

# **OBJECT**

**Challenging  
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## **Lap dancing testimonial – ‘Lucy’\***

**Object 2007**

\* Please note that ‘Lucy’ is a pseudonym

### **Comments on this report**

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This testimonial is prepared from an interview with Lucy, a former lap/pole dancer who approached Object herself and with whom we have met on several occasions.

Her testimony reflects that from other performers presented in research carried out by Julie Bindel for Glasgow City Council.

### **Notes about lap dancing**

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Performers are self-employed – their only source of income comes from customer's payment for services.

Performers often have to pay 'house fees' for working in a club, often paying retainers on the days they do not work.

## **The truth about lap dancing - a performer speaks out**

### **The beginning** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Lucy, can you tell us about your involvement in the industry?**

I worked in two clubs from the Secret's chain. I was a dancer at both. The work involved chatting to men, private dances (fully nude) and pole dancing (no nudity). There was also a VIP area where you could take a client to spend the hour for chat and as many dances as they wanted.

#### **Were checks were made on your age or immigration status?**

I gave a fake NUS card as ID, which was accepted as documentary evidence, proof of age, proof that I was able to work in the UK.

#### **Were there any particular reasons that you went into lap dancing?**

I was fired from my office job and needed money fast. I didn't feel qualified to do anything else. I was bored of working nine to five and thought it would be an easy way of making good money. I thought it would solve my financial situation quickly and easily. I was also using drugs at the time and knew that it was a lifestyle that would allow me to continue doing so.

I was at a point in my life where I felt helpless and hopeless and somehow I felt that it was all I could do.

#### **Why do you think *other* performers go into the industry?**

Some of the women working in the club were clearly self-sufficient, driven individuals who found that lap dancing suited them. However some of the others were young eighteen year olds, others had moved here from Eastern Europe, others were working as nurses during the day and coming in to the club at night, exhausted and wired, others were single mothers.

#### **So at least this was probably a positive experience for some performers?**

I certainly knew a few dancers at the clubs who had long dreamed of being lap dancers and whose families thought they had done well to get the job. They also saw it as a route into glamour modelling, celebrity, and thought it was a good way to meet a rich man.

While this was how they presented themselves, once you began to dig a little deeper you discovered other things about them. For example, previous relationships involving domestic violence. Ongoing issues with men who controlled them. Drink problems. Self-esteem issues.

## Licensing terms

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### **In your experience, do clubs abide by their licensing terms?**

Club regulations *stated* that it was necessary to remain one foot away from the customers at all times.

But it's laughable to suggest that this was abided by, it really is.

Not touching, not exposing your genitals, not allowing men to touch you is the exception rather than the rule.

I would say most of the lap dances I ever did were less than one foot away from the man and that physical contact of some description was usually made. Some of the more regular customers knew and expected it.

Lots of the regular customers would make arrangements to come to the club to see specific dancers. My impression was that in these cases that more extreme sexual contact might well have been being performed and paid for accordingly.

### **Why do you think the rules were so often broken?**

If men weren't prepared to pay for it, then all touching and exposure would cease.

The key fact is that everyone knows they can make more money by breaking the rules. In a culture where you are literally selling yourself for cash, and you are working on commission, then you'd have to work very hard indeed to stop people going for extra money if they know they can make it.

Since there are no incentives to encourage dancers *not* to break the rules, and the customers are always prepared to pay more to get more, then licensing terms will always be broken.

### **What did management do to try and ensure licensing terms weren't breached?**

Occasionally the management would come round and tell you off if you were dancing too close in a really public place, but that was for the sake of appearances.

One night, I think one time after Stringfellows had been busted for being a brothel, the management put up all these newspaper clippings about how the council were sending round people to check the licensing.

Another time some policemen came in and the manager came over to warn me about behaving when dancing for policemen.

The attitude of the management was, make sure you know who you're dancing for before you break the rules. The attitude is *not* that we abide by the rules because they are there for a reason, the attitude is *we abide by the rules if and only if there is a danger of getting caught*.

### **How do you feel the clubs you worked at compared with others?**

What went on the VIP areas in our club was pretty tame I think. But certainly other, bigger, clubs in town had worse reputations. I heard that at one major club in town it was expected of you, if you went to VIP, that the man would at least be allowed to put his fingers inside you.

money \_\_\_\_\_

### **Can you tell us a little about 'salary and employment' terms?**

Lap dancers don't have employment rights like everyone else. They are self employed so they aren't paid a wage, they don't get holiday pay, sick pay, all the other things which people are entitled to in other jobs. Instead they work like prostitutes, they only get money if they get a man. And they will get as much out of each man as they can.

