business studies (Jones, Shears, and Hillier 2003) and leisure studies. In one leisure studies collection, for example, visiting a strip club is described positively as “a satisfying leisure experience” and “passive recreation” (Suren and Stiefvater 1998, 114).

### **Trafficking**

One aspect of organized crime involvement in the strip club industry is trafficking, which has become a common way of supplying clubs with dancers. All over Europe and North America, women and girls are brought into the clubs by deception, by force, or, initially, by consent (Anderson and O'Connell Davidson 2003; Dickson 2004; Monzini 2005). In such cases, they are kept in debt bondage, are deprived of their travel documents (which are confiscated by the traffickers), and are controlled by threats to themselves or their families—all traditional aspects of this modern form of slavery. Governments can be seen as complicit in the trafficking of



women to strip clubs through the issuing of visas for women who will work in debt bondage in strip clubs. In Canada, for instance, the importation of women was institutionalized through exotic dancer visas issued by the state since visas for particular skilled occupations that could not be staffed by local citizens were a formal part of the government's immigration program. Until 2004, the Canadian government issued four hundred to five hundred visas a year for Eastern European women to work as exotic dancers. In order to gain visas, women had to supply proof that they were strippers, which was accomplished by their provision of soft-porn pictures to immigration authorities (*Agence France-Presse* 2004). Audrey Macklin argues in the *International Migration Review* that local strippers could not be found because the conditions of work in strip clubs had deteriorated drastically with the advent of lap dancing and private booths (Macklin 2003): Canadian citizens were not prepared to experience the extreme degradation involved. Macklin makes the fascinating argument that the strippers from Eastern Europe should therefore be seen as the spoils of war. She explains: "If the fall of the Berlin Wall symbolizes the defeat of communism and the triumph of capitalism, then perhaps commodified East European women, exported to serve Western men, are the spoils of the Cold War served up by the global market to the victors" (2003, 471). The soldiers of liberty from the West, in the form of strip club habitués in North America and Western Europe, can claim and use the bodies of women of the defeated Communist regime. These strip club patrons exercise the colonizing power of rich males within a globalized economy.

Strip club owners have such power and influence within national economies that they are frequently able to get governments to act as procurers for their industry. Mendel Green, a lawyer for the Canadian clubs, asserted that the state owed a duty to the private sector to provide labor inputs where market incentives failed (Macklin 2003). Indeed, he is quoted in a newspaper at the time reducing women to items of merchandise, saying, "They're a critical sort of product in the entertainment industry that is not readily available in Canada" (*Guelph Mercury* 2004, A6). Interestingly, Green argued that foreign women were needed because "Canadian-born dancers were controlled by biker gangs" (*Guelph Mercury* 2004, A6), an admission by an industry representative of the involvement of organized crime. Canadian government officials became sufficiently embarrassed by having acted so clearly as pimps for the local strip club owners that the exotic dancer visas were discontinued in 2004.

The trafficking of women from Eastern Europe into strip clubs has also caused considerable concern in Ireland. Until 2002, the Irish state, like Canada, issued work permits for lap dancers under the category of "en-

tainment,” thus making the trafficking effortless (Haughey 2003, 4). Justice Minister Michael McDowell told the Parliament in 2002 that “there was clear evidence that human traffickers from Eastern Europe used lap dancing clubs as a front for the sex trade” (Wheeler 2003, 7). In June 2003, the gardai (police) in Ireland “blocked a bid by Eastern European organised crime gangs to take control of the money-spinning lap dancing industry” (Brady 2003). These gangs were thought to have links to paramilitaries and criminals in Ireland. The *Irish Times* commented that the industry is plagued by reports that prostitution occurs in the clubs: in Dublin, one club was closed by a court order after illegal sex acts were found to have been taking place (Haughey 2003, 4). The Dublin-based feminist antiviolence organization Ruhama argues that the clubs groom women for prostitution while “in every other country in the world they are just a cover for prostitution” (Haughey 2003, 4). There is trafficking of women into the clubs in the United States, too. In one instance from 2005, “Russian entertainment promoter Lev Trakhtenberg of Brooklyn, N.Y., got five years in prison after admitting he and his wife . . . helped more than 25 women to come illegally from Russia to the United States to perform nude lap dances at strip clubs” (Parry 2006).

