



WORKPLACE PERSPECTIVES ON EROTIC DANCING

A Brief Report on Community-Based
Research with Entertainers in
Minneapolis Strip Clubs

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Driven to DiscoverSM

Workplace Perspectives on Erotic Dancing

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Introduction

There is a significant dearth of current and basic information about the general working conditions – safety, occupational health, job expectations, and pay – among people working as entertainers in strip clubs in Minneapolis. Unlike many other industries, strip clubs have no human resources departments that send out annual employee satisfaction surveys or field grievances. Entertainers working in strip clubs face significant social stigma. In addition, advocates in the Twin Cities and Minnesota have asked many questions about the connections between strip clubs and sex trafficking, including concerns about minors working in strip clubs and commercial sex. Much of this information came from people who had been victims of sex trafficking who also worked in strip clubs. Little is known about the typical workplace experiences of those working as entertainers in the strip club industry in Minneapolis.

The purpose of this study is to document the workplace experiences of entertainers within strip clubs in Minneapolis from a lens of workplace health and safety. Strip clubs provide nude or semi-nude performance (hereafter to referred to as “erotic dancing”), which is legal and regulated. This study hopes to surface information that can guide policy and regulation of adult entertainment establishments in Minneapolis in ways that address the workplace concerns of entertainers and avoids inadvertent harm to them. We believe the best way to do this is to directly engage entertainers in a research process that is supportive and respectful, while continuing to engage entertainers’ voices and ideas as specific policy solutions are generated. This study is premised on the notion that entertainers are experts about their workplace and their own experiences and are in the best position to understand what they need to stay safe and healthy.

Background Context

There is no legal or regulatory category specific to strip clubs. They are regulated as part of a category of businesses called adult entertainment establishments. There are 17 businesses in Minneapolis that are licensed as adult entertainment establishments, including venues that provide live nude and semi-nude dancing, peep shows, and adult video stores.¹ This study focuses only on the 14 adult entertainment establishments that provide erotic dancing. Our primary focus is on established strip clubs (10), but we include some information about establishments that provide go-go dancing or other erotic performances on a semi-regular schedule. A glossary of terms is provided at the end of this report.

Commercialized erotic dancing can occur in many settings outside of these licensed establishments, including private parties, hotel rooms, party buses, bachelor parties and more. This study is limited to only the working experiences of entertainers in legally licensed adult entertainment establishments in Minneapolis. After discussion with stakeholders, we determined that the work environments and regulatory frameworks for licensed establishments are distinct from “unlicensed” erotic dancing in informal settings and warrants separate inquiry. Some entertainers who work in licensed establishments also perform in unlicensed settings. While not our primary research question, our data indicate significant concerns associated with some aspects of markets for unlicensed erotic dancing which will be fully described in a future report.

¹ City of Minneapolis. “Environmental Health Assessment in City-Licensed Adult Entertainment Establishments.” Public presentation to the City Council of Minneapolis, March 13, 2017. Also see: Minneapolis Code Chapter 549 Section IV.

Individuals who perform in adult entertainment establishments are often referred to colloquially as “strippers” or dancers. Here we refer to them as “entertainers” since this is the preferred industry standard language according to our stakeholders. In Minneapolis, as is the case nationally and in some places internationally, entertainers are not technically employees of adult entertainment establishments.² Rather they are independent contractors, which means that they do not receive a standard wage, benefits, sick time (or any paid time off), or guarantee of work. Independent contractor status also affords entertainers flexibility in work schedule (frequency of work, shift dates, and times).

Entertainers in Minneapolis are predominately women, which is consistent with the industry globally. Based on our community stakeholder conversations, we know that not all entertainers in Minneapolis strip clubs identify as women, but they may have a femme (or feminine) performance presentation while on stage. Furthermore, there are venues with live erotic dancing that cater to the adult LGBTQ community, whose entertainers are go-go dancers and mixed-gender. Our research focuses on the ten strip clubs, where the majority of entertainers are women or femme-presenting individuals.

Entertainers make money in strip clubs by receiving payment from individual customers for stage performances, individualized performances (i.e. lap dances, bed dances, etc.), and individualized attention. These exchanges can either be facilitated through management in the form of credit card payments, “club bucks/dance dollars,” or directly from individual customers in cash payments. We refer to individuals who go to strip clubs and pay for performances as “customers.” The majority of strip clubs in Minneapolis have three main performance spaces:

1. A stage (with or without poles) surrounded by a tip rail for customers
2. Open seating areas with tables and chairs for lap dances
3. Semi-private spaces for what is termed “VIP” experiences, including exclusive lounges offset from the stage and small enclosed spaces with couches or beds

Most clubs in Minneapolis contain all of these performance spaces; however at least one does not have VIP private areas. Entertainers earn money directly from customers in all of these spaces, including tips during dance sets on the stage, and money from performing lap dances with customers sitting in the open bar area. The highest earnings come from providing VIP experiences for customers.

According to our interviews, lap dances range in price from \$10 to \$40 per dance and VIP experiences range from \$75 for a half hour to \$400 for an hour, depending on the strip club. Each club sets a standard price for these services which minimizes price competition among entertainers in the same club, but there is some room for customer-entertainer negotiation for lower prices. We identified a large range in take-home pay for entertainers, anywhere from \$700 for one week of daytime work to \$1,000 for one nighttime shift.

Strip clubs earn money in a variety of ways. They charge entrance fees to customers, sell alcohol and/or food, they receive payments from entertainers in the form of house fees, commissions or a “cut” from specific services, credit card fees, and charge entertainers “fines” for various reasons (being late, dress code violations, and more). In some strip clubs, so-called “shot-girls” are employees who also earn a

² Sanders and Hardy (2012). Devalued, deskilled and diversified: Explaining the proliferation of the strip industry in the UK. *British Journal of Sociology* Vol.63(3); Colosi, R., (2010). *Dirty Dancing? An Ethnography of Lap-dancing*. Willan Publishing: Cullompton, 2010; 194 pp.: 9781843922171 (hbk); UROC (2017). “Labor Classifications for Entertainers.” Available from uroc.umn.edu/stripclubs.

significant portion of their income directly from customers by selling shots of alcohol with an optional brief “sexy” dance. These employees are distinct from entertainers, although some staff move from “shot-girl” to entertainer. Non-entertainment staff at strip clubs (managers, bouncers, DJs, bartenders, and wait staff) are typically employees who receive regular wages as well as tips directly from entertainers. This is discussed more in depth below.

Our data describe a range of clientele at various clubs. At all strip clubs, customers are predominately men. Overall, most clubs cater to a wealthy, white demographic, such as businessmen, executives, and other professionals. Some wealthier customers and regular customers get special treatment within the club. Entertainers also described clubs and customers that cater to working class and blue collar men, and other clubs that cater to the African-American community. Women were discussed as a minority of the customer base, although certainly not rare. Female customers typically go to strip clubs with an opposite gender partner (e.g. husbands and wives), a same-gender partner (e.g. lesbian couple), or large groups of women (e.g. Bachelorette parties). Men typically attend alone, with a friend, or in a large group (e.g. Bachelor parties).

It is not clear exactly how many entertainers work as independent contractors in Minneapolis adult entertainment establishments. However, our data suggest that on any given night the different clubs range from between 3-50 entertainers, depending on the venue and whether it is a weekend, holiday or special event. Based on this anecdotal information provided by interview participants, we estimate that there are upwards of 200 entertainers working on a typical Friday night in Minneapolis.

It is important to note a few aspects of club ownership structures in Minneapolis. Most clubs are part of national or multi-national corporations, or franchises. Independently owned and operated clubs are on the decline in Minneapolis as competition between these venues increases.³

Methods

This was a mixed-method, community-based and qualitative exploratory study. There is no official or publically available list of entertainers who work in Minneapolis making it virtually impossible to develop a representative sample. Additionally, there are many barriers for individuals who may choose to volunteer for research. Erotic dancing is generally stigmatized and socially denigrated. Prior work as an entertainer can harm future job prospects and be a source of shame and embarrassment. Many (but not all) entertainers hide their involvement in the industry from family, friends and others. If entertainers have negative things to say about strip clubs this could hurt their employment status and favorability on the job if their participation in research were known. As an industry, workers may not trust that a research process would respect them.

Given these constraints we used an action research (AR) approach that focused on collaboration and co-construction of the research process with community stakeholders. This approach is appropriate and preferable because our goal was to engage entertainers in a respectful research process that prioritized confidentiality and safety to surface qualitative information about their experiences in the workplace. This is an exploratory study that sought breadth and depth of “insider” knowledge to surface key themes and to develop initial insights to guide policy direction.

