

Not Just Harmless Fun: The strip club industry in Victoria

Introduced by Dr Meagan Tyler

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia is the Australian branch of CATW International. We work both locally and internationally to end all forms of sexual exploitation of women, but particularly the exploitation and violence of prostitution and trafficking.

First things first, why did the Coalition want to write this report? First and foremost, we wanted to get a conversation started about strip clubs in Victoria, a conversation that extended beyond "Have you been to one?" and "Which one should I hold my bucks' party at?" Questions that are, unfortunately, becoming increasingly normal. We want to start a critical discussion here tonight about the place of strip clubs in our society and how they impact upon women's equality. This is especially crucial in the current environment where strip club industry profits are growing, pole dancing classes are proliferating and speaking out against the strip club industry is becoming increasingly difficult.

Earlier this week, for example, the Coalition's new report was mentioned in an *Age* article outlining the way that holding corporate events and "after work drinks" at strip clubs is creating a new glass ceiling for women in the workplace. Most of the comments online about the article fitted into one of two categories. The first was complete denial – "It hasn't happened at my workplace, so it therefore doesn't happen" – and the second, more worrying category, was complete indifference – "So what if work events are held at strip clubs?", or as one man wrote: "*Get over it, why can't the boys go out and have some fun?*" While I was heartened to discover that there are still many people out there who have not been invited to a corporate function at a strip club, I was astounded by how many people were accepting and even supportive of this idea.

This event, and indeed the report itself, were both set up to try and tackle these sorts of common reactions. The report shows, though an analysis of club websites, that strip clubs certainly expect and court corporate business. They offer corporate deals, corporate discounts, corporate memberships and at this time of year, corporate Christmas parties. This is undoubtedly creating a new form of exclusion for women in the private sector. The report also shows that the strip club industry in Australia is booming and that this boom has proved lucrative for organised crime in Melbourne. It also shows

that several prominent strip clubs have been linked to ongoing violence and that as a result Victoria Police recently attempted unsuccessfully to block liquor licences for some venues. In addition, there is evidence that these strip clubs create no-go areas for women and that sexual violence, harassment and stalking are common experiences for the women who work in the clubs.

Despite all of this, there seems to be an entrenched belief in Melbourne, and Australia more generally, that strip clubs are a non-issue. To some the clubs are apparently invisible, to others, at worst, a nuisance, while many seem to believe a proliferation of strip clubs simply means a proliferation of harmless fun. Almost universally, however, people believe that strip clubs are inevitable. It is quite astounding to think that less than 20 years ago then, there were no official strip clubs operating in Victoria. It was only in 1992 that the first official club opened.

So how did we get from this to a situation now where our undergraduate students, at this [Melbourne] University, commonly talk about the acceptability of strip clubs in everyday life? A situation where young men often talk about the pressure to go along to a club, especially for events like Buck's nights, and where young women almost all speak of experiencing pressure to be accepting of men's attendance at strip venues. Indeed many young women feel that if they speak out against strip clubs this may threaten their relationships with their friends, colleagues, brothers, fathers and even lovers.

So this is one of the purposes of the report, to create a space where a critical language about strip clubs can develop. To allow a new narrative about strip clubs to be heard, one which shows that they are not just harmless fun but are rather sites that produce and reinforce sexual exploitation and inequality.

This is a discussion already happening elsewhere around the world. As we mention in the report, Iceland actually banned strip clubs earlier this year with the reasoning that their existence harms women's equality. That if you allow some women to be bought and sold for men's sexual arousal or entertainment then you compromise the position of all women in a community. And the banning of strip clubs was a move which received considerable public support there. Difficult to imagine here, of course, in a context which prostitution is legal.

But a discussion about strip clubs is also happening elsewhere. In the UK for example, a recent campaign by the feminist group OBJECT has seen strip clubs officially recognised as offering sexual services. This meant new restrictions applied to strip clubs which had previously been licensed no differently to cafes and bars.

The fact that strip clubs were ever **not** recognised as offering sexual services seems faintly ridiculous but that is also the current situation in Victoria. There is no separate licensing system for strip clubs, so at the moment, they are registered under a variety of different business types. *Showgirls Bar20*, for example, is registered as a nightclub, while *Explicit* and *Goldfingers* are registered as hotels.

None of these non-sexual classifications require special licensing arrangements. There is no recognition that clubs which are frequented almost exclusively by men and which feature naked women dancing, jelly wrestling and inserting objects into themselves, are appreciably any different from a mainstream nightclub, pub or hotel. But, of course, strip clubs are different from the average nightclub or pub and we at the Coalition are arguing that strip clubs have a lot more in common with brothels than with hotels and pubs. And as such we are seeking to have strip clubs licensed in the same way as brothels. This is because in order to understand what happens in the clubs and in order to understand how these clubs fit in to the context of the wider sex industry, we need to see stripping as a form of prostitution or at the very least as part of a system of prostitution.

This is often a controversial point, but the fact that prostitution and stripping are seen as so vastly different is something that needs to be challenged. Firstly, on a fundamental level both stripping and prostitution are forms of what is now commonly called “commercial sex” even by those who are supportive of the industry. What this really means is that both stripping and prostitution involve the buying and selling of women for men’s sexual arousal. Now most people wouldn’t debate this, but there is an invisible line operating for many that says brothel prostitution is not okay, or at least isn’t okay for their boyfriend, or wouldn’t be a place fit for their corporate event, while a strip club is seen as something completely different, something much more acceptable.