### **Exploitation of and violence toward strippers**

It is in the context of huge profits to club owners, of organized crime and trafficking, that women strip in the clubs. The profits would not be so large if women were being fairly remunerated for stripping. In fact, the vast majority of the profits go to the club owners and not to the dancers, who may find it hard to earn enough just to pay the stage fees. In San Diego, dancers “can make several hundred dollars on a weekend night, but most struggle to make \$100 a night, many of them earning only what they can make in tips. . . . Another dancer at Minx Showgirls . . . said she averages closer to \$45 a night” (Washburn and Davies 2004, A1). “Tyke,” a strip club habitué of twenty-five years who writes for the industry journal *Strip-magazine*, explains that the idea that UK dancers can make £2,000 a night is a myth. This myth is in fact a story repeated frequently by club owners, who would find it hard to attract dancers if they told the truth. Tyke explains, “To make £2,000 in 1 night would involve 100 table dances ie around 15 an hour for a typical 7 hour shift, I just don’t think that happens” (2003). He further explains that strippers might in exceptional circumstances find a merchant banker who will spend his “Christmas bonus” on them, a scenario that can help to create the idea of large earnings.

The profit levels in the industry are enhanced by the fact that strippers do not get the benefits—such as sick leave or superannuation—that other club workers receive, because the club owners treat strippers as individual agents who simply rent space in the club. As Kelly Holsopple points out in her research on stripping, although the club owners argue that they are not employers and that the strippers are independent agents, the owners control hours and schedules, fees and tips, and even set the price of table dances and private dances. They pressure dancers to completely shave their pubic hair, to acquire year-long tans, and to undergo surgical breast augmentation. They regulate when women can use the bathroom, mix with other women, and smoke. Rules are enforced, with fines charged for being late, calling in sick, talking back to customers or staff, and many other, often invented, infringements that can deplete strippers' earnings. On top of this, strippers have to tip those who are employed by the club on regular wages: managers enforce “a mandatory tip out to bouncers and disc jockeys” (Holsopple 1998, 3). Furthering this point, Liepe-Levinson also writes of fines for minor transgressions and harsh work schedules (2002).

As the clubs seek to maximize profits, they work greater numbers of dancers, which creates greater competition among the strippers, forces down earnings, and pressures strippers to engage in practices they would rather avoid, such as lap dancing or prostitution. Retired stripper Amber Cooke explained in a 1980s collection on sex work that strippers are forced to compete because there are too many dancers and not enough male buyers, and are encouraged to provide “hands-on entertainment rather than dance, in order to make their money” (Cooke 1987, 98). She points out that this is dangerous, particularly because bouncers are not an effective protection: they cannot watch all the tables—let alone the private booths—and may be reluctant to defend a stripper against a group of aggressive male customers. The advent of lap dancing in strip clubs has therefore been seen by stripper advocacy groups and individual dancers as creating severe harm. Private booths, because of their nature, enable male buyers to sexually assault women and to engage in forms of intimate contact that the women find intolerable. For example, in a Melbourne court case a man was jailed in July 2006 for raping a stripper in a private booth: “During the dance, she took off her G’string and was naked. Her breasts were about 30 cm from Nguyen’s face. . . . [He] lunged at the woman, digitally raping her” and “pinned the woman to a couch” (Associated Press 2006, 9).

Canadian strippers formed an organization to oppose the practice of lap dancing, arguing that it is harmful to the dancers, and those inter-

viewed in one study particularly objected to having to come into contact with “customers’ ejaculate,” which could occur “when ejaculate penetrated the men’s clothing during lap dances” (Lewis 2000, 210). One interviewee explained to researcher Jacqueline Lewis, “So halfway through the song, like no warning, you’re sitting on their lap, and all of a sudden you’re wet.” Another concern was “dancers’ genital contact with other dancers’ vaginal secretions, left on customers’ clothing” (210). These opponents of lap dancing also talked about the harm they experienced both from being pressured by owners, managers, and customers to engage in lap dancing and from being threatened with job loss if they did not comply. Such practices made them feel “disempowered and victimized.” Two dancers told Lewis they were “crying their eyes out” after their first night of lap dancing and were distressed by, for instance, “these strangers’ fingers all over you—it was really nasty” (210). Nonetheless, Lewis herself opposes the ban on lap dancing that many of her interviewees saw as necessary for their survival in the industry. She contends that the solution to the problems strippers face is to treat stripping as just like any other form of work. However, there are no other forms of work, apart from those in the sex industry, in which women have to battle to keep their naked bodies away from men’s fingers and ejaculate.