³Jackson, S. (2017). “Minneapolis strip clubs adapt to changing times.” *Star Tribune*. Retrieved January 2, 2017, from <http://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-strip-clubs-adapt-to-changing-times/364578011/>

In accordance with conducting ethical research with marginalized populations, our team also developed a list of resources that was available upon request at the end of an interview, downloadable from the survey, and on the UROC website. This resource guide contained information about services and supports on topics such as housing, employment, health care, sexual exploitation, trafficking, sex workers’ rights, legal services, and filing complaints to the City. It was also translated into Spanish, Hmong, Karen, and Somali.

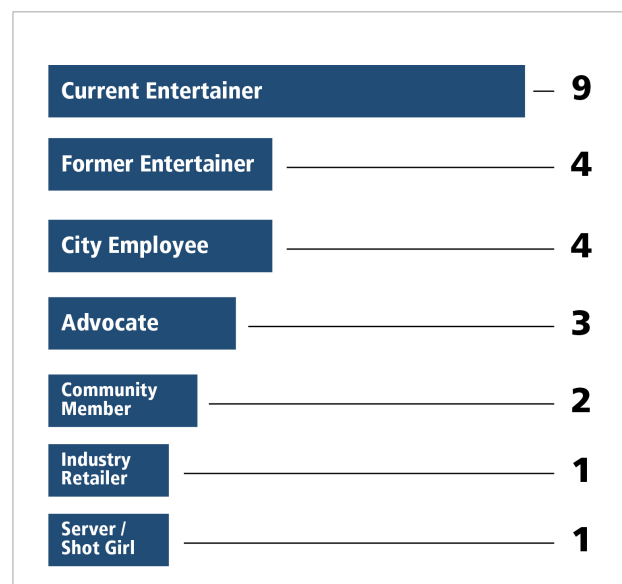
Community Advisory Group

Our first step was to develop a Community Advisory Group (CAG) that brought together industry professionals and advocates. Our CAG includes expertise from entertainers, entertainer and sex worker advocates, social service advocates specializing in sexual exploitation, and action research experts. The research team also had many informal conversations about the research approach and terminology with industry insiders that were known to us through our personal and professional networks. Based on this expert and insider advice we developed the following data collection and recruitment methods.

Confidential Interviews

We conducted semi-structured, confidential qualitative interviews with stakeholders to gain an in-depth understanding of the “lay of the land.” We sought to uncover the major themes we should explore vis-à-vis workplace experiences. We also asked about personal experiences and those of their friends and colleagues, the role of specific strip club contexts in shaping workplace experiences, and ideas of who else (individuals and/or types of individuals) we should contact. As part of the interview we provided statute definitions of human trafficking and inquired into any potential first-hand knowledge of this crime as connected to clubs. Our inclusion criteria for the stakeholder interviews was individuals who have first-hand knowledge about entertainers’ workplace experiences in strip clubs in Minneapolis. Our goal was to hear from individuals with experiences in all Minneapolis strip clubs, and from people from diverse demographic backgrounds (gender, race, sexual orientation, age). We did not focus specifically on go-go dancing at gay night clubs, peep shows, or adult video stores. We offered a \$20 Target gift card to all interview participants to thank them for their time.

Fig. 1: Key Stakeholder Interview Participants



Our sampling technique is known as purposeful sampling. This means that we sought to talk with individuals with specific experiences and backgrounds. Between September 2016 and February 2017 we interviewed 24 individuals. This sample size is in line with other similar studies.⁴ It takes time to build trust and develop referrals. We believe more time would be needed for a larger sample.

Anonymous Online Survey

Based on the themes surfaced in the interviews we developed an anonymous online survey to provide an avenue for entertainers with current and recent (within the last 2 years) experiences within strip clubs to share information about their workplace experience in a completely anonymous format. We believed there were individuals who would prefer this anonymous format to talking with a member of our research team. We identified potential participants through network referrals and flyers posted in coffee shops, entertainer supply shops, pole dancing and aerial performance studios, websites, blogs, Facebook and local newspapers. The flyers contained the survey URL and a QR code that linked an interested participant directly to the online survey. The anonymous online survey contained a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions about workplace experiences, including a modified OSHA checklist. The questions were voluntary and participants could skip anything they did not feel comfortable answering. We also provided a \$20 Amazon.com gift card as compensation for survey participants. In order to maintain anonymity, a separate link to enter one's email address was available at the end of the survey.

The survey was oriented towards individuals with current and recent (within the last 2 years) experiences working as an entertainer in Minneapolis. However, based on recommendations from our CAG, questions for other industry stakeholders were provided as an option. These other industry stakeholders were rerouted to these questions through the inclusion/exclusion criteria. After data cleaning we identified 29 valid and completed online surveys over the course of two and a half months.⁵ This data is a good supplement to the confidential interviews because, as the survey data showed, we were able to reach a more diverse group of participants through the anonymous survey format.

We collected demographic information only from the 23 current/recent entertainers: 19 identified as female, 1 as male, 3 choose not to answer. No one self-identified as transgender or another gender. Of 23 current/recent entertainers, 9 identified as heterosexual (straight), 4 as bisexual, 1 as lesbian or gay, 2 as queer, and 1 as pansexual. Six respondents chose not to disclose their sexual orientation. The

⁴Qualitative research with entertainers in the past two decades has had interview sample sizes between n=10 and n=40. For example: Sherman, S. G.; Lilleston, P., & Reuben, J. (2011). More than a dance: The production of sexual health risk in the exotic dance clubs in Baltimore, USA. *Social Science & Medicine* (73), 475-481. Maticka-Tyndale, et al (2000). Exotic Dancing and Health. *Women & Health*, Vol 31. Maticka-Tyndale, et al. (1999). Social and cultural vulnerability to sexually transmitted infection: the work of exotic dancers. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 90 (1), pp. 19–22. Barton, B. (2002). Dancing on the Mobius Strip: Challenging the Sex War Paradigm. *Gender and Society* 16(5): 585-602. Sanders, T., & Hardy, K. (2012). Devalued, deskilled and diversified: Explaining the proliferation of the strip industry in the UK. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 63(3), 513-532.

⁵ Unfortunately we had to close the survey early due to significant fraudulent activity in which several users completed "fake" surveys in an attempt to procure a gift card. This happened despite several technological barriers we built into the survey to make fraud difficult. We were able to identify surveys associated with this fraudulent user. We were concerned that the fraudulent user(s) would figure out how to elude our measures in order to secure additional gift cards. Thus, we thought it best to close down the survey rather than risk false information.

majority of participants were under the age of 30, with most between 21 and 24 years old. Twenty survey participants opted to self-identify their race/ethnicity, which was offered as a select-all question. Just under half of participants were white (9); the other participants were people of color.

