

BRIEFING:



Sexual Entertainment Venues (SEVs) **as 'employment' opportunities**

Position summary

The Licensing Committee was advised at its meeting on 8 March 2021 that ***“as far as employment is concerned that’s not a consideration for [the licensing committee] when deciding whether or not a locality is an appropriate place to have a sexual entertainment venue”***.¹

Our position focuses on a bigger conversation around changing the behaviours of men and boys in order to make our city a safer, more equal place to live for all women and girls as outlined in Bristol City Council’s own One City Plan. However, given the focus on women’s employment in the local press, this briefing summarises some of the key research relating to women’s employment opportunities and SEVs for background information.

We’ve heard from some women who cite pay and flexibility as a key benefit of working in SEVs, however these venues do not provide long-term stable, secure employment. Women cannot be sure of a reliable income and many women, particularly more vulnerable women, frequently do not make money at all. Vulnerabilities such as substance use or poor mental health are frequently exacerbated by working in a highly competitive environment where women can be subject to harassment and degrading treatment (the need for such high security within SEVs points towards the links between this type of work and male violence against women). Furthermore, SEVs can provide a gateway into other forms of sex work that are often difficult to leave and which have a lasting negative impact on many women’s mental and physical health.

Bristol City should support the development of quality, sustainable and flexible employment opportunities for all women across the city. SEVs cannot be the answer.

Summary of key evidence relating to SEVs and women’s employment

Like most industries, there are a range of employment practices and management styles within SEVs. Some are better than others. Research and women’s testimonials find common themes including becoming ‘trapped’ in stripping work after starting young. Performers in SEVs are often young women who are incentivised to *“stay below the radar of the state, for migration or tax reasons”*; the work is unreliable and *“profoundly precarious”*.² Performers are self-employed so they are uninsured unless they pay for their own workplace insurance and they aren’t entitled to sick pay or other benefits associated with being ‘employed’. As self-employed workers, dancers have to pay an up-front fee of up to £120 a night to ‘rent’ the stage and pole from the clubs. Clubs will often employ more dancers than customers as a) they benefit financially and b) they can offer more customer choice. This increases competition between the women and reduces women’s chance of earning money. Women make money through being paid for private dances and while some women can earn a lot of money, others can finish the night owing the club money. 70% of lap dancers have left their shift not having made any money.³ Meanwhile managers benefit from the precarious ‘self-employed’

¹ Bristol City Council Licensing Hearing 8th March 2021 Webcast <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O66GeA4KzmM> (28:55)

² Hardy, K. and Sanders, T. (2015) The political economy of ‘lap dancing’: contested careers and women’s work in the stripping industry in *Work, Employment and Society* <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017014554969>

³ Hardy & Sanders (2015) Ibid.

status of the performers⁴ because they avoid paying taxes on performers' income. Performers have had to take cases to Employment Tribunals to find out whether they have any workers' rights.⁵

Links between stripping and women's disadvantage

There is evidence from research as well as in testimony from exited performers that socially vulnerable women are over-represented among the women who work as lap-dancers. Drug and alcohol use by performers has been found to be "*an integral part of the occupation*", both making it possible to do the job and contributing to development of habits.⁶ That is not to say that "all women working in SEVs" report it as a negative experience, and we have heard from local performers who have said the opposite. However, research into the industry has found the following:

- The longer women work in the industry, the more their feelings about it transform from "elation" into "anger, disappointment and disgust".⁷ Consultation with performers has found that "*individual women can experience dancing as liberating and rewarding, at least for a while...Structurally, dancing is exploitative and destructive to women both as individuals and as a group*"⁸
- There is a disproportionate volume of survivors of domestic abuse among performers; "*Social and economic disadvantage and histories of substance use [are]... common precursors to dancing.*"⁹
- Interviews in the UK with 197 performers revealed that 40% said that customers were rude or abusive towards them.¹⁰ Almost half the women reported frequent verbal harassment and unwanted touching from customers.¹¹

Before they exit, current performers have been found to criticise policies that seek to shut down or limit the sale of sexual entertainment. Those who have moved on, tend to favour policies to reduce it:

"The self-esteem and the psychological effects of being in that situation can last for years on a woman. And these girls that go into it and think yeah that they're fine, do they actually go out and speak to women that have done that before? It's not a long-term thing...It's not something that you want to be reminded of. It's playing on people's innocence and ignorance. And they're playing on the councillors' ignorance as well." (Interview with a former lap dancer and sex worker, Bristol)

One of the key arguments used to keep SEVs open is that, if they close, the industry will 'go underground' however the evidence is that where clubs have been closed down, there has not been a proliferation of underground clubs. There is evidence that SEVs facilitate women's entry into prostitution and can exacerbate women's substance misuse and mental ill health. This information is presented to inform thinking about the future impact of policy decisions.

