



## Research on Lap Dancing in England: Preliminary Findings

Dr Teela Sanders & Kate Hardy

**DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR**

### Background to the Project

This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council for the investigators to conduct a study on lap dancing with the specific aims to: a) examine the supply of dancers, their experiences of dancing and their working conditions; b) explore how industry management have 'mainstreamed' lap dancing and become acceptable in the high street; and c) to uncover the competing interests between erotic dance businesses, law enforcement and licensing processes. **These preliminary findings are presented half way through the fieldwork process and mainly centre on the dancers experiences and working conditions. The final findings and related reports will be available May 2011** The project comes at a pivotal time in the changes to how lap dancing clubs are licensed. A change in law in 2010 saw the reclassification of these establishments to Sexual Entertainment Venues, giving local authorities more powers to decide the number of clubs in their area, if at all, and to take any forms of objection into consideration. Moving away from the licensing objectives of the Licensing Act 2003, these new powers enable greater control over lap dancing, whilst not considering the activities that take place within the club or the welfare of the dancers.

### Methodology

The final methodology consists of a survey of 300 dancers, with follow-up interviews, and interviews with industry management and regulators. To make comparisons between locations, two cities have been chosen: one in the North and one in the South. This report draws on findings from 86 questionnaires with dancers who have worked in venues across the country.

### Who are the dancers?

- *Age*: The majority of dancers (68.8%) are aged between 22 and 29. Interestingly, despite an emphasis on youth within the industry, only 10% were younger than this and 21.3% of dancers were older than 29. The age range between dancers spanned from 19 to 39. The age at which most dancers had started dancing, however, was considerably younger.
- *Age started dancing*: A large proportion of 68% started dancing when they were under 25 years old and 92% began when they were under 29. Only a small proportion (7.6%) started when they were over 30.
- *Relationship status*: Half of the dancers were single (50%), but the other half were in some form of relationship with someone with whom lived (21.3%) or did not live (21.3%). Only 6.3% of the dancers were married.
- *Mothers*: Only 19% of dancers surveyed had children. Amongst dancers with children 86.8% had one child and 13.2% had two children. No dancer had more than two children.
- *Nationality*: British nationals constituted over half the dancers surveyed. The next largest national groups were Romanian (19%) and Brazilian (8.9%).
- *Education*: All of the dancers had some education and had finished school with some qualifications. 87% had completed at least Further Education, while 25% had completed an undergraduate degree. Just over one third of dancers were students. 31% of dancers were currently in some form of education, making students a significant proportion of dancers. 3.8% were taking further education courses, 13.9% were using dancing to help fund an undergraduate degree and 6.3% for a postgraduate degree.
- *Other work*: Dancing was the sole form of income for the majority of dancers (60.3%). However, it was significant that 39.7% of dancers did combine dancing with other forms of work and income.

### Why did they start dancing dance?

- Obviously, most women cited 'money' was the reason they started dancing: but there were other common reasons such as paying for education; a friend was dancing; the freedom and flexibility of the job; liking dancing; and to increase confidence.
- Dancers mainly found work in their first club through friends and the internet (sum = 63.6%). Agencies had a small role to play, but were more predominant amongst migrant workers.

### How much do they dance and where?

- *Length of time working:* Dancers that we spoke to had been dancing for between 1 day and 17 years. Most dancers had been dancing for between 1 year and <3 years (mode and median). Only 17.7% had been dancing for more than five years, indicating that most dancers left between 3 and 5 years into their dancing careers.
- *Number of clubs:* Women had danced in between 1 and 35 clubs. Most women had worked in only 1-2 clubs. Women that had danced in more than ten clubs (5.1%) tended to have worked for agencies who had sent them to a number of different pubs and clubs.
- *Shifts:* Most dancers worked between 2 and 4 shifts a week (57.1%). Over 66.2% of dancers worked less than four shifts a week.
- *Earnings:* Women generally reported earnings going down. They reported between £50 and £800 earnings in the first club they worked in. The average in the first club women worked in was £284, while the average that women currently reported was £232. Dancers have tended to state that it is not so much that earnings have gone down across the board but that they are a lot more inconsistent now and that earnings across the week may even out, but that they were more likely to be out of pocket on a night than they were previously. Most attributed this to the effects of the recession.

### What do they think about dancing?

- *Job satisfaction* amongst dancers was strikingly high. Asked to score their job satisfaction from 0 to 10 with 10 being the highest, a significant proportion (84.4%) rated their satisfaction above five and only 5.3% rated their satisfaction at less than five.
- *Feelings about their work:* When asked how happy they felt at work, the majority of dancers stated that they felt Happy or Very Happy (76.4%). While 22.2% were neutral, only 1 person said that they felt unhappy.
- *Respect:* Dancers were also asked how respected they felt within the workplace. This time, the majority (59.2%) were neutral, stating that they neither felt respected nor disrespected. Despite this neutrality, significantly more dancers said that they felt Respected or Very Respected (33.8%) than Disrespected or Very Disrespected (7%).
- *Safety:* A large majority of dancers felt safe at work. However, a number of them stated that there was significant difference between clubs and therefore it was hard to say as a rule.

