

Lap Dance Challenge Briefing

OBJECT
Challenging
Objectification

About lap dance clubs

The term 'lap dance club' refers to establishments which make the majority of their income from 'erotic dancing' of an adult nature featuring women. This includes routines referred to as lap dancing, table dancing, pole dancing, stripping and striptease. Lap dancing clubs are part of the commercial sex industry. The first UK club opened in 1995 and there are now estimated to be at least 300 nationwide (industry sources). The 2012 Olympics are expected to bring further expansion of the industry.

Current licensing of lap dance clubs

Under the 2003 Licensing Act lap dance clubs require only a Premises License. The Act does not differentiate between lap dance clubs and other forms of entertainment such as cabaret or karaoke. Lap dance clubs are therefore licensed in the same way as public houses and cafés.

Why current licensing regulations are inadequate

The 2003 Licensing Act severely restricted the capacity of local councils to control the licensing and working practices of lap dance clubs. Current legislation is wholly inadequate given the true nature of lap dance clubs:

- Many establishments are run in such a way that implicitly encourages clients to seek and expect sexual services from performers and there is evidence this occurs in some clubs (Bindel, 2004). There have been multiple police investigations into misconduct and criminal activity within lap dance clubs and they have been linked to sexual trafficking. In 1997 three Lithuanian women were deported after being trafficked into the UK to work in an Edinburgh lap dance club (Bindel, 2004).
- Women working in lap dance clubs face extremely poor working conditions and as self employed workers have no employment rights or income security. They pay a fee to work in the clubs, are subject to fines for being late and incurring debt to club owners is a common experience for many women (Scottish Executive, 2006). Local councils cannot impose sufficient conditions on licenses to protect dancers.
- Current legislation is unclear. Some local councils have interpreted the 2003 Licensing Act as requiring them not to track and monitor adult venues. Others have criticised the legislation for restricting their ability to refuse applications on the grounds of a 'zero tolerance' policy, in the light of the Act's requirement that all applications be treated equally regardless of the entertainment offered (Eden, 2007).
- The 2007 Gender Equality Duty requires local councils to support the different needs of men and women in all aspects of policy, including licensing. However lap dance clubs normalise the sexual objectification of women in contradiction to efforts to promote gender equality.

Support for a change in licensing legislation

There are growing calls from local councils for a change to current legislation. Brighton and Hove City Council is currently considering a Private Members Bill that would allow its licensing authority to license all lap dance clubs as Sex Encounter Establishments. The London Councils are also currently pursuing a Bill through Parliament to give London boroughs greater control over premises which 'were it not for the 2003 Licensing Act would be classed as Sex Encounter Establishments'. Numerous lap dance clubs licenses have been overturned as a result of opposition from residents and community groups. A 2006 Marie Claire poll found that 78% of its readers view lap dancing as degrading and not empowering.

The Lap Dance Challenge

In April Object is launching a national campaign calling for legislative change to allow all local authorities to license lap dance clubs as Sex Encounter Establishments. This will give local authorities greater capacity to block licence applications and adequately regulate existing clubs. We will co-ordinate support from MPs, local authorities and other women's organisations to highlight the high level of support for change to the current licensing regime.

REFERENCES:

Bindel, J (2004) *Profitable Exploits: Lap Dancing in the UK*, Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University
Eden, I (2007) *Inappropriate Behaviour: Adult Venues and Licensing in London*, The Lilith Project, Eaves Housing for Women
Scottish Executive (2006) *Adult Entertainment Working Group: Report and Recommendations*
Industry sources: Strip Magazine (August 2007) *UK law change brings strip club openings boom*
Marie Claire (September 2006) Online poll of reader's views on lap dancing.

SUPPORTED BY:


THE Joseph Rowntree
REFORM TRUST LTD