⁴ Mount, L. (2016) "Behind the Curtain": Strip Clubs and the Management of Competition for Tips in *Journal of Ethnography* <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241616630608>

⁵Stringfellows Restaurant Ltd v Quashie [2012] EWCA Civ 1735; Nowak v Chandler Bars Group Ltd UKET 3200538/2019

⁶ Forsyth, C.J. and Deshotels, T. (1997) "The Occupational Milieu of the Nude Dancer." *Deviant Behavior* 18(2): 125-42

⁷Barton, B. (2002) "Dancing on the Mobius Strip." *Gender and Society* 16(5):585-602:596

⁸ Ibid (2002) p.600

⁹ Decker, M.R., Nail, J.E., Lim, S., Footer, K., Davis, W. & Sherman, S.G. (2017) 'Client and Partner Violence Among Urban Female Exotic Dancers and Intentions for Seeking Support and Justice' in *Journal of Urban Health*, 94(5), 637-647

¹⁰ Sanders, T., & Hardy, K. (2011) *The Regulatory Dance: Sexual Consumption in the Night Time Economy – Initial Findings* Leeds: University of Leeds.

¹¹ Sanders, T., & Campbell, R. (2012) *The Regulatory Dance: Sexual Consumption in the Night Time Economy – Briefing for Licensing Practitioners*. University of Leeds

- 43% of performers in one study reported selling sex; 92% of whom began to do this after working in SEVs¹²
- In another study, every manager consulted mentioned that performers often tried to sell more than they were supposed to, in the form of sexual acts or prostitution.¹³
- Of 101 men interviewed in Scotland who had been clients of prostitutes, 31% said they had bought prostitution in lap dancing clubs.¹⁴
- A Home Office study found women working in SEVs tended not to have previously worked in the sex industry: rather, they were attracted to erotic dance specifically. However, the majority went on to escorting or working from home offering full-service (prostitution), though perhaps after an extended period of stripping.¹⁵
- Among the 50% who reported heroin or cocaine use, over half had initiated this drug use after they began to work in SEVs.¹⁶
- Women who work as strippers are subject to high levels of abusive behaviour by customers: In a UK study almost half the performers consulted reported frequent verbal harassment and unwanted touching from customers (in other words, sexual assault).¹⁷
- Many women working in the sector *“have been attacked, exploited, and humiliated, and mind-altering substances often are sought to temporarily mollify the physical and emotional pain. The most prevalent mental health symptoms are in the mood and anxiety spectrums, but are often coupled with addiction to substances. Many of these women who use substances state they are anesthetizing themselves to be able to work in the sex industry.”*¹⁸

“Every girl that I've known who at first went in for stripping has ended up in prostitution...Lap dancing is a foot in the door to prostitution... you can only work in so many clubs for so many years and unless you're spectacular with your moves or your extras or whatever...the girls don't last that long. They burn out.” (Interview with a former lap dancer and sex worker, Bristol)

Fair, healthy and sustainable employment opportunities

We are absolutely committed to making Bristol a city that offers women quality employment, with decent pay, flexible working, affordable childcare and good conditions of service e.g. maternity leave and sick pay. This is not found in SEVs. Bristol Women’s Commission Women and Economy task group released a [‘Delivering an inclusive economy post Covid-19’ report](#) in 2020 to deliver a local economy which meets the ambition in the One City Plan of a city that is “Fair, Healthy and Sustainable”; and help Bristol meet its commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Bristol City Council can help women by supporting accessible employment opportunities in industries of the future, not by licensing 2-3 SEVs.

¹² Reuben, J., Serio-Chapman, C., Welsh, C., Matens, R. & Sherman, S. (2010). Correlates of current transactional sex among a sample of female exotic dancers in Baltimore, MD. *Journal of Urban Health*, 88(2), 342–51. Doi: 10.1007/s11524-010-9539-0

¹³ Mount, L. (2018). “Behind the Curtain”: Strip Clubs and the Management of Competition for Tips’ in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 47(1): 60-87

¹⁴ Farley, M., Macleod, J., Anderson, L. & Golding, J.M. (2011) ‘Attitudes and Social Characteristics of Men who Buy Sex in Scotland’ in *Psychological Trauma*, 3(4), 369-383

¹⁵ Hester, M., Mulvihill, N., Matolcsi, A., Lanau Sanchez, A., & Walker, S-J. (2019). *The Nature and Prevalence of Prostitution and Sex Work in England and Wales Today*. University of Bristol, October. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/842920/Prostitution_and_Sex_Work_Report.pdf

¹⁶ Sherman, S.G., Brantley, M.R., Zelaya, C., Duong, Q., Taylor, R.B. & Ellen, J.M. (2017). The development of an HIV risk environment scale of exotic dance clubs. *Aids And Behavior*, 21(7), 2147-2155.

¹⁷ Sanders, T., & Campbell, R. (2012) *The Regulatory Dance: Sexual Consumption in the Night Time Economy – Briefing for Licensing Practitioners*. University of Leeds

¹⁸ Anklesaria, A. and Gentile, J (2012) Psychotherapy with Women Who Have Worked in the “Sex Industry” in *Clinical Neuroscience* 2012 Oct; 9(10): 27–33