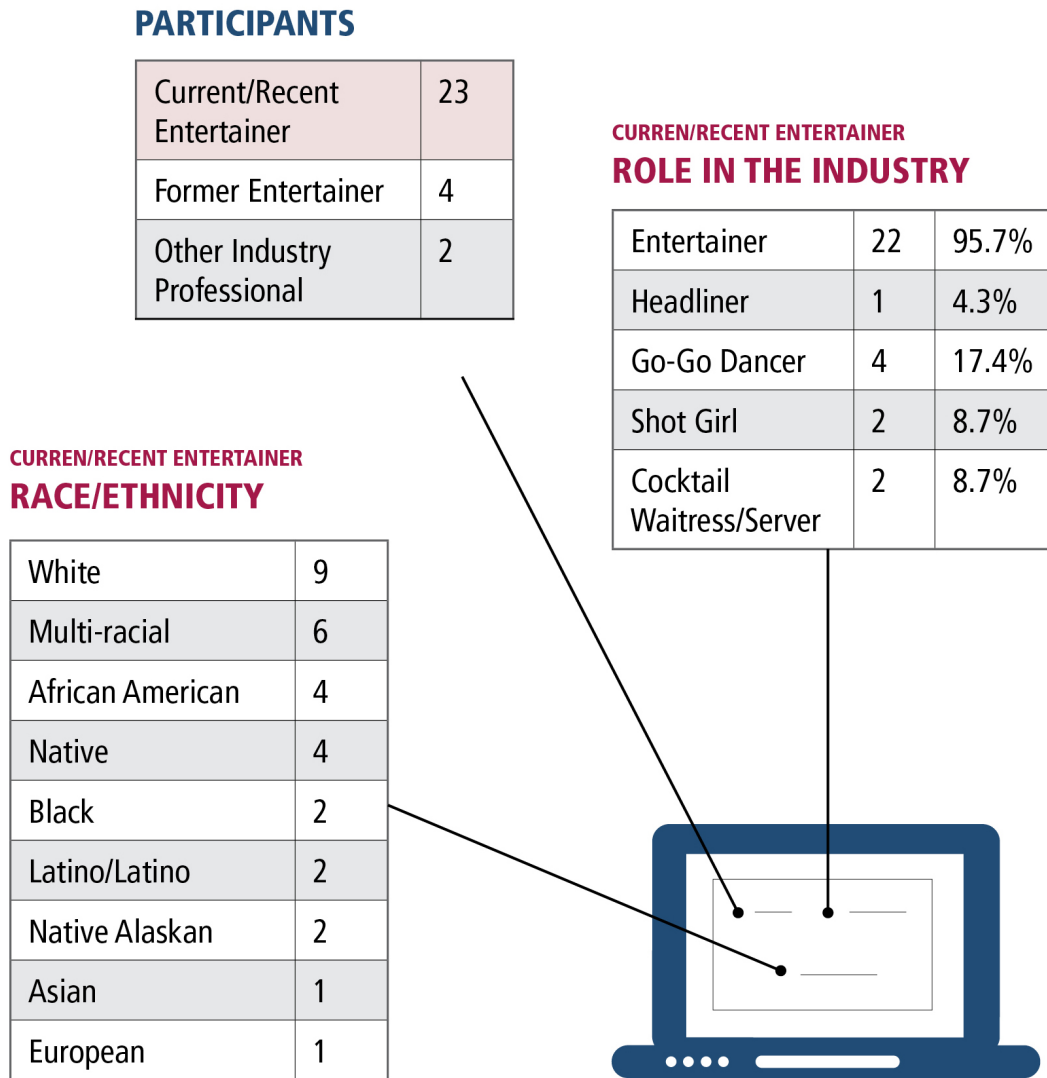


Fig. 2: Online Survey Participants

With the survey and interview data combined, we were able to hear from people with a wide variety of experiences. We learned about workplace conditions in all Minneapolis strip clubs by hearing from individuals who have worked as entertainers in 9 out of 10 strip clubs, and 5 additional venues that offer nude or semi-nude performance. Participants had a wide range of racial representations, ages, and sexual orientation.

Supplemental Information

To supplement our first-hand empirical data we did a review of literature and contracted with two individuals to research and write supplemental reports. We conducted a thorough literature review of national and international studies of strip clubs, reviewing over 60 articles. There is robust literature on this topic, with much of it using feminist critiques of power relationships in clubs.⁶ We found that compared to other aspects of the commercial sex industry there are fewer studies of strip clubs in particular, and fewer that approach this topic from a public health and worker safety perspective.

Limitations

As with all research there are limitations to our findings. This was an exploratory study meant to surface themes and provide a framework for further research of greater depth. More deep-dive research is needed to follow-up on themes we surface here. The time frame of our study was short. We were able to build enough trust with a significant number of individuals who participated in our study. Though it is not certain, we can reasonably speculate that it is likely that we did not build enough trust to reach out to individuals engaging in more stigmatized and illegal behaviors within strip clubs. Our participants talked about people with whom they work(ed) who engage in commercial sex, but we were not able to interview those workers. However, we did succeed in surfacing worker experiences from the perspective of individuals who are not involved in sex trafficking or commercial sexual transactions within or outside of the club.

⁶Wahab, et al. (2011). Exotic dance research: A review of the literature from 1970 to 2008. *Sexuality & Culture*, 15(1), 56-79. Frank, K. (2007). Thinking Critically about Strip Club Research. *Sexualities*, Vol 10(4): 501-517.

Overview of Key Findings

Relative to its short time frame, this was a large study. We collected a great deal of rich and informative data about entertainers' experiences in strip clubs. The individuals we interviewed, survey respondents, and members of the project's CAG asserted that they choose to work in strip clubs for a variety of reasons, including higher pay and quick money (i.e. one can earn a lot of money in a small amount of time), flexible work schedule, and/or they enjoy being "sexy" and interacting with customers through performance. **We want to be very clear: many individuals choose to work in strip clubs and enjoy the job of erotic dancing.**

Interview and survey data surfaced a variety of job duties for entertainers. Entertainers are expected to perform stage dances and lap dances, provide VIP experiences, offer individualized attention to customers, and sell alcohol to earn themselves and the clubs money. Most stage dances consist of a three-song set wherein an entertainer begins in their "sexy" outfit, and proceeds to undress throughout the set. At full-nude venues, entertainers undress completely; while at topless venues, entertainers undress their top half. Stage dances may contain pole performances as well, if the club has a pole/s. **Stage performances are often for an entertainer to advertise or market themselves for personalized lap dances or VIP experiences.** Lap dances are personalized sexual dances between an entertainer and a customer, and some body rubbing or contact can occur (e.g. grinding). Entertainers also provide VIP experiences for customers, which consist of lap dances, bed dances, and individual attention given to the customer. Bed dances are sexualized performances wherein a customer lies on a bed and an entertainer dances on top of the customer. Additional work expectations of entertainers include encouraging beverage sales, especially champagne for VIP experiences, encouraging customers to tip the management, and cleaning the stripper poles.

As it pertains to their workplace environments, entertainers reported numerous challenges and concerns. **Entertainers reported a lack of training or clear job expectations when they were initially hired.** This includes workplace expectations, safety protocols, injury prevention (due to falls, pole injuries, muscle strain from dancing, etc.), financial literacy related to independent contractor status, and work place rights as an independent contractor. Entertainers over the age of 21 are allowed and in some cases pressured to consume alcohol during their shift. Study participants saw intoxication while working as a cause for concern related to workplace safety.

Everyone who participated in our study shared aspects about strip club environments that they find exploitative and harmful, including perceived economic exploitation by the club itself, pervasive verbal harassment and derogatory language, pressures to perform commercial sex acts, unwanted touching or groping, and sexual harassment and assault. Many of these harmful experiences were due to patron behavior intertwined to club management. The frequency, degree and intensity of these experiences vary widely among strip clubs, different managers, and different performance spaces within clubs. The variation across clubs, with some clubs having much safer environments, suggests that it is possible to increase entertainer workplace safety through workplace management and regulation.

Participants also believed that industry stigma contributes to poor and ineffective regulation of their industry.

“As a society, too, I feel like strippers are like, there’s the big judgment and so like, why— why take care of that [entertainers’ working concerns] because they deserve to be in a shitty work environment because you wouldn’t be there if you were a good person. Which is bullshit.” – Industry retailer

“It’s the stereotypes that have gotten us in this deep dark pit of shame, and it’s not shameful. It shouldn’t be shameful. It’s a hard job [...] I feel like a lot of the lawmakers are the ones who go there secretly because they’re sexually frustrated [...] So they’re not—I feel like they’re not the ones who can make these laws, I feel like it has to be the people who experience these things and know these things.” – Former entertainer

None of the current entertainers who participated in our study said they were involved in commercial sex trading or trafficking, but two former entertainers had overlapping experiences of being trafficked for sex and working in a strip club. **Entertainers who are not also victims of sex trafficking make a distinction between erotic dancing and commercial sex trading. They do not see it as the same thing.** However, entertainers who are trafficked may not make the same distinction, seeing it all as part of their trafficking experience. Further, we learned that **some entertainers engage in commercial sexual transactions both inside and/or outside of the strip club by choice.**

In the next section we discuss these concerns in more depth. Then, we describe entertainers’ ideas for how to reduce these harmful experiences to make their workplace safer. More engagement directly with entertainers is needed to craft specific policy, regulation, legal tools and solutions.

Reasons Entertainers Choose to Work in Strip Clubs

Participation in erotic dancing is largely an occupation of choice. The participants in our study tell us that they choose to work in strip clubs for a variety of reasons; chief among them is scheduling flexibility. This is particularly important for entertainers who are unable to work regular work hours, are in school, who work multiple other jobs, have childcare responsibilities, or for those whose mental health may prevent them from holding other jobs. Strip clubs do not require that entertainers have prior experience or know how to dance, although it can be a plus for getting hired. Entertainers are also not required to pass a background check. Working as an entertainer offers quick money and typically more money than other jobs that could be attained with comparable skill level/expectations. This was especially important for interview participants experiencing poverty. Some entertainers suggested that working as an entertainer increased their self-confidence and helped them develop a positive body image. Some described strip clubs as fun and exciting places to work and emphasized that they enjoy being “sexy.”

Training and Workplace Expectations

Most people we interviewed said that they received very little training about the job. This includes how to perform stage sets, lap dances and VIP dances, how to prevent common injuries, how to stay safe from unwanted patron behavior, the rules and regulations about touching and physical contact, and their rights as independent contractors. Entertainers often begin erotic dancing without workplace training and with vague expectations. For example, at many clubs, managers will tell new hires that they cannot engage in sexual acts, but then they may encourage sexual touching in VIP spaces. Rules that are clearly enforced in one area of the club can be bent in another area. **Vagueness in language about expectations leaves interpretation up to the entertainer and they are left to create and enforce unclear boundaries.** This vagueness predictably leaves entertainers unsupported with liability falling on them.

Entertainers perceive that the lack of worker training impacts their ability to be good at their jobs. Many entertainers turn towards each other in collaboration and mentorship to learn tips, strategies for staying safe, and managing workplace expectations.