And unlike enforcing licensing terms, when it came to the regulations enforced on the women, the management was absolute: you went on the pole or you were fined £20. You would then be called to the pole again and if you missed that you would be fined another £20. And so on.

### **How true did you find the notion of it 'being easy money'?**

It's laughable. It is absolutely not easy money.

For example on my first night they said I didn't have the right shoes or dress and said if I wanted to work then I would have to buy them off the club. The shoes were £60, the dress was £70 or £10 to rent per night. I didn't have the cash but they said I had to have them or I couldn't work so I would have to take them immediately and then work to pay them back.

So from my very first night I was in debt to the management and working to pay off that debt.

We also had to pay for our own (over-priced drinks) as well as paying commission to the house every night which was a minimum of twenty pounds *whether or not you made any money*. Some nights it was possible to actually lose money.

There was also the fact that if you as a dancer break the regulations then you were fined : £20 for being late onto the floor, £20 for wearing the wrong shoes. £20 for the wrong or dress, £20 for missing your pole dance. These regulations, unlike the licensing regulations regarding touching for instance, were enforced strictly.

You weren't allowed to leave early, you got fined if you don't turn up at all. It becomes very easy to start losing money.

Urban legends surrounded the amount of money it might be possible to make in the club. In reality no one ever seemed to make that much money. it's the only job I've ever had where some nights I could end up paying to be there.

### **Were there problems with drugs and alcohol?**

Getting drunk was considered by many to be the aim of the night as well as making money. If you had managed to get drunk on other people's money then you had done well.

I used drugs with at least four or five of my colleagues while I was there, bought drugs off another, and was pretty regularly given drugs to use by male customers. I'm talking about cocaine in the most part, though sometimes we sneaked off upstairs to smoke a spliff if the night was slow.

### **And prostitution?**

According to the Oxford English Dictionary :

The action of prostituting or condition of being prostituted; the practice or occupation of engaging in sexual activity with someone for payment.

Lap dancing, according to that definition, is prostitution.

empowerment

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**The industry is presented as empowering for women - would you agree with this?**

Absolutely not.

My fundamental belief about this, having worked in clubs, is that the reason why men want to pay for lap dances is not that they are visually titillated, but rather that paying a woman to take her clothes off is an act of power.

There is something predatory and unhealthy about that desire and whether or not individuals feel able to control that urge, whether or not it is natural, these are things of minor consideration when we consider the state of rape convictions in this country.

There is still an horrendous power imbalance between the genders. Lap dancing clubs feed and breed that power imbalance. Lap dancing is the opposite of empowering.

**Performers sometimes appear to paint a very positive picture of the business. Why do you feel their account differs so much from your experiences?**

If your whole living depends on your body, on how attractive you are, then nothing is more embarrassing than admitting you haven't really made any money.

To the outside world I never admitted that I wasn't earning that much cash. I felt that if I admitted I wasn't earning, it was like saying "no one wants me".

If you are - or have been - a lap dancer then you have an investment in believing that it is a worthwhile thing to do and that there is nothing wrong with it.

It's hard to say : 'I made a mistake. I betrayed myself. I'm unhappy.' It's hard to say : 'actually some bloke offered me an extra twenty quid to suck my tits and I said yes because the TV license man came round and I really need the money' . It's hard to say : 'I get drunk every night. I need drugs to see me through'. It's hard to say : 'I'm really just hoping to meet a rich man and one day to be rescued'.

**Men who visit clubs often get the impression that performers are happy, empowered and have more money than them!**

It is important, within the club, to appear to appear wealthy and successful. Are any of them really, really making genuine money? No. I don't believe they are, and if they are they are the exception to the rule.

Most of the women working in most lap dancing clubs are not high earners. They are not making more money than they could make working in a bank or a shop. And there is absolutely no security.

And for those who believe it is their true calling, perhaps it is impossible to see that actually they are genuinely capable of so much more. That often these women are resourceful, intelligent, funny, entertaining, creative women, who despite a lack of education could actually be doing something else. If they can't see it then there is a bigger problem to blame. There is a problem within our culture which is underestimating them and which is leading them to underestimate themselves.

### **What about it being sexually empowering for women?**

In society, attractive women are perceived as having sexual power. So women are encouraged to believe that by being employed as a lap dancer, they are inherently powerful.

And as young women we are encouraged to believe that our sexual power is particularly potent. The emphasis which is placed on our responsibility to control and contain this sexual power, to guard it, to be careful with it, implies that it is very great. In fact, many people believe it to be "the one power women have over men". It is also sometimes represented as "the real power". The myths imply that we can manipulate or seduce men according to our wishes and that men are helpless to resist.