There has been very little research on the physical and psychological harms that strippers face in clubs. Information on the harms of stripping may be difficult for some researchers to elicit. Thus R. Danielle Egan, who writes about stripping from what she calls a “sex radical perspective” and who rejects radical feminist analyses that focus on harm, comments that the women she worked with as a stripper and interviewed for her book avoided elaborating on their “experiences with bad nights” (2006, 83). Egan interprets “bad nights” as those during which women made very little money and were made to feel bad or “like whores”; she understands “good nights” as those on which they made money and felt good (83). She does not enlarge on the women’s experiences of being touched by men or having to touch them, nor how they felt about such practices. This more detailed analysis is quite scarce. However, a useful study by Holsopple (1998) provides information about such harms. She worked as a stripper in the United States for thirteen years and researched the effects of the industry on the dancers by conducting forty-one interviews and eighteen face-to-face surveys followed by discussions. She argues that the “common underlying element in strip clubs is that male customers, managers, staff, and owners use diverse methods of harassment, manipulation, exploitation, and abuse to control female strippers” (1998, 1).

Holsopple’s interviewees did not report the empowerment or expres-

sion of agency that some gender studies scholars have attributed to strip-ping (e.g., Egan 2006). Women had to engage in activities they found repugnant if they were to make a living from their work in the clubs, because their income was “entirely dependent on compliance with customer demands in order to earn tips” (Holsopple 1998, 3). Holsopple concluded from her interviews that “customers spit on women, spray beer, and flick cigarettes at them” and that the strippers are “pelted with ice, coins, trash, condoms, room keys, pornography, and golf balls” (8). Missiles from the audience have included a live guinea pig, a dead squirrel, and cans and bottles. Male buyers also “pull women’s hair, yank them by the arm or ankle, rip their costumes, and try to pull their costumes off.” Women are commonly “bitten, licked, slapped, punched, and pinched” (8). The male buyers attempt to penetrate women vaginally and anally with “fingers, dollar bills, and bottles” (8). Successful vaginal and anal penetration was common.

Holsopple’s study shows that women suffered particular harm from the conditions in which they were required to dance. They had to dance on elevated runways so narrow that they could not get away from men on either side touching them. In the private dances in booths, men would openly masturbate and “stick their fingers inside women.” Wall dancing, for example, “requires a stripper to carry alcohol swabs to wash the customer’s fingers before he inserts them into her vagina. His back is stationary against the wall and she is pressed against him with one leg lifted” (Holsopple 1998, 6). Holsopple’s interviewees describe clearly the forms of pressure and sexual harassment that they experienced from the male buyers in private dances: “I don’t want him to touch me, but I am afraid he will say something violent if I tell him ‘no’”; “I could only think about how bad these guys smell and try to hold my breath”; and “I spent the dance hyper vigilant to avoiding their hands, mouths, and crotches” (6). Every one of the eighteen women in her survey reported being both physically and sexually abused in the clubs and being verbally harassed, often multiple times. Most had been stalked—from one to seven times each—by someone associated with the club. Holsopple states that regulations prohibiting customers from touching dancers are “consistently violated” and that “stripping usually involves prostitution” (4). Liepe-Levinson reports that the strippers she interviewed experienced pressure to provide sexual favors to club bosses and employees (2002).

The advice offered to strippers from within the industry and from state-funded sex work agencies on how to avoid violence illuminates just how significant a threat this violence is. On the *Strip-magazine* Web site, for instance, Ram Mani offers advice to strippers on how to be constantly

alert to all the possibilities of men's violence (Mani 2004). Women are advised not to leave the clubs alone. Once outside the club, they should get straight into their cars and lock the doors, moving off immediately. They should not take a direct route home and should keep an eye on the car's mirror to check that they are not being followed. They should park neither so far from the club that they have a dangerously long walk to their cars nor so close that a man may be able to note their car's license number. When they register their cars, they should not use their home address. They are warned that "the odds of being stalked, mugged and attached [*sic*] are on increase and you must always keep your guard up" (2004). The advice offered to strippers by the sex work advocacy Web site STAR (Sex Trade Advocacy and Research) in Toronto includes tips for combating sexual assault: "Watch for roaming hands. Clients have an easier time touching you when you dance on a box, especially when you're bending over" (STAR 2004, 3). Dancers are told to "watch out for unruly or aggressive customers" and to "use the mirrors to keep track of your back." There is specific advice for private dances, since "there's a greater possibility of assault. . . . If a customer is trying to manhandle you, try holding his hands in a sexy way to control him. But be aware that touching violates some municipal bylaws. . . . If you're being assaulted, scream" (3).