“So they give you a tour of the club [...] But there's definitely no job description or anything. Not sure what they do now with the new hires but I suppose yeah, they tell you the rules and they tell you how much everything cost and the different rooms and what you--they tell you don't have to do anything you know--so they do kind of, yeah, I suppose they give you a little in that way---but nothing written down, that's for sure.”

– Entertainer

“Like, there's no training. Like, as far as like, how to dance on stage. There was no training on how to do my job well. I had to kind of figure that out. There was training on like, the rules. What I could not do, but not on like, how to do it well necessarily.”

– Entertainer

“They leave you to figure it out, and then you get in trouble if you do something that's not what they want you to do. So they're very vague about what they want you to do.”

– Entertainer

Entertainers described frequent workplace injuries, such as twisted ankles, broken or bruised ribs, torn nails, and falling on one's head. Some of these injuries occurred through pole dance performances, and entertainers believed they were preventable if they had the proper training. Because entertainers are independent contractors, they do not receive paid worker's compensation. A number of entertainers were uninsured and many are on publically subsidized healthcare. One entertainer described a chronic rib injury acquired from her pole performances. In order to keep working with this injury, she had to tip the DJ to create a workplace accommodation so she could skip her stage set rotation.

“I one time had this rib injury for three months until I started seeing this awesome massage therapist, and I found out it was from these three or four different moves that I was doing in my stage set. [...] I would pay the DJ to not put me on stage. So I'd be like, ‘Here's 20 bucks. Don't put me on stage.’” – Entertainer

Entertainers also have little to no training around the potential for the presence and clean-up of bodily fluids. Because sex trading (prostitution) is illegal within the clubs – and can get entertainers fired – there is a code of silence at many clubs around other situations that can precipitate bodily fluids (e.g. semen). In most instances described by entertainers, these include lap dances in VIP spaces where there is more sexual contact and touching, such as grinding. Entertainers described male ejaculation during these performances to be unwanted, undesirable, and often unexpected.

“Two or three times at [my club] customers have come [ejaculated] in their pants during lap dances. And that’s frickin’ gross. Like no courtesy, no warning.” – Entertainer

When these instances occur, the disclosure of this occurrence could put the entertainer in a bad light with their coworkers, and potentially could get them fired if it was perceived that they engaged in prostitution. This leaves entertainers to deal with the presence and clean-up of semen alone.

“No people don’t want to talk about it. [...] So it happens whether or not it’s necessarily instigated by, you know, by physical touch, right, by the woman. [...] It’s kind of a taboo subject because you don’t want to be known as that girl either, so you’re not gonna discuss it, and they’re not discussing it because that’s not supposed to be happening. [...] So yeah, it’s not something that’s really talked about. The girls will talk about it in the back amongst their closer cohorts.” – Former entertainer

Entertainers also expressed concerns around inconsistent training and enforcement of other cleaning practices. Vomit, urine, and other bodily fluids on poles were other cited potentially infectious bodily fluids. Some clubs regularly clean poles, while for other clubs, this may be an after-thought. Entertainers believed that overall many clubs practiced general cleanliness procedures, yet they could use some improvement.

The regulation of dress codes presented some additional concerns for entertainers around workplace expectations. While some entertainers experienced broad latitude in dress code regulation, others had strict standards to adhere to. Furthermore, these standards were not applied uniformly. Entertainers expressed a desire for a middle-ground between reasonable expectations and regulation. More information about this topic will be presented in future reports.

“Sometimes it is very, very, very cold in the club and I’m not allowed to wear any kind of sweater or practical cover-up. I have gotten sick this way. This goes for ALL clubs.” – Survey respondent

“The dress code is rarely enforced evenly. The big ones (no see through panties) are pretty firm, but every girl gets treated differently. One of our black performers is not allowed to have her nipples visible through her outfits, although lighter skinned and white performers never have problems. [...]” – Survey respondent

Finally, the intensity of alcohol consumption at alcohol-serving establishments was cited as a cause for concern. Entertainers who are over the age of 21 are allowed to consume alcohol while working, and most clubs maintain strict procedures for not serving their under-21-year-old staff. At clubs that do serve alcohol, consuming alcohol with customers was embedded into workplace culture and customer expectations. Intoxication while on the job was raised as a safety concern as it made it harder for entertainers to maintain professional boundaries and to keep track of their earnings. Refusing to drink

with customers could also lose an entertainer their customer (and thus, their earning potential), as this is part of the paid-for fantasy. This especially includes champagne bottle services in VIP spaces and purchasing shots of alcohol.

“I would say the policies of the pushing the champagne, that kind of stuff, that definitely leads to over drinking. Nobody ever said to me ‘You have to drink this.’ Absolutely not. But would it affect my money? Yes, absolutely.” – Entertainer

Intoxication of customers was also seen as a concern for entertainers’ safety, regardless of whether or not the establishment served alcohol. In non-alcohol serving establishments, it is very common for customers to arrive already intoxicated. **Entertainers perceived that heavily intoxicated customers were more demanding, less predictable, and more disrespectful.**

“They're intoxicated coming in. And those guys really suck. And that's another thing that sucks about the job is dealing with those guys. Dealing with the grabby guys and the guys who are on something.” – Entertainer

Suggested Solutions

Entertainers recommended that strip clubs should provide more guidance on workplace expectations with things such as paid orientations and ongoing trainings. It was also suggested to create worker handbooks. Topics could include worker rights, safety, human trafficking, Right-to-Know training, and industry specific financial literacy for independent contractors. Another related entertainer-solution is to establish clearer expectations for customers.

“They let me walk in and audition on the spot. And the audition was first is topless, second song is nude, and then I was naked and got a third song. And I was like, ‘Oh what do I do?’ Just like run around and dance. I had no idea what to do. So I guess if I had any advice for strip clubs, some kind of employee hand book would be absolutely wonderful.” – Entertainer

“[In my dream], it's like a club environment where you have to apply to be a customer and then you go through an orientation--whether it would be physically at the club or online basically saying these, this is your behavior at the club. Like, you can't do this. You can do this. This is encouraged. Don't like--these girls are not prostitutes. Do not ask them for sex. Like, they're not here to date you. Don't ask them for da-da-da-da. You know, just [...] common sense stuff. Like, you know, tip whoever is on stage. Like, if a girl is sitting and talking with you, pay her for her time if she's spending a lot of time with you. Or let her know right away. You know, basically like, etiquette.” – Entertainer

They also suggested that clubs could set alcohol consumption limits for entertainers while working. Some alcohol consumption is due to pressure from customers, so the clubs could provide opportunities for entertainers to safely refuse alcohol. The clubs could also not allow heavily intoxicated entertainers to work, and could refuse service for heavily intoxicated customers.

Finally, some suggested that clubs should promote entertainer leadership within clubs. They could champion worker-led solutions and promote entertainers who have interest in managerial positions.

“It would also be cool to be managed by people who've done the job too. So like, I think that would be really neat to have a manager who used to be a dancer. So obviously they'd have to be female. Well, they don't have to be female if they—I know there's such thing as male dancers but who understand the industry from that perspective and so can manage the employees in that way.” – Entertainer

SUMMARY: Training and Workplace Expectations

KEY FINDINGS:

- Lack of workplace training
- Frequent workplace injuries with no monetary compensation
- Lack of protocol for bodily fluid clean up
- Poor and inconsistent industry regulation of dress code
- Intensity of alcohol consumption creates safety hazards for all

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS:

- More guidance on workplace expectations
- Paid orientation and ongoing trainings
- Worker handbooks with topics including worker rights, safety, human trafficking, Right-to-Know training, and financial literacy for independent contractors
- Clear and enforced expectations for customers
- Limitations of alcohol consumption for entertainers and customers
- Promote leadership of entertainers

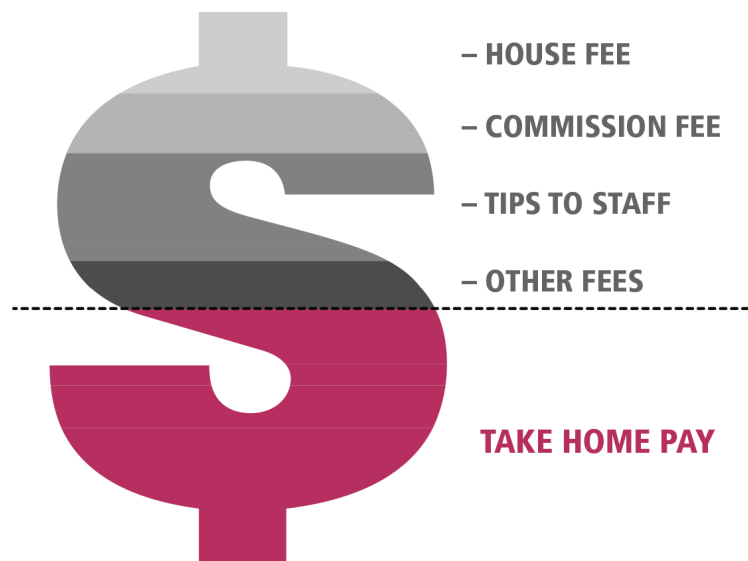
House Fees, Tipping, and Fines

Tipping obligations, house fees, and fines were some of the greatest concerns and burdens that entertainers described in their workplace. Our study did not collect in depth information on earnings and financial arrangements in strip clubs. However, study participants suggested that clubs earn money from entertainers in a variety of ways. First, a “house fee” is the money an entertainer pays the club in order to work, similar to a hairdresser renting a chair in a salon. House fees ranged from \$10 to \$100 per shift depending on club and start time. The house fee is sometimes waived at management’s discretion.

