

ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS: Stripping

Stripping facilitates a culture that normalizes the exploitation and objectification of women for men's sexual pleasure. The organization and conditions of strip clubs produce and reproduce gender inequality and sexual violence. Research shows that women involved in stripping often find it abusive, manipulative and difficult to leave. They often feel pressure to enter other parts of the sex trade while being involved in stripping.

Misconception:

Stripping is a viable and lucrative employment option for women.

REALITY:

As soon as a woman begins dancing at a club, it costs her money rather than being a lucrative job. Many of the women who dance at strip clubs or strip for a house-call company are hired as independent contractors instead of as employees and are therefore not paid a salary or hourly wages.¹ Despite this classification, the clubs maintain enormous control over the women, setting their schedules and hours and setting the prices a dancer can charge for table or private dances.² Additionally, the women often pay the club stage fees or "rent," sometimes as high as \$150 per night. In addition, women pay the club a commission of up to 20% from private dances and tips. Many clubs also require dancers to "tip out"—sharing a percentage of what they earn with the bartender, waitresses, bouncers, house mother, and DJ.³ Clubs often fine dancers for "in-discretions" like missing a turn to pole dance, wearing the wrong shoes, or breaking any of the club's many arbitrary rules.⁴ A dancer's income becomes dependent on her compliance to customers' demands in order to earn tips. As one woman said, "There are so many ways to make money from you. You are constantly trying to make as much money as possible out of everybody, otherwise you are literally paying to be there."⁵

Misconception:

Stripping is empowering for women and makes them feel good about themselves.

REALITY:

Stripping exacts a high cost from those who engage in it, taxing a woman's energy and her self-respect, both at the club and in her daily life. Researchers have found that stripping distorts dancers' perceptions of money and sexuality; encourages them to blur their personal boundaries about previously unacceptable sexual acts; teaches them to develop contempt for men; reduces their sex drives; and causes problems in their intimate partnerships.⁶ As one researcher stated, "Several late-career dancers told me that stripping itself became literally toxic to them, that just the idea of going into work made them feel sick."⁷ Additionally, many dancers feel tremendous pressure to conform to a particular body image—the "Barbie doll" image of an extremely thin woman with large breasts – that garners the most attention from customers.⁸ This pressure becomes so intense that many dancers reconstruct their appearance through various body technologies, using methods such as expensive and painful plastic surgery to enlarge breasts and reform faces, and developing eating disorders and turning to drugs to stay excessively thin.⁹ Those dancers who cannot afford these methods tend to compensate for their "flawed" body image by taking off more clothing and performing more graphic moves on the stage and floor, stretching their own boundaries to appeal to customers' personal tastes.¹⁰ As one dancer stated, "The men just see you as an object, not a person, and whether you are equally engaged in their desire is irrelevant. Increasingly, you learn to despise the men because of the way they perceive you. Lap-dancing is about creating a situation whereby the men feel they are doing you a favor—that's the way the game is set up, so all the power is with the customer."¹¹

¹ Barton, B. (2006). *Stripped: Inside the lives of exotic dancers*. New York: New York University Press.

² Holsopple, K. (1998). *Stripclubs according to strippers: Exposing workplace violence*. Unpublished manuscript. Retrieved January 21, 2010, at <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/strip1.htm>

³ Barton, B. (2006). *Stripped: Inside the lives of exotic dancers*. New York: New York University Press.

⁴ Bell, R. (2008, March 18). The reality of lap-dancing, by a former dancer [Electronic version]. *The Guardian*. Retrieved on January 21, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/19/gender.uk>

⁵ Bell, R. (2008, March 18). The reality of lap-dancing, by a former dancer [Electronic version]. *The Guardian*. Retrieved on January 21, 2010, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/mar/19/gender.uk>

⁶ Barton, B. (2006). *Stripped: Inside the lives of exotic dancers*. New York: New York University Press.

⁷ Barton, B. (2006). *Stripped: Inside the lives of exotic dancers*. New York: New York University Press.

⁸ Wesely, J.K. (2003). Exotic dancing and the negotiation of identity: The multiple uses of body technologies. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32(6), 643-669.

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¹⁰ Barton, B. (2006). *Stripped: Inside the lives of exotic dancers*. New York: New York University Press.

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Misconception:

Stripping is a safe job, and women who work in strip clubs are protected from violence.

REALITY:

Women who dance in strip clubs report a wide range of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse.¹² Strip club patrons frequently grab dancer's breasts, buttocks and genitals. The women are regularly kicked, bitten, slapped and spit on by customers. Patrons also often attempt and succeed in penetrating women vaginally and anally with their fingers, dollar bills, bottles and cell phones.¹³ Research studies on strip clubs in the U.S. have found that all dancers suffered verbal harassment and physical and sexual abuse while at work; all had been propositioned for prostitution; and three-quarters had been stalked by men associated with the club.¹⁴ Academic research has also linked strip clubs to trafficking, prostitution, and an increase in male sexual violence against both the women who work in the clubs and those who live and work in their vicinity.¹⁵ A 2008 report in London looked at lap-dancing in Camden Town, North London, and found that in the three years before and after the opening of four large strip clubs in the area, incidents of rape in Camden rose by 33%, while sexual assault rose by 55%.¹⁶

Misconception:

Stripping is a flexible job, and many women are just "working their way" through school.

REALITY:

Despite the strip club's representation of a dancing job as flexible, many women report that their relationship with the club becomes all consuming and interferes with their day-to-day lives outside of the club.¹⁷ Although a woman may have initially chosen to strip to help pay for school, the long and late hours, fatigue, drug and alcohol problems, and out-of-town bookings make it nearly impossible for them to maintain their academic careers. Not only do the women spend a significant amount of their time in strip clubs, the activities and influences from the club environment permeate their personal lives and detrimentally affect their wellbeing.¹⁸

Additionally, when not at the club, dancers combat social stigma daily. They often do not easily form or keep friendships or intimate relationships with those who are not dancers or in the sex industry. They avoid discussing their work with others because the reaction is usually "a mixture of shock, disgust, and perverse curiosity."¹⁹ Research has shown that, over time, stripping takes a tremendous toll on practically every woman involved, negatively affecting her self-image and overall quality of life.

¹² Holsopple, K. (1998). *Stripclubs according to strippers: Exposing workplace violence*. Unpublished manuscript. Retrieved January 21, 2010, at <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/stripc1.htm>

¹³ Holsopple, K. (1998). *Stripclubs according to strippers: Exposing workplace violence*. Unpublished manuscript. Retrieved January 21, 2010, at <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/stripc1.htm>

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