### **Reinforcing gender inequality: The glass ceiling for women in business**

It is not just the women who strip who experience the harms of strip clubs. All women living in a society in which strip clubs flourish are likely to be affected by them in a variety of ways. Women whose husbands, partners, sons, male friends, and male workmates visit strip clubs will feel some effects. Wives and partners of pornophiles, for instance, report in interviews that they lose self-esteem as men compare them with the women in pornography, that they are asked to perform poses and practices that come from pornography to satisfy their male partners, and that they have lost needed family income to men's obsession with pornography (Paul 2005). Frank's research found that men reported visiting strip clubs in order to take revenge on their wives if they had an argument and were well aware of the distress that their behavior would cause if their wives knew of it, and did cause to wives who suspected it (2002a). When areas of cities are commandeered for men's sexual commodification of women, women who are not in the sex industry are likely to feel excluded from these spaces. While men may take for granted their right to access public space freely, women have

always suffered a reduction in this right because of male violence and its threat.

Strip clubs are not separate from society but influence on many levels the way men relate to women. One type of harm relates to the obstacles that strip clubs place in the way of equality for women in the business world, an issue now gaining attention legally and in research. A fascinating 2006 study by Laurie Morgan and Karin Martin shows how women professionals are blocked from engaging in the vital social networking that secures business clients and contracts. Morgan and Martin explain that many women professionals “traverse other settings beyond that of the office” in the course of their work, “including conferences, airplanes, hotel rooms and lobbies, restaurants, shop floors, golf courses, tennis courts, sporting events, bars, cars, and trade shows” (2006, 109). They state that “employer-sponsored out-of-the-office socializing with colleagues, customers and suppliers is institutionalized,” for it is through these socializations that day-to-day work is done, as is the “relationship building” that “embeds the foundation for reciprocity and long-lasting organizational ties in personal ones” (109). Thus, this out-of-office socializing has important purposes, which are completely necessary to a woman’s work and career, and is not optional at all. Morgan and Martin explain that in many industries the “entertainment” of male clients at strip clubs is an ordinary part of the work of the sales representatives they were researching. They write that “accounts from industry trade magazines suggest that almost half of salesmen, but only 5 percent of saleswomen, had entertained clients in topless bars” (116). Saleswomen, they point out, are thereby excluded from “industry contacts and denied access to professional information exchange” (116). The interview information Morgan and Martin examined showed that while some of the women professionals were disgusted by the visits to strip clubs, others were just angry that they were excluded from these meetings by being sent to their hotel rooms while their male coworkers went on to the clubs. The entertainment receipts showed the clubs as restaurants so that the accountants did not have to know where the events had taken place.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that when men enter strip clubs in groups the atmosphere becomes even more exaggeratedly masculine (Erickson and Tewksbury 2000; Frank 2003). As Morgan and Martin put it, “Patrons tend to be louder and more raucous. The male-bonding bravado permeates the entire audience to some degree. The level of objectification of the dancers also appears to increase as a result of this phenomenon” (2006, 118). Women are not able to join in this bonding, which is expressly constructed between men through their objectification

of naked women: “Saleswomen said that at these events they undermined the ‘cavorting’ and ‘fun’ and ultimately the ‘bonding’ that the events were intended to promote” (118). One woman described trying to attend a strip club with a customer and two company managers. During the visit to the club, she ended up speaking, and perhaps bonding, with the strippers rather than with her male companions, stating in an interview, “And I’m like, ‘Okay where do I look?’ I’m talking to the strippers” (118). Her interaction with the strippers would be likely to humanize them and provide an impediment to the men’s enjoyment of objectification.