Second, **clubs also collect numerous fees.** The most common fee (sometimes referred to as “commissions”) for entertainers is collected per lap dance and VIP time. Commission fees range from 10-25% of the cost of the service. Some clubs do a flat rate commission on all earnings the entertainer receives, ranging from 25-30%. Some managers track VIP commissions and collect it at end of the shift. Some clubs also charge a fee to the entertainer if a customer uses a credit card. These fees are may be waived if the entertainer sells expensive alcohol to a customer.

On top of the house fees and commissions, **entertainers are obligated to tip managers, bouncers, hosts, DJs, servers, bartenders, and valets.** Entertainers generate significant money for the club, and then pay out to nearly all staff. In other industries, such as the restaurant industry, sharing tips or tipping other co-workers is common. However, it is not common for workers to tip management staff as they do in strip clubs. Tipping practices vary greatly by clubs. We found that **entertainers tip anywhere from 10-30% of their earnings to managers, bouncers, DJs and other staff on top of the commission fees.** After commissions and tipping, entertainers take home somewhere around half of their earnings, more or less depending on the club and the entertainer.

In addition to these somewhat regularized payments that entertainers make to clubs, they are also subjected to seemingly arbitrary fines. Fines are charged for things such as arriving late to a shift, dress code violations, talking back to a manager, being rude to a customer, and other infractions.



In some instances, entertainers leave work owing money to the club.

"[...] Because I'm actually thinking about those scenarios [of leaving work owing the club] and just how heartbreaking that is, especially when you're actually really broke, and you only had \$60 and you're hoping to make \$600 and you actually left with, not \$0 but like negative \$60. Yeah, I cried in the bathroom, for sure. It's like 'Fuck my life; I'm going to go home and hang myself.' [Laughs] Not literally." – Former entertainer

Entertainers feel pressure to tip managers, and tip well, because managers have significant control over entertainers and their workplace. For example, managers arrange customers for VIP experiences, which can be some of the most lucrative workplace services for entertainers. They also control hiring and firing. Many entertainers echoed the following quotes:

"And if they [management] get tipped, they're making sure I'm taken care of, well, not making sure I'm taken care of, but making sure, like, things go a little easier. And, they'll upsell for you." – Entertainer

"A girl got in trouble. She wants to keep her job. She wants to keep working her shifts, and she feels like she has to pay him extra money in order to keep him on her side, so she can keep her job." – Entertainer

Entertainers described using tips to obtain better security services provided by the club, a role shared by managers and bouncers.

"Who's gonna watch out for you? Who's gonna, you know, do this? Who's gonna send somebody over your way? It's all based off of what you're gonna tip." – Former entertainer

These tipping obligations were viewed as unfair, arbitrary and exploitative.

"I am consistently appalled to be charged money simply to show up at work. It feels like I'm being pimped by the corporation or owner of the club. Also, I feel consistently extorted by a heavy pressure to tip out a LARGE quantity of my earnings to the staff that all make wages from the company and have benefits and protections as employees. I do not get any benefits or privileges as their employer, yet I am paying their wages out of my own pocket." – Survey respondent

Taken all together, many entertainers believe that the arbitrary and large amounts of money required for house fees, tipping, and fines are a form of economic exploitation of entertainers. In order to make more money for themselves and the strip club, this structure pushes entertainers to engage in more high-paying private services that, as we describe below, result in less safe work environments as they are currently configured. An authoritative study of strip clubs conducted in the United Kingdom put it this way, "the industry has maintained its market presence due to its ability to establish highly financially exploitative employment relationships with dancers at a time of economic fragility."⁷

⁷ Sanders and Hardy (2012) p. 513.

Suggested Solutions

Entertainers recommended a requirement to maintain uniform and non-exploitative standards for tipping and house fees. These recommendations call for eliminating the possibility of an entertainer finishing a shift owing money to the club by waiving house fees on slow nights. They could do away with the practice of favoritism and rule-bending on tipping obligations. Finally, many suggested that clubs should eliminate direct tipping of managers since this practice creates significant unequal power structures which create conditions for extortion and victimization of workers.

Entertainers have differing views for improvements related to their employment status, yet agree on needing solutions that could alleviate some burdens and provide more rights and benefits. Some entertainers believe their work environment would be better if they were employees who earned wages and tips, such as servers. In this scenario, entertainers would have more workplace protections such as workers' compensation, health insurance, and other benefits. Other participants prefer the independent contractor status. They believe that independent contractor status allows them to make more money, secures their flexible work arrangements, and because the industry is heavily stigmatized, they prefer that their work as an entertainer does not show up in their employment record. Entertainers overall believe that attractive options to become employees would benefit both sets of worker desires.

SUMMARY: House Fees, Tipping and Fines

KEY FINDINGS:

- Arbitrary and exorbitant house fees, commissions, and fines charged to entertainers
- Entertainers obligated to tip managers, bouncers, hosts, DJs, servers, bartenders, and valets
- Pressure to tip to ensure job security, manage workplace relationships and receive workplace benefits or protections

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS:

- Maintain uniform and non-exploitative standards for tipping and house fees
- Eliminate the direct tipping of managers
- Offer more attractive options to become employees

VIP Spaces

Participants described VIP spaces as dimly lit semi-private spaces separated from the main floor or open seating area. Customers pay a set fee regulated by the club for a range of time from 30 minutes to 1 hour. Specific amounts range by club from \$75 for a half hour to \$400 for a full hour. VIP spaces are characterized by privacy through curtains or booths, and furniture in which a customer can recline or lie down, such as a couch or bed. Some clubs have multiple levels and areas of VIP with a range of entrance fees, which is divided between the entertainer and the club. VIP space is set up for a private dance or time spent with an entertainer, although some accommodate small groups of up to five people. There is typically minimal club oversight of the VIP spaces with fewer managers or bouncers than on the main floor. Some entertainers perceived that less foot traffic in VIP created a perception of privacy, while supervision of these spaces occurred through security cameras. Not all clubs have security cameras in VIP spaces.

The VIP space makes the most money for the club, other staff, and the entertainer. Many entertainers like this aspect of VIP. It is also less physically demanding than working the floor.

“I would say the bulk of the money is gonna come from VIP hours and half hours. [...] Because if you try to do \$600 worth of straight lap dances downstairs, you’re gonna be dancing for hours. You’re gonna be so exhausted. Because if you go upstairs, they don’t make you dance all the time. They will buy your time rather than the actual dance.”
– Entertainer

Services in the VIP spaces are private “sexy” interactions that may include erotic dancing, rubbing body to body over clothes, grinding, and sensual or sexual touching. Sometimes VIP experiences were less about the performance, and more about time conversing with a customer or snuggling. **However, entertainers identified VIP spaces as the most unsafe, where they experience higher rates of unwanted physical contact, sexual assault, and pressure to engage in commercial sex trading from customers.** Customers in VIP expect more services than what are available in non-VIP spaces, including more physical touching in exchange for higher cost of services. Entertainers estimated anywhere between 50% to 99% of VIP customers expect “something more.” For example, when asked how often VIP customers assume that they will get to grope, touch, or engage in sexual contact with the entertainer, one entertainer said:

“Like 99% of the time. Like, I feel like there’s one percent of customers who know exactly what they are going to get, who understand why they are there, what’s happening, and are cool with that.” – Entertainer

“The [VIP] guys think they’re going to get more.” – Former entertainer

They also suggested that some customers expect that the services offered in a VIP space will lead to ejaculation.

“[Customers] want it [orgasm] to happen and of course they do. [...] My goal is that you don’t cum because if you do cum, you’re done. You’re out of here. My money train is gone. [...] Do [customers] expect it? Sometimes yes. Do they want it to happen? Absolutely. I mean that’s the... you know?” – Former entertainer

“They’ll cum in their pants. Sometimes they’ll be wearing shorts, it will come out the side. Sometimes they’ll have it pressed up against here, and then it’s coming out here [gesturing to stomach area of body]. [...] Sometimes, you know, it leaks through whatever they’re wearing, thin stuff. Then it’s on you.” – Former entertainer

Many participants suggested that VIP customers expect additional sexual contact from entertainers in VIP spaces. Most commonly expressed requests for sex trading included manual stimulation (e.g. hand job and fingering) and oral sex.