### Positive feelings about work

- 98.1% said that one of the best features of the job was the ability to **choose their own hours**
- 80.6% **earning more money** than in other jobs
- 77.8% said **getting money straight away**
- 75% said the ability it gave them to **be independent**
- 74% said that **keeping fit** was one of the best features
- 74% said **combining fun and work**
- 56.9% said **making new friends**
- 51.4% said **feeling good about themselves** was one of the best elements
- 51.4% said **working shorter hours**

When asked what dancers liked most about dancing as a job, the most frequently cited answer was clear, "Money!":

*Earn VERY good money in the short term. £100-£200 a night. My favourites are Tues, Wed, Thurs - that's the business guys.*

*Easy money. Getting things I could never have got otherwise. Seen more money than I have ever seen in my life and I've gained a lot of confidence.*

*It's only about money. I like the money. It's fun. Interesting talking to people.*

Fun, socializing and sociability were also frequently stated, alongside money, as key factors for engaging in dancing:

*Money. Some of the girls. I made a best friend here. Social life - I like working socially.*

*Money. Nice people. Sometimes you can find nice people to have a conversation.*

*I love it. It is a really glamorous job. I love the socialising, the glamour. You meet some really decent guys as well. It does shine a light on many things in many different ways. You get regulars and that makes the job so much easier. In the club I work in now no-one has ever been rude or racist towards me. Never.*

It was felt that this also offered the opportunity to self-improve and to learn new skills:

*You meet a lot of people, learn about new people. You learn a lot about the psychology of the human being.*

*It keeps you fit. Gives you bravery. It makes you a very a good psychologist.*

*Helps me to handle men, to be more feminine, to take care of myself and my appearance. It's like an art, not just dancing.*

*Fully independent, flexible hours, social job, confidence as a woman. Self esteem.*

Flexibility was also frequently mentioned and sometimes in combination with both earning potential and sociability:

*Work when you want. Only have to work three days a week, still earn more than in five days a week. I like night work. It's just social. You have a laugh, even when it's crap, it's like going on a night out.*

*It's not stressful. Good money. If you don't want to work, you don't work.*

*I can choose my holidays, like if I just want to go away, I don't have to wait. Money. It's the same feeling like when I go out to a club.*

All of these feelings were neatly summed up by one dancer who surmised “**Better money. No commitment. Leave when you want to leave. Drink what you want**”.

### **Negative feelings about work**

Dancers were given a list of options and asked whether any of them represented things they felt was the worst part of their job:

- 55.6% said **never knowing how much money they would earn**
- 48.6% said **keeping their job a secret** was one of the worst aspects of the work
- 31.9% said **customers being rude or abusive**
- 30.6% said that having to **compete with the other dancers** was problematic for them
- 23.6% said feeling **pressure on their bodies** to look a certain way
- 23.6% said **losing respect for men**
- 20.8% said they found it **emotionally difficult**
- 13.9% said they felt it meant they **didn't have career prospects**
- 11.1% said **feeling bad about themselves**
- 6.9% said feeling that they could **lose their job easily**

Dancers were also asked open question about what they liked least about the job. Customer behaviour was consistently cited by dancers as one of the more negative elements of the jobs:

*It's tedious talking to drunk men and pretending to enjoy their conversation*

*The way that some people treat you, but that doesn't happen often.*

*Rude customers. People who think they don't have to pay. People who touch you, only when they're drunk though.*

*Rude men: some men are perverted, they don't respect the rules and just be coarse. We are dancers, not prostitutes.*

*Pigheaded guys and assholes. English guys don't have much sense, they want intimacy, to have a relationship with you. The job is mainly ego boosting. You have got to make them believe that you'll go home with them, when you have no intention of doing that at all. More so in London than anywhere else.*

Dancers reported customers requesting 'extras', such as touching the customers or being allowed to touch the dancers and this was frequently cited as one of the worst aspects of the work.

## **Working Conditions**

### **House fees, fines, debts and commission**

- House fees paid by dancers ranged from £0-£200 though only 19% of dancers had ever paid over £80.
- Commission on private dances and other services ranged from 0-66%, but only 18% had ever paid over 30% commission.
- 74.6% of dancers had been fined at some point in their dancing career. The highest reported fine was £100 for a missed shift. The most common fines were for chewing gum and lateness.

### **Club Rules**

- Club rules consistently came up as an element of dancing that dancers did not like. Some felt that there were too many rules and others felt that they were enforced inconsistently and often with significant favouritism:

*Rules swap and change and you never know what they are.*

- Many of the women felt that they didn't have access to knowledge about what the council imposed rules were and which had been instituted by the club. Some thought that this was a good reason to have a contract between the club and the dancers:

*It would set out the rules properly. Rules for everyone: set out what people aren't allowed to do.*

## **Improving Conditions**

- **Insurance:** None of the women had their own insurance. Some vaguely knew that they needed it, but others had never thought about it and no-one had ever spoken to them about it. One 20 year old dancer summed up all the things that needed to be improved in the industry as:

*[There needs to be] more regulation of agencies. One was done for running a brothel and simply renamed itself. This legislation should not have been passed. Girls don't know where they stand. There's no way to find it out. There's not enough security, I know of girls who have been raped and abused at work. You cannot go to the police, as you are a stripper, so there is no legal standing at all.*

- **Security:** In order to improve security, panic alarms, more CCTV and doormen were cited as important. Similarly, many felt that the way in which private booths were set up also endangered them and also allowed standards to be lowered by dancers offering more than is allowed in the dances.

## **Suggested Changes:**

- Clearly displayed council rules in a number of places in the club: toilets, changing rooms etc
- Offer a receipt for fines and fees – make sure fines and fees go through the *books*
- Offer a receipt for dances where commission is taken
- Monthly meetings to discuss rules, changes, get dancers' input
- Prohibiting use of private booths
- Insurance for the women
- Limiting number of girls per capacity of clubs

**Further Information:** Official details about the project can be found here:

<http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/research/projects/regulatory-dance.php> Or by contacting Dr Teela Sanders: [t.l.m.sanders@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:t.l.m.sanders@leeds.ac.uk)