

Licence to Dance: Research on the erotic dancing industry has given dancers more information on workplace safety and their rights, improved working conditions and influenced the licensing policies of local authorities.
(By Dr Kate Hardy and Rosie Campbell).

WHY HAS LAP DANCING become an acceptable work and leisure option and what has led to the integration of sexual consumption into the night-time economy? These were the core questions of the research carried out by the largest study into the erotic dance industry in the UK.

The study focused on dancers' experiences in the industry, specifically on working conditions. We surveyed 197 dancers who had worked in 45 towns and cities across the UK, asking about the last four clubs where dancers had worked to cover as many clubs and standards across the industry.

The survey results were then qualified by interviews with 35 dancers and 20 other people involved in the industry (including bar staff, security, 'house mums', managers and owners).

Our research found that the majority of dancers had made a decision to dance as a flexible, relatively high-earning (although unpredictable), cash-in-hand form

of work. Dancers generally reported high levels of job satisfaction and described both advantages and disadvantages of their work. Most women did not report any violence and felt safe in their workplace due to security, but they did report persistent unwanted touching and harassment from customers (nearly half reported frequent verbal harassment and unwanted touching from customers).

There was no evidence of organised prostitution or trafficking/forced involvement, although some migrant workers were paying more than the normal rate for accommodation and organisation of their work.



The key issues for dancers did not include **gender exploitation** or

experiencing their work as a form of sexual violence, which is the primary argument of some **feminist** lobby groups against lap dancing.

However, most dancers were concerned about the high house fees, commissions and fines they were paying; especially on occasions when they were taking relatively little money home. Seventy per cent of respondents said they had left a shift without earning any money.

The research took place at a pivotal time in which all Local Authorities were re-writing their policy on licensing lap dancing as a result of changes introduced under the Policing and Crime Act, 2010.

Local Authorities now have greater powers to control the number of clubs, by using quotas or introducing 'nil policies' which aim to remove existing clubs or prohibit new licences. New powers also mean that

There was a strong feeling expressed by dancers that the legal changes would not make the industry safer or that their welfare and working conditions would be taken seriously by the new legislation.

Instead they felt that assumptions were being made about

exploitation, particularly gender exploitation, and that legislation favoured community's views over dancers'.

There continues to be growing public protest for opening new 'erotic' dancing club in Britain's city centres. For example, hundreds recently gathered in the centre of a Bedfordshire market town to protest against the prospective opening of a lap-dancing club. Amptill residents met on Monday to give a petition to a Bedfordshire Council, which was signed by over 2,000 people.

Feminist campaigners also joined the protest pointing out that lap-dancing clubs simply reinforced women's subservient role in society: women, they claim continue to be viewed as sex objects, and also extended their protest to the ways in which women are portrayed in music videos.

