

OBJECT

Challenging Objectification

The impact of lap dancing on women in the workplace – 'Della'*

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* Please note that 'Della' is a pseudonym

"I am a woman in my early 30's, and I am qualified as a solicitor. When I left university I worked as a temp in the city for about a year before getting a job in a solicitors firm. I was 21, excited, and naïve. I thought it would be a great experience working in the City with these "pillars of the community" – as I thought they were. The reality turned out to be very different.

Never have I been subject to so much sexism. Women were only there as objects to be looked at, commented on and fawned over. All the office manager jobs were carried out by men, and the majority of administration work was done by women. There was a high turnover of administration and support staff, all temp workers, and all women.

If there were drinks after work you had to be "one of the lads" to fit in. In a supposedly professional environment, sexist jokes were banded around constantly, along with sexist and pornographic emails. The guys referred to their wives or girlfriends as "her indoors", something they could do without, never as loved ones, partners or even fellow human beings. They would go to strip clubs in their lunch breaks and not think anything of slapping my bottom as they walked past.

Why did I put up with it? Why did I not report it? Well it was my first office job after university. I was also very shy, hated confrontation, and extremely naïve. I had never encountered anything like this and inexperience can be disarming.

I then worked in various solicitors, and the blatant sexism continued. One Christmas party we went out for a meal. Straight after dessert was served all the men in the office left to go to a strip club with a few of the secretaries in tow, leaving the rest of us at the

restaurant. One of the secretaries went simply because she was having an affair with one of the solicitors and wanted to check what he was getting up to. Another went to fit in “with the lads” and seem cool. Only one man didn’t go, and I have always respected him for not following the crowd.

I have had conversations with other women who hate the whole “lad culture” in the office but, faced with such entrenched attitudes it is not easy to bring this to your employers without suffering derision and further propagating the divide. My present employers know I am a strong feminist and my feelings about strip clubs, and prostitution are well known. However, even in what is a comparatively moderate environment, any discussion on these topics still serve only to distance me from the others, as it’s still “just a laugh”, nothing to be taken “seriously”

I feel I am sidelined, and I know I am talked about behind my back as the “prudish, fun-hating” employee. Personally, what this does makes me feel worthless.

I feel I am judged only by my appearance and not by my abilities. I have spoken to countless “professional” men who only stare at my chest while talking to me; I have had comments about what I wear, my hair; my lack of makeup. It seems that it is perfectly acceptable to comment if I wear trousers more than skirts, or if I do wear a skirt I’m “getting my legs out” for clients or for the office. I am public property. I have never heard any similar comments being made to men.

Once the debate is opened it has always surprised me how many other woman feel like this and are treated in exactly the same way.

Fawcett and OBJECT have a huge task ahead of them. Underlying sexism has become so ingrained that it is seen as entirely acceptable behaviour, just a bit of fun or a laugh. However, by opening up the debate and raising awareness I hope people might start to think what is and is not acceptable office “banter”. This has gone on too long”.