The practice of taking clients to strip clubs seems to be particularly common in the finance industry. An estimated 80 percent of city finance workers (presumably male) visit strip clubs in London as a part of their work. This statistic came out in a court case about the poaching of clients between two London finance firms in 2006. Matthew Lynn, reporting on this interesting piece of information, comments helpfully, “In effect, just as their fathers might have taken clients to one of the gentlemen’s clubs of Pall Mall, so brokers today take their business associates to see lap dancers. The old gentlemen’s clubs banned women—some still do—whereas the lap-dancing establishments merely intimidate them” (2006). He explains that if one bank would not let its workers take clients to lap-dancing clubs, then its rivals certainly would. In the United States this form of exclusion of women from equal opportunities has resulted in women employees’ filing some high-profile actions for sex discrimination against top finance houses. Morgan Stanley, for instance, agreed in 2004 to pay \$54 million to settle Equal Employment Opportunity Commission charges that it had “discriminated against women in pay and promotions, and tolerated crude comments about sex and men-only outings to strip clubs with clients” (Lublin 2006, 33).

So integral and accepted have strip clubs become within corporate culture that their importance to business is now being used as an argument as to why town councils should encourage their development (Valler 2005). When the issue of granting a lap-dancing club license was before the council in Coventry, England, in 2005, a “leading businessman” argued that “a lap-dancing club would boost Coventry’s reputation as a major centre of commerce. . . . When businessmen travel to a major city where they stay overnight, they almost expect to find a lap-dancing club. If Coventry has aspirations to be a major business area, then it has to have a quality adult entertainment area, and that would include a lap-dancing club” (8). Strip clubs are but one aspect of the international sex industry that is integral to the way that men do business now. The effect is to reinforce the glass ceiling for women in business and the professions.



### **Reinforcing gender inequality: A masculinizing practice**

Concomitant with the losses women in general experience from the existence of strip clubs, there appears to be a direct enhancement of men's self-esteem, their feelings of masculinity, and their bonding with other men. Although there is little evidence from research on strip club practices to suggest that the strippers experience a reversal of gender roles and an increased sense of empowerment, there is, however, some very interesting research on what the male buyers experience in terms of personal power in relation to women from visiting the clubs. Frank used her status as a stripper to gain access to male customers and interview them, and her work is most revealing about the motivations of buyers (Frank 2003). She studied men in traditional strip clubs that did not provide lap dancing. She reports that none of the men she interviewed said they went to the clubs for "sexual release" (2003, 64). They had other motives, of which the most common were the "desire to relax" and to visit a place where they could "be a man" (64). Frank explains that the clubs "provide an environment where men, singularly or in groups, can engage in traditionally 'masculine' activities and forms of consumption frowned upon in other spheres, such as drinking, smoking cigars, and . . . being 'rowdy,' vulgar or aggressive" (65). Strip clubs re-create the gendered spaces for men that were challenged by second-wave feminism. In the 1970s and 1980s, some major equal rights' campaigns were directed at eliminating the male privilege of men-only spaces, places in which men could socialize and do business but in which women were not allowed. These campaigns included demands for and achievement of women's entry to public houses, sporting clubs, and other places of entertainment on an equal basis with men. The boom in strip clubs can be seen as a counterattack, in which men have reasserted their "right" to network through male dominance, without the irritating presence of women, unless those women are naked and servicing their pleasures.

Frank found that an important reason why men visit the clubs is that the clubs provide a compensation for the decline in power that men have experienced as their wives, partners, and women workmates have shed their own subordination, begun to compete with them, and demanded equality. The strip clubs provide an antidote to the erosion of male dominance by reinstitutionalizing the traditional hierarchy of gender relations. The men reported finding everyday relationships with women "a source of pressure and expectations" and "described relations between women and men in general as being 'strained,' 'confused,' or 'tense.'" One buyer "referred to the 'war between the sexes'" (Frank 2003, 65). They sought respite from the problems of having to treat women as equals in the

workplace too. One of Frank's respondents, Philip, said that visiting the clubs "let frustration out" and that because of "this sexual harassment stuff going around these days, men need somewhere to go where they can say and act like they want" (66). Some buyers, Frank found, "desire to interact with women who were not 'feminist,' and who still wanted . . . to interact with men in 'more traditional' ways." One of these traditional ways, it seems, is women's unconditional servicing of male sexual demands. Other buyers told her that outside the sex industry "men had to continually 'be on guard' against offending women" (66). Frank points out that "several of the [men's] comments could be analysed as part of a backlash against feminism" but that she prefers to see them as resting "within a framework of confusion and frustration rather than one of privilege or domination" (66), a result of anxieties caused by feminism and the women's movement toward equality. She does say, however, that the rapid increase in strip clubs in the United States in the 1980s "was concurrent with a massive increase of women into the workforce and an upsurge of attention to issues of sexual harassment, date rape, and the condemnation of the sex industry" (66). Many of the men she spoke with said they were confused about what women expected of them in relationships, particularly when their wives worked, had their own incomes, and wanted to be included in decision making.