So if your job, as a lap dancer, revolves around exercising this sexual "power", then you may feel as if you are powerful and empowered.

But is that real power ?

### **Some say strip clubs empowers women to be very provocative in a safe environment**

If you went to a nightclub, met a man, took him into a private room, and then danced provocatively for him, took your clothes off for him, gyrated on his lap and then told him he wasn't allowed to touch you or have sex with you, and then he raped you, then you would probably find it pretty hard to get a conviction.

And if you are a young woman then there is a high chance that on the outside world you will have received your fair share of unwanted sexual attention and sexual contact from men for which there is little to no retribution.

So the rules of a lap dancing club, where the men know that they are not supposed to touch and to behave as the rules dictate, and where there are consequences and resources available to you if he breaks that boundary, might seem like power.

So because you live in a world where it is culturally acceptable for men to invade your boundaries without ramifications, then being sexual within the “safety” of a lap dancing club feels relatively speaking like power.

But this comes from a place of powerlessness. From unsafety.

### **So where is the real power?**

The reality is that in the clubs, as in so much of life, the real power lies where the money is. The men have the money, and therefore the men have the power.

And for me that is a problem because it reflects a cultural reality. Maybe it wouldn't matter if there wasn't inequality of power in our culture. But I can't help but feel it's chicken and egg. Lap dancing exists because of that inequality, and might not exist without it.

attitudes \_\_\_\_\_

### **Why do you think women aspire to it?**

You get to dress up and look pretty and loads of men tell you that you're “gorgeous”. It is affirmation on the most basic level, appealing to the part of women which to some is most important: *our looks*.

And lap dancers portray themselves as high earning, glamorous individuals who do what they want when they want. They are well groomed and well turned out.

Most importantly, those who aspire to it genuinely believe that it will earn them a lot of money. And maybe it can be, but it's certainly not guaranteed. There's no guarantee you'll earn anything.

### **Why do you think some women do not take issue with strip clubs when their husbands and boyfriends visit?**

They don't take issue with it because it is presented as simply striptease. They have no idea what actually goes on inside the clubs.

If a woman's boyfriend is off to a strip club then she may feel pressured not to take issue because she doesn't want to be perceived as unliberal or prudish.

And she also probably imagines it will simply involve him watching another woman take her clothes off.

Of course if that same woman knew that her boyfriend was actually going to be allowing a woman to touch him, put her breasts in his face, show him her vagina while she fingered it, maybe even let him finger her, put her face in his crotch, gyrated against him until he came...etc etc. suddenly she might not feel so liberal about it.

Suddenly that might actually feel like infidelity. But women don't know what really goes on because not many women go to strip clubs.

### **So what about women who go to strip clubs with their boyfriends for instance?**

Even if they do, they don't really get the full picture.

As a dancer when you see a man or woman come in together, you aren't going to treat them the same as you are a man on his own or a group of men. You will act according to what you think they want.

So even if your boyfriend took you to a strip club to show you what it was like, you still probably wouldn't know what really went on.

### **Is there a double standard applied to the performers at clubs as opposed to the customers?**

The fact is that lap dancers are not respectable members of society. I haven't told anyone at my jobs since working in clubs that I once worked as a lap dancer. It's not a job like 'I was a waitress'

But the men who come into the clubs are 'respectable'. They are mostly suits. They have city jobs, engineering jobs, wives, children, new born babies.

Firms take their lads in to make business deals. It's a night out.

In contrast lap dancers aren't even on a wage, they are working cash in hand, they aren't getting a pension, or perks. They could be fired at any moment with no employment tribunal. And they – not the men for whom it exists – are surrounded by a culture of judgement.

the end

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**Why did you leave in the end?**

I was constantly in trouble for not looking cheerful and for not wearing the right clothes or shoes. I was tired of daily pube shaving and fake tanning. It also became increasingly clear that my drinking and drug problem was out of control. I was not alone in that respect. There was a high turnover of dancers, and often women would be booted out, only to be allowed back in again several months later.

I didn't make very much money.  
It's competitive, it's tough, and it's incredibly tiring.

I had started seeing a therapist while I was in the club, and was beginning to work through some of my problems and realising that I could do something better with my life.

**What effect do you feel this work had on you?**

I now realise that lap dancing is one of the hardest things I ever did. I found it tough, soul destroying and it had begun to strip me of my humanity. I began to see everyone in terms of how much I could get out of them. I had begun to really hate men, to be bored in their company. I stopped caring about people around me because I was surrounded by this atmosphere of constant mistrust.