*“Like, why would you think that you could give me \$20 and I’m going to touch your penis?”
– Former entertainer*

“Just like something I think that people don’t think that we care about that kind of stuff. [...] Some people don’t really recognize that strippers are people. Like at all. Like at the fuck all. Like, ‘What can I buy off you?’ You know what I mean? ‘What do you do?’ It’s like oh my God, I’m a fucking human. You know what I mean?” – Entertainer

“They [customer] want to get away with whatever they can and then they just want to go home. You know, they’re not – if they wanted more, they’d see a prostitute, if they really wanted to push those boundaries.” – Former entertainer

Some customers use force if they do not feel they are getting what they paid for.

“Men can get upset that [ejaculation] has not happened because they’re paying this money, they expect that something’s going to occur and when it doesn’t and their time is up, they can get very mad about that, you know?” – Former entertainer

“[...] but I’ve had people [customers] decide that they were gonna get what they felt like they paid for, and had to physically struggle many times with my guests, and not had a bouncer be like, ‘Don’t touch the girls.’ So it can be draining mentally but also actually physically!” - Entertainer

“[...] she got a VIP and then he immediately stuck his hand down her panties, and she said she walked out of the room and went to the manager and said, ‘That guy just tried to touch my vagina.’ And the guy said, ‘Well yeah, you’re in VIP.’ So just absolutely no back-up there whatsoever.” – Entertainer

Several described quite harrowing situations of physical and sexual violence occurring in VIP areas, including choking and restraining.

“The guy was just a little too drunk, and he was very strong, like he was 6 feet [tall] and very powerful, and he started choking her [the other entertainer working with her], because he thought she liked it, and was too drunk to comprehend. And she was terrified. So I pulled him off. [We were worried about] getting knocked out or getting hurt severely. [...] She was terrified and we had to finish that hour being very careful, but like thank God I was there because if she would have done that by herself she could have died. She’s a pixie; she’s not as durable as I am.” – Entertainer

“[...] sometimes you're going to wind up in a dangerous situation where someone is hoping to get more than what's on the menu. Such as I was part of a three-girl private dance with a person who was a Bachelor. [...] But I was getting my ass slapped, and I wasn't okay with that. And the general policy at the club was, they don't get to do that. [...] We verbalized, 'Look, stop it' more than once, and that kept happening. Um, so, I kind of had a knee jerk thing where I turned around and slapped him in the face. And this particular individual decided he was going to get extremely angry, he was very affronted, and he grabbed my arm, my forearm, and he was a large, they were all really large guys, not necessarily overweight large, but they were tall, they were just a lot bigger than I was. And his hand took up like almost my entire- his hand took up my entire forearm. He had long strong fingers. I couldn't get him to let me go and at that point I started to panic because I didn't know what was going to happen next. All I, I was sitting there exposed, not able to move, I was restrained physically and I had all these people that I didn't know. I didn't know if they were going to be helping me or helping him. And I got completely scared and I quit dancing for a month. I cried. I ran home. I left work.” – Entertainer

One entertainer described how she forgoes earning more to avoid the negative aspects of VIP spaces.

“I am OK with being more of a peacock, like working the floor and having more social time with everybody in the room and making my money that way, than going upstairs and having to deal with that pressure. Because I'm very aware of what that rate [for commercial sex] is, and I'm not OK with those blurred lines. [...] But I just want to be able to do it without that pressure.” – Entertainer

Interview participants noted that **there is a great deal of variation in VIP space experiences based on how management and bouncers hold customers and entertainers accountable, and whether they provide clear and supportive security**. Some strip clubs and managers are very clear and maintain strong rules against sexual contact and any type of commercial sex trading. Some clubs may fire entertainers who engage in this behavior and remove or ban customers who demand it. The VIP space is inherently a grey zone where the lines are deliberately blurred and expectations are vague in order to convince customers to spend more money.

Participants noted a large-scale shift in the industry with the rise of VIP space changing the nature of the industry and expectations of customers. They believe that customer experiences in VIP spaces shape overall customer expectations within strip clubs. Particularly if a customer has a VIP experience that involves a significant amount of “extras,” they then expect those same services from other entertainers. Entertainers cited competition among strip clubs as one potential driver of this trend.

Suggested Solutions

Entertainers strongly recommended reconfiguring VIP spaces and how they are managed to increase worker safety. Some suggested eliminating private beds and booth spaces where customers are fully reclined and in private areas. Other recommendations included a redesign of VIP spaces to make them more open, e.g. better lighting, sheer curtains, more cameras. Entertainers saw a great need to increase surveillance of VIP spaces, including additional staff to monitor VIP spaces, so that entertainers can easily get support or help if needed. Some suggested eliminating VIP spaces altogether.

Finally, entertainers expressed a line between helpful and harmful policing of boundaries. For example, if a customer ejaculates during a performance, entertainers would like to receive support in cleaning up and protection from this without fear of being fired. At the same time, many entertainers perceived that universally enforced boundaries between customers and entertainers (such as a variant of No-Touch model ordinances, or consent-forward ordinances) relieved them of the pressure to “do more.” Bouncers intervening also can relieve some of the pressure from entertainers to maintain the fantasy of the VIP experience, without losing customer’s money. Entertainers felt strongly that practices of seeking consent need to work their way into the strip club environment for all sexual and sexy activity.

SUMMARY: VIP Spaces

KEY FINDINGS:

- VIP spaces are identified as the most unsafe for entertainers
- Entertainers experience higher rates of unwanted physical contact, sexual harassment and assault, and pressure to engage in commercial sex trading from customers

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS:

- Reconfiguration of management of VIP spaces
- Redesign of VIP spaces
- Increase surveillance of VIP, and support entertainers with troublesome customers
- Instill universally enforced boundaries between customers and entertainers
- Support practices of seeking consent

Harassment and Assault

The types of experiences of harassment and assaults that occur in VIP spaces are normalized as part of many strip clubs. Entertainers described harassment inside the strip club from customers, management, and other club staff including derogatory language, verbal harassment, physical assaults, and sexual harassment. They also described tacit support for and complicity in assaults by some strip club staff and customers.

“But it becomes normal in that environment. If I was walking down the street it wouldn't be normal. If I'm working there, it's normal. Those kind of things happened all the time. And you just kind of become numb and immune to them.” – Former entertainer

“I mean, it is kind of like a fantasy land where [...] it is very, very ego boosting for most women who do it because a lot of these men really worship you, but then you spend the night going back and forth with men saying awful things to you.” – Former entertainer

Participants described that many entertainers feel alone and isolated in dealing with these circumstances. Support systems do not always exist in clubs. Stigma around “strippers,” combined with a normalization of men’s entitlement to women’s bodies, lead to an unhealthy workplace environment for many entertainers.

“My first time ever dancing [...] this dude I didn't know grabbed me off the stage and gave me \$60 for three dances, and I was like, ‘Okay.’ He physically grabbed me and pinned me down. He didn't speak any English; he physically pinned me down and started masturbating in his pocket. I did not get the manager's attention. I didn't want to make a fuss. He came [ejaculated] in his pants and left within three songs. And I was just, like, super scared, violated, and I told a manager what happened, and [he] was like, ‘You should have started screaming.’ And I was like, ‘You tell us to put our arms up if something goes wrong, and he had pinned my arms up so I couldn't move.’” – Entertainer

Most people we interviewed felt that it was primarily their responsibility to police the boundaries and behavior of customers.

“But, I have to admit as a dancer in that situation, I will put up with a great deal. Knock it off, walk their hands up, whatever. I'll be in control. But I get grabbed or a dude will flash me, I'll be like ‘Zip it up. Put it away.’ And then I'll finish the damn dance. And I'll see him the next time he comes in, and I'm not going to flip or cry. I want his money.” – Entertainer

Pressure to earn sufficient money contributes to a culture of acceptance of unwanted behavior and harassment.

“Where [in this industry], inappropriate behavior gets glossed over because there is some money flowing.” – Entertainer

“There was this one dancer [...] and [she was] crying to me and all of this and didn't want to go into the private room with this one guy. [...] but she ended up talking him up like, three

times the rate and then went there with him. So even though she was uncomfortable, once the money got to a certain point...” – Server/Shot Girl

These same economic pressures are evident in club management as well, as wealthy customers are often given special treatment, and prioritizing customer money is a given. In one case, a customer who engaged in unwanted behavior with an entertainer was reprimanded, but then immediately rewarded by management.