What goes on in the clubs, however, seriously disrupts this clear distinction. According to Melissa Farley’s (2003) extensive research across several different countries, “since the 1980s, the line between prostitution and stripping has been increasingly blurred, and the

amount of physical contact between exotic dancers and customers has increased, along with verbal harassment and physical assault of women ..." in the clubs (p. 61). In many strip clubs "customers can buy a lap dance where the dancer sits on the customer's lap while she wears few or no clothes and grinds her genitals against his" (p. 61). Although the men are required to be clothed, it is often expected that they will orgasm. Most of the strip clubs operating in Victoria, and certainly all of the larger ones, offer private rooms and/or lap dancing.

So what is the point of a private room and a lap dance exactly if not to provide a sexual service? How much touching needs to be involved in a lap dance before it becomes masturbation and therefore prostitution?

The 1999 amendment to the Prostitution Control Act in Victoria actually tried to provide answers to these questions. It defined sexual services as instances where sexual penetration or masturbation could be viewed in circumstances where either a) there is direct contact between the viewer and the performer or b) where members of the audience are encouraged or permitted to masturbate. Now if we mix the various aspects of these definitions together, we get the very essence of a lap dance. There is some contact (even if it is minimal) between the viewer and performer and the ultimate aim is sexual arousal through a form of masturbation.

Yet strip clubs, according to current regulations, don't offer sexual services.

Okay, well that's from the legal side of things, but what about a broad common sense understanding of stripping as a sexual service? These clubs, just to be clear, do, almost across the board, offer shows which involve women actually penetrating themselves with objects, with everything from vibrators to vegetables while an audience of men watch on. Who are we kidding that this is not a form of sexual service? If it was filmed, it would be called pornography. If it was happening in Thailand it would be called a sex show. But when it happens in Victoria we call it entertainment in a hotel or club.

The most damning evidence of the connections between stripping and prostitution isn't found in legislation or abstract argument though, it is found in the experiences of the women who perform in the clubs. At this stage, there are no serious studies into the experiences of women in Australian strip-clubs – which is one thing that the Coalition is

calling for – but in many parts of the West, most notably Canada, the US and the UK, sociological studies on the experiences of women in stripping show that most women share very similar stories. Most commonly these include the experience of sexual assault while performing – for example having men penetrate you with money, mobile phones and beer bottles – and the pressure to perform sex acts beyond stripping. This may involve activities still within the club such as lap dancing or service in a private room, but it also often involves direct prostitution outside the club such as escort services. In many instances strip clubs operate as a gateway to other forms of prostitution.

The most profound connections though, are not even this obvious or material. The most powerful way in which stripping can be seen as a form of prostitution is through the harms that it creates and reinforces for women. The most extensive comparative sociological study of prostitution to date, which involved a survey of nearly 1000 prostituted women across 9 countries (Farley et al., 2003), found that women in all forms of prostitution experience extremely high rates of Post Traumatic Stress. Indeed, the study found that women in all forms of prostitution experience PTSD at around the same rate as men returning from active duty in war.

The researchers had actually expected to find that women in stripping would have lower rates of PTSD, but they exhibited symptoms at the same level as women who were in street prostitution, brothel prostitution and escorting. They theorised that this was linked to the dissociation required when performing sexual services. That is, that strippers and other prostituted women alike, were required to be responsible for someone else's sexual arousal regardless of their own sexual desires, emotions or even physical safety.

When faced with this evidence it becomes difficult to see how strip clubs can be just harmless fun.

The problem of strip clubs is further compounded when we consider harms to the community and harms to the status of women and women's equality. In Victoria there have been persistent links between strip clubs, organised crime and violence. Many of these incidents have been well documented in the papers, so I won't go into them too much here as you can read about the long list of recent incidents in the report. I will say, however, that the concentration of strip clubs in the CBD, particularly in King St, is

creating a virtual no-go area for women. Indeed, in 2008 it was voted Melbourne's least safe street.

The normalising of strip clubs, however, is even more pervasive than a street-long no-go zone. This is the normalising of – by and large – the buying of women for men's sexual arousal. The glamourising and normalising strip clubs helps to entrench women's inequality and damages the possibility of creating relationships of equality and respect between women and men in the home and in the workplace.

So, on this basis we are asking for several things. Ultimately, the Coalition would like to see the abolition of all forms of violence against women and for us this includes ending the violence of prostitution. In a situation like Victoria's, however, where prostitution is legal, we are seeking to at least have strip clubs recognised as offering sexual services in the hope that they can be regulated accordingly.

In particular we would like to see a prohibition on the selling of alcohol. Currently, this is a requirement of brothels and was given at the time of legalisation as a measure to help protect women in brothels from further abuse at the hands of drunken clients. The same basic rationale and protection needs to be extended to women in strip clubs. As an upshot of this, if drinking was banned in strip clubs, it is unlikely that many of them would continue to be viable.

So we urge you all to lobby your local member about this issue and push for change.

The Coalition is also asking people to make smaller, more personal stands against the normalisation of stripping. If you are invited to an event which involves stripping, pole dancing, or any other aspect of the sex industry, please decline.

Even better, explain why you don't want to go - because what is most important is that we keep this conversation going.