Frank believes that what takes place in the clubs does more than compensate men for these changes. The visits to strip clubs can be understood as "masculinizing practices" in their own right (Frank 2003, 74). In the clubs, otherwise unattainable women could be subjected to men's control, exercised through men's ability to refuse payment and to determine the length of their conversations with the women, what would be discussed, and whether and when the woman had to strip. Men reported that they got an "ego boost" (70), because there was no fear of rejection or of competition with other men. Frank concludes that strip clubs help to reinforce male power through maintaining "imbalanced power dynamics in [men's] personal relationships with women, especially when visits are used to shame or anger wives or partners" (74). However, she remains determined not to place too strong an emphasis on this. She remarks that, despite the evidence she presents, "this is not to say that commodified sexual exchanges are inherently about the preservation and reproduction of male power" (74–75).

Another study of strip club patrons by two male researchers supports Frank's findings about the role the clubs play in upholding male dominance. This study analyzes how the "ultra-masculine context of the setting affects and illuminates patrons' motives for frequenting strip clubs" (Er-

ickson and Tewksbury 2000, 272). It also points out that the men in the club are in control, as the women are bound to “reciprocate most of the attention paid to them by the customer,” unable to reject male attention as they can in the world outside (273). The customer “may dictate the nature, and often the course, of the interactions because the dancer is both obligated and financially motivated to cooperate with the direction of the customer in defining the interactions” (273). These claims affirm Frank’s argument that the clubs are male-only environments that confirm masculinity: “It is almost exclusively a ‘man thing’ to go to strip clubs. It is one of the very few places where men have the opportunity to openly exhibit their latent sexual desires and to perform their ‘male privilege’” (Erickson and Tewksbury 2000, 289). The context of the strip club serves to affirm masculinity because it is “pervaded by images and norms that openly objectify women, [that] is ultra-masculine” (289). David John Erickson and Richard Tewksbury conclude, however, in a way that seems to challenge their earlier findings, saying that their study contradicts the notion that strippers are exploited, because the dancers “control the sequencing and content of their interactions with patrons and, in doing so, . . . generate a substantial income for themselves and provide men with access to important social commodities” (292). In these researchers’ view, this is a fair exchange. Yet Erickson and Tewksbury explicitly state earlier in their article that the men in the clubs are in charge of the interactions, unlike in the world outside the clubs, where women can decline to service them, and their article provides no evidence of the good earnings of the dancers. Their research thus seems to represent a male buyer’s perspective.

Unlike the traditional gentlemen’s clubs of London’s Pall Mall, the strip clubs offer men the opportunity to debase women, not just to bond and do business in their absence. These new “gentlemen’s clubs” require women to be present—but only when they are naked and available to be bought. Men can drink with their friends while staring into a woman’s genitals or shoving their fingers into her anus or vagina. The context in which the male buyers are delivered this bounty is created for them by masculine networks of club owners and franchisees.

### **Conclusion**

Feminist scholars and activists should pay serious attention to the strip club boom. The research on stripping that has taken place has been influenced by poststructuralist and queer theory, which concentrate on individual agency and transgression rather than on economics and power dynamics. An examination of the context of the strip club boom, of the way that

profits are made, of the involvement of organized crime, of the trafficking of women and girls into the clubs, and of the violence and exploitation that take place in them makes the arguments of some researchers—that dancers are empowered by stripping, exercise agency, and transgress gender relations—look thin. Such arguments represent a decontextualized individualism that takes little account of existing inequality between men and women and of the way strip clubs derive from and serve to reinforce this inequality. I suggest, rather, that the strip club boom represents both a rebalancing of the power relations of male dominance and a compensation to men for what has been gained through feminist movements and as a result of the social and economic changes of the last quarter century. Strip clubs have achieved this readjustment through their role in the growth of international capitalism and organized crime, the masculinizing effects of club patronage on male buyers, the subordination of hundreds of thousands of women in the clubs, and the exclusion of women from equal opportunities in national and international professional and business networks, which continue to be the special preserve of men. More research is needed on all aspects of the burgeoning international sex industry to enable us to understand how it operates and how it affects the power dynamics of male dominance.

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