“I’ve always had to fend for myself, and always have. The one time I asked for help, I got flack for it. The guy was kicked out, and he was given a card to come- a free get-in card. I lost it. I was furious.” – Entertainer

Suggested Solutions

The entertainers we interviewed had many ideas about how to create stronger mechanisms within strip clubs to protect entertainers from unwanted sexual contact, harassment, and assault from customers. The starting point is for strip club managers and security to believe and validate entertainers when they disclose unwanted sexual contact, harassment, or assault. Clubs could prioritize worker safety over customer’s money, if they choose. Entertainers noted that several clubs have clear boundaries and that managers enforce those boundaries with customers. Entertainers believe that clubs could actually make more money if the management took more responsibility for enforcing boundaries rather than leaving it to the entertainer. Management could partner with entertainers rather than siding with customers.

Clubs could remove and refuse entry for customers who engage in violent or unwanted sexual contact, including customers who request sex acts or pressure entertainers for sex acts, and customers who recruit entertainers to engage in commercial sex outside of the club. They could also make expectations more clear with posted notifications of appropriate behavior for customers that are enforced.

SUMMARY: Harassment and Assault

KEY FINDINGS:

- Harassment and assault are normalized in clubs
- Pressure to earn money contributes to acceptance of unwanted behavior and harassment
- Wealthy customers are given special treatment

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS:

- Managers and security need to believe and validate entertainers when they disclose unwanted sexual contact, harassment, or assault
- Managers could partner with entertainers rather than siding with customers
- Clubs could remove or refuse entry for customers who engage in violent unwanted sexual contact

Commercial Sexual Trading in Strip Clubs

Our data suggest that commercial sex trading does happen in strip clubs, but that it is by no means universal among all clubs or all entertainers. Entertainers distinguish between “clean clubs” that have a reputation among entertainers for not allowing commercial sex trading, and “unclean clubs,” that have a reputation for tolerating, condoning or even facilitating commercial sex trading. With a small number of club owners in Minneapolis, it is interesting to note that some owners operate both clean and unclean clubs. The implication of this is that this is a regulatory and managerial function of the club, and could be changed.

Entertainers at both so-called clean and unclean clubs described increasing pressures to do more things that may come much closer to the line of sex trading or even cross the line into sex trading. Several entertainers we interviewed talked about what they referred to as “extras girls,” or fellow entertainers who are known to cross the lines from the expected behavior to include allowing themselves to be groped, performing oral sex, or providing manual stimulation. We found a significant range in how clubs and managers react to commercial sex. Some clubs are known for turning a blind eye or even facilitating commercial sex trading, especially if they receive extra tips from customers or entertainers. Some managers will specifically maneuver a customer to an “extras girl” for an additional tip for themselves. One entertainer described an incident where a manager told a customer to expect a commercial sex act without telling the entertainer, thus setting up a situation for assault. This situation could be considered sex trafficking, according to Minnesota Statute, as described in the next section. While exerting pressure or facilitating commercial sex, clubs often shift liability for sex trading and sexual contact onto the entertainer.

“Supposedly [the manager] once sold a girl without telling her he was selling her, and [he] took the money. [...] But for what it sounded like he took extra money from the guy to make sure there was extra privacy. And that would be okay, but the thing is the girl hadn’t consented, didn’t know what was going on, she knows that security is watching her [...].”
– Entertainer

Other clubs set and maintain clearer boundaries against physical touching and commercial sex. It is evident that while the pressure is frequently there, many entertainers do not engage in commercial sex. Several people we interviewed believe that when some entertainers engage in commercial sex trading on site this creates customer expectations for similar services from other workers, which fosters coercive economic pressures and an unsafe working environment.

“[...] If a girl is doing extras on the floor, that fucks up our money because a guy looks over and goes, ‘Well why aren’t you, like face first in my crotch with your hair everywhere?’ And you’re like [Silent pause].” – Entertainer

According to our data, some entertainers engage in commercial sex trading outside of the clubs. However, there are some strip clubs that will not hire entertainers who are involved in commercial sex trading outside of the club. Thus, there is a differentiation of services and experiences in the industry between clubs that provide a variety of environments to customers.

Suggested Solutions

Many study participants recommended that the industry as a whole could redefine standards for entertainer and customer interaction that move away from the blurred lines and some of the customers' expectations for sex trading. Regulation could establish clear and universally applied work boundaries for entertainers and customers of no touching of bikini zones or breasts, including contact over clothes (i.e. no grinding).

Participants also expressed that clearer boundaries and accountability to them benefitted all entertainers, creating a safer environment with less pressure to compete alongside a network of entertainers for titillation or sexual service for lower prices.

SUMMARY: Commercial Sex Trading

KEY FINDINGS:

- Commercial sex trading is not universal among all clubs or all entertainers
- Entertainers feel pressure to engage in commercial sex trading
- There is a significant range in how clubs react to commercial sex

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS:

- Redefine standards for entertainer and customer interaction
- Establish clear and universally applied work boundaries

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking within a strip club is a form of labor trafficking, as nude or semi-nude performances are legal. Some activities within a strip clubs could meet the definition of sex trafficking if commercial sex is present.⁸ The entertainers who participated in our study saw what they describe as minimal evidence of trafficking within the clubs. They said it was rare to see what they perceived as signs of force, fraud, or coercion among their coworkers. When they did see this it typically involved a boyfriend or spouse who they described as abusive and controlling.

“So what I’ve seen [for entertainers who did have pimps] is there was a circuit. So on the weekends they might go to Iowa or North Dakota. So they may be trafficked or exploited during the week. They would set up dates and stuff through Backpages, and then on the weekends they would work the clubs.” – Advocate

“There’s always the girl who’s getting beat up, who’s gonna give all her money to her guy, and they’re both addicted to whatever, or he is. And you know, the dynamic is he makes her feel very small and takes her power away, so she can’t get away. She feels she has no ability and no strength. You see that everywhere.” – Entertainer

Many entertainers said they were interested in learning more about human trafficking, including warning signs and prevention. Participants that we interviewed tended to understand trafficking as involving forced movement, with victims coming from another country, and also believe that victims of sex trafficking would appear to be enslaved. These however, are commonly misunderstood perceptions and myths about victim/survivors of trafficking.

*“But it’s really, those girls are taken. Those girls are taken to another country.”
– Entertainer*

“[...] Because when I think of sex trafficking, I think of like slaves. They’re slaves. They’re being brought, and it doesn’t matter how they’re being used, they’re being used against their will.” – Entertainer

Entertainers did describe strip clubs as places where pimps seek to connect with potential victims.

They said it was common for known pimps to come into clubs as customers and seek relationships with entertainers. In this way, strip clubs are a well-known site for recruiting for sex trafficking. Previous research has identified many such recruitment places, so strip clubs are not unique in this.

“Pimps would come into the clubs and I had no idea that they were pimps. I was just too young and dumb to know. [...] Had some of the other girls there talking to me about what was going on and who they are and what they’re doing and that kind of stuff, I probably would not have known. I was very young and I was barely 18 working there. And they were very smooth. They’re very nice [...].” – Former entertainer

However, our participants described some instances where strip club staff seem complicit in allowing and facilitating pimps and traffickers to recruit. They also described other instances of club-facilitated

⁸ <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/labor-trafficking-venuesindustries/barsclubs>

commercial sex trading that would fit the Minnesota state definition of sex trafficking in that it involves a third-party facilitator.

Entertainers who participated in our study thought it was very unlikely that minors work in strip clubs now. They said they do not see it and that it would be difficult for minors to work in strip clubs because hiring at most clubs requires two forms of identification. Several people we interviewed believe that there used to be more minors working in Minneapolis strip clubs, but that it does not happen anymore. There are young people in the clubs because the industry is dominated by women aged 18-24. However, participants noted that there were also no legal regulations around this.

“Under age dancers? Oh no, no, no, no, no, no. They’re very, like they’re super strict about that, because in order to work you have to give them your social security card and all your identification.” – Entertainer

Suggested Solutions

Right now the primary suggested solution related to human trafficking was a request for more industry-wide training with entertainers and other strip club staff on what human trafficking (labor and sex) is, how to recognize the signs, and what tools/protocols are available to entertainers to deal with this issue.

An additional suggestion included refusing service to a customer if the customer was known to recruit or solicit entertainers into prostitution (e.g. pimps and johns).

SUMMARY: Human Trafficking

KEY FINDINGS:

- Domestic-violence involved trafficking is the most common way that this crime is connected to strip clubs
- Minors are not a present-day concern for strip clubs
- Clubs can be sites of recruitment for pimps/traffickers
- Instances of club-assisted commercial sex could qualify as sex trafficking
- Entertainers desire more training and resources to deal with this issue

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS:

- More industry-wide training with entertainers and staff on human trafficking
- Refusing service to a customer who was known to recruit entertainers into prostitution

Conclusion of Findings

Our findings suggest that there are significant concerns about the workplace experiences of entertainers in strip clubs. Most, but not all, of the entertainers who participated in our study chose to work in strip clubs and enjoyed aspects of the work. However, the high rates of unwanted touching, groping, sexual assault, and pressure to engage in commercial sex trading were frequently cited as problems for entertainers. Further, participants in our study also reported significant amounts of verbal harassment and derogatory language.

Many of the safety concerns stem from several intertwined workplace practices. First, **entertainers pay a significant portion of their earnings back to the club in the form of house fees, tips, and fines.** This pushes more entertainers to work in VIP spaces where they can make more money. The club management also pushes more work in VIP spaces because it makes more money for the club. However, these spaces seem to present a much higher risk for sexual violence and coercion. They are secluded, private and often lack appropriate security. Customers expect more physical contact, rubbing, and grinding, sometimes to the point of ejaculation, because they are paying more money. Some clubs encourage a blurred line about enforcement of rules and what customers can expect due to price setting and general implications.

Some of our research participants have worked in the industry for many years and they report that **the industry has shifted to an increased market share of VIP experiences over the last decade, with stage performance being more about advertising or marketing for VIP.** Academic research about the strip club industry internationally has identified a similar market trend.⁹

Managers, bouncers and security have a clear role in shaping the VIP experience. They set the tone, expectations, and policies for customers about what types of behavior is acceptable in VIP spaces, and the club as a whole. Managers and bouncers decide whether a customer will or will not be removed from the club or reprimanded for specific behaviors. Some clubs have clearer behavior standards than others. This creates expectations among some customers in specific clubs where they start to request and even demand more sexual contact as part of a VIP experience. Thus, **the business operational structures of the club related to pricing, entertainers' pay-outs, and VIP spaces interplay as a powerful push factor to do more sexual services for less money.**

This study is premised on the notion that entertainers are experts about their workplace and understand what they need to stay safe and healthy. Here we explored workplace safety concerns as expressed by entertainers and industry stakeholders and their ideas for how to improve safety. The ideas presented in this report are not specific policy proposals. However, they can help shape policy directions. We strongly encourage that any proposed policy changes – whether through city ordinance, licensing, or Minnesota Statute – should engage entertainers in crafting and vetting. There are many potential pitfalls and problems with regulation and licensing of adult entertainment establishments that could inadvertently harm entertainers and other workers. Entertainers describe their work in strip clubs as a vital source of legal income. Thus, care should be taken to not cause entertainers to lose work and income.

⁹Sanders and Hardy (2012).

Bios

Team Bios

Lauren Martin PhD is the Director of Research at the University of Minnesota's Urban Research Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC), as well as affiliated faculty at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs. Lauren holds a PhD in Anthropology from the New School for Social Research in New York City. She was the recipient of the University of Minnesota, President's Engaged Scholar award in 2016.

Christina Melander, MSW, is a Research Fellow at the University of Minnesota's Urban Research Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC). Christina holds a Masters' of Social Work from the University of Minnesota, and a Bachelor's in Sociology from The University of Chicago.

Natalie Taber, MA, is an MSW student in Clinical Mental Health at the University of Minnesota and a recipient of the Kente Circle Clinical Fellowship. Natalie holds a Master's in Philosophy from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

Cheyenne Syvertson is a MSW candidate at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work. She is a recipient of the Sharon L. Doherty Leadership Award for her volunteerism on women's issues. Upon completing her graduate program, Cheyenne will pursue an advanced clinical license practicing psychotherapy.

Community Advisory Group Bios

Tawnya "Sweetpea" Konobeck is a locally-based, internationally-renowned entertainer with her Bachelor's in Urban Education, and certifications in personal training and therapeutic lifestyle coaching. She's a multi-award winning burlesque performer, event producer, and community organizer. When not putting on shows or taking off her clothes, Sweetpea teaches dance and fitness classes.

Artika Roller has served as a Program Director at the Women's Advocates and the PRIDE (Promoting Recovery, Independence, Dignity, and Equality) Program. She is a graduate of the Executive Leadership Institute at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor School of Business and School of Social Work. Ms. Roller has over fifteen years of non-profit experience and participated in legislative advocacy for the Minnesota Safe Harbor legislation. She is a current MSW candidate at the University of Minnesota.

Angela Callais is the co-owner of Mama Luna Care offering holistic birth and postpartum services, and a widely-sought out public speaker and educator on pleasure-based sexuality. Angela has been a long-time advocate with people involved in sex trading. Angela also has a Bachelor's degree in Human Sexuality and is currently completing her MSW degree and certifications to become a Sex Therapist.

Katie Fritz Fogel, MPH, is a Research Associate with Rainbow Research, where she works on gender-based violence, participatory evaluations, and action research projects for community change and

equity. Katie has more than five years' experience providing direct service and program oversight in youth programming, as well as conducted applied research around sexual exploitation.

CeMarr Peterson is the Project Live Out Loud Program Manager at The Link, where she manages a LGBTQ homeless youth housing program. CeMarr has over five years of experience working with victim/survivors of sexual exploitation. CeMarr's expertise working with at-risk populations, especially LGBTQ youth, enable her to develop strategies for reaching this population, as well as for providing advocacy that is specialized, relevant, and culturally-specific. She is working on her Bachelor's degree in Computer Forensics at Metro State University.

Glossary of Terminology

Language can be contentious and loaded. For this report, these definitions explain some of the common terminology that we use:

Entertainer: Any person who provides entertainment through erotic dancing, exotic dancing, stripping, strip tease, or go-go dancing.

Sex Worker: A broad umbrella term for anyone who provides sexual services for monetary gain. Sex workers can include escort services, phone sex, sensual massage, pornography, and stripping. In this research, many entertainers self-defined as sex workers, even though they did not trade sex. As one entertainer put it, "I provide sexy for sale versus sex for sale."

Customer: Any person who patronizes a strip club, such as paying an entrance fee, paying for lap dances, VIP experiences, or watching sexual performances on the stage. In the context of strip clubs, the vast majority of customers are men-identified persons.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation: The unfair or unequal treatment or abuse of those involved in commercial sex for the gain or benefit of another.

Human Trafficking: The most widely understood definition of human trafficking is from the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000). This Federal definition creates an umbrella framework for sex trafficking and labor trafficking. This definition is: the recruitment, transportation, harboring, obtaining, or maintaining of a person through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purposes of commercial sex, force labor, debt bondage, or the removal of organs.¹⁰

Sex Trafficking: In lay terms, sex trafficking is the facilitation of prostitution by a third party using force, fraud, coercion, or any other means; or profiting from the facilitation of prostitution by a third party.¹¹

Labor Trafficking: In lay terms, labor trafficking is the facilitation of forced labor, debt bondage, the removal of organs, or slavery-like practices by a third party using force, fraud, coercion, or any other means; or profiting from the facilitation of these actions.¹²

Lap dance: Previous research has defined lap dances, yet we know that these performances change and shift across time, space, and culture. According to our interview participants, a lap dance consists of a sexualized performance typically of one entertainer for one customer. These dances last for approximately ten minutes, or the duration of a three-song set. Lap dances occur across a spectrum of

¹⁰ Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000, reauthorized in 2013). Accessed March 12, 2017 from <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/61124.htm>

¹¹ Minnesota Statute 609.321, Subdivision 7a. Sex trafficking. "Sex trafficking" means: (1) receiving, recruiting, enticing, harboring, providing, or obtaining by any means an individual to aid in the prostitution of the individual; or (2) receiving profit or anything of value, knowing or having reason to know it is derived from an act described in clause (1).

¹² Minnesota Statute 609.282, Subdivision 5. Labor trafficking. "Labor trafficking" means: (1) the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, enticement, provision, obtaining, or receipt of a person by any means, for the purpose of: (i) debt bondage or forced labor or services; (ii) slavery or practices similar to slavery; or (iii) the removal of organs through the use of coercion or intimidation; or (2) receiving profit or anything of value, knowing or having reason to know it is derived from an act described in clause (1).

body contact, sometimes with no body touching, to gentle brushing of one body on the other, to deep rubbing of one's genitals over the clothed genitals of the customer. Lap dances have multiple variations, such as couch dances, table dances, and bed dances, all referring to the location in a club where the dance takes place.

Adult entertainment establishment: As we use it in this report, an adult entertainment establishment is a business that is open to adults and hosts live, nude or semi-nude performances by entertainers (e.g. strippers, dancers). The City of Minneapolis has a more nuanced definition for “adult entertainment center,” as is established through the Minneapolis City Ordinance.¹³

Go-go dancing: As our participants described it, go-go dancing in Minneapolis is a type of live semi-nude dance performance that can mimic or copy components of stripping, such as lap dances and other sexualized dance moves. Typically go-go dancing involves colorful and playful costumes. This form of performance may or may not be tipped-based, and is most associated with night clubs, especially LGBTQ performance spaces.

¹³ Minneapolis Code Chapter 549 Section IV