

OBJECT

Challenging Objectification

Personal account of working in lap dancing clubs – ‘Sarah’*

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* Please note that ‘Sarah’ is a pseudonym

mens’ attitudes...

I used to tell punters I was doing a degree in Russian and they’d be visually intimidated and would clam up. They’d want a bimbo who’d be subordinate to them. I’d tell them I didn’t - I’d say I’d work in Tesco. A degree was like pouring cold water over their privates. I learnt from that mistake.

wages...

I don’t know any where you get paid a wage. It varies but you have to pay what’s called a house fee. You pay club £10 up to £80 for being there. That’s not for doing anything. You give them that up front. Then they take a percentage of what you earn. It varies depending on what you earn. 10% if you don’t do very well, or 25% if you have a good night. If the managers see you having a good night, they bump up the commission level. Lots of people would lie so they wouldn’t have to pay. [there are] lots of hidden costs they don’t tell you about.

working conditions...

You have to get there and get ready for half seven, then you’re there until two or three in the morning. It starts getting busy at 10.30pm. So three to four hours of working. Early on

there's a lot of sitting around in the club. They expect you to be there early so it looks like there's glamorous women. You have to buy your own drinks but can also accept from the clients.

There's no way of regulating the numbers of girls. Usually 20 plus per night. Thursday and Fridays, there seemed to be no upper limit, so always more girls than customers. Always a competition to see who could get to the customers first, which wasn't very nice. Owners loved the fact customers would see dozens of girls. They liked the fact the customers would be dazzled with the choice. Even if someone didn't earn during the night, they were still giving the club £80. They weren't concerned people went away having not earned anything. I did about three to five nights a week. I used to keep it to about three. It was all I could do.

'spending patterns'...

You could tell if someone was going to spend a lot of money. Students would come in and you'd know they'd spend nothing. Students would be given a wide berth. If anyone came in dressed like they worked in the City you'd pounce on them. A suit was a symbol that the person was a good bet. You'd look out for the type of watch or shoes they were wearing. The performers who'd been in it a long time would be really attuned to jewellery. If someone was dressed more casually, I'd give them a wide berth. You'd feel bad, but it's all about the money. I became quite money orientated. There's a real mix of clients. There would be lots of corporate nights out. Also young men on trips up to London, stag nights and students who'd stumbled in. There were a few students a week. It didn't make up a large percentage.

links to the corporate sector...

Vouchers or tokens are given in exchange for dances. Companies send huge groups of employees to the clubs. Every day it happened. It'd be part of expenses. The employees seemed to be old hands. At the end of a big brainstorming day, they'd head down to Secrets. They'd be bought vouchers by their bosses. They give you a token and then the club gives you the money at the end of the night. There were different values for different tokens. It wasn't as lucrative as getting cash. They were taking quite a big cut of the tokens. They were charging the customers more and commission from the dancers. So the club got more out of it. They'd encourage people to use tokens so the girls couldn't hide the cash. I'd have a sinking feeling if I was given a token. I'd be giving half away. They're just plastic discs with pics of girls on them.

interactions within the clubs...

Some of the punters in groups would be pervy. People would avoid men who'd come in on own. They were lonely and wanted company they'd be hard work. They'd try things on. Far less than I'd imagined when I started doing the job.

Even the men who regularly went in would make excuses. They'd say 'I wouldn't normally go to places like this. They'd be apologetic.' They'd say I'm meeting friends in town later and I've come in here for company. You'd think why not go to the pub then? People used to make things up a lot of the time. A lot of people would say they were doctors. People were blatantly making up high-flying jobs. They'd try to impress. They'd make up a story about who they were and what they did. They'd assume a different identity. They'd make up an entire different persona. Doctors were common, a lot would say they were in banking but would be very vague. A lot of people said they were plastic surgeons. They were creative with the truth. Lots would say they were airline pilots. They wanted to impress. They never admitted they'd lied.

They'd ask to meet you outside the club. Nine times out of ten they'd ask for phone number or to meet you. The ones that didn't still wanted to. Almost all would try something. They wanted more than the brief period of contact. They wanted to believe you'd put a sign up saying you'd chosen them. They thought they couldn't continue it outside. There was a no phone numbers policy, but in reality a lot of people did. Some would shove business card into your hand. Out of obligation I'd take the cards.

club requirements...

They tell you they'll give you training but it's trial and error. Have to wear special costumes and lots and lots of make up. It's not glamorous. It's out of the pages of a men's mag.

You'd have to wear the clothing they'd tell you to wear and that comes out of your earnings. They'd tell you to buy a dress from their own range and that would come out of your wages. As would shoes. They'd supply all this but you'd pay for it. They have people who come in regularly who design the clothes and earn money from that. Retailers who specialise in those outfits come into the club and you're expected to buy. Some companies design specifically for dancers. It was weird.

They'd put a sign up saying a company was coming. You had to buy several different outfits. The first dress I bought cost £75 for the dress. I'd have never worn it anywhere else. I'd say to begin with you'd spend £200 on shoes and dresses. You could wear your own stuff, some would make their own to save money and get them passed. You couldn't just walk into top shop and find something you could wear. They'd be made of lycra with splits up the side. Not something you'd wear on your average Saturday night out. There was a big mark up. I spent loads on dresses. Upwards of £400 quid on that sort of thing. I won't be able to use those things ever again.

relations with other performers...

There's a place where everyone gets ready. There's a bit of camaraderie, certain groups stick together. But there were very few genuine friendships because it's so competitive.

People had dibs on certain areas unofficially. The people who'd been there longest would congregate around the VIP area and expected you to steer clear. Not much would happen while on the floor but there'd be slanging matches later on. You'd be made to know you shouldn't be doing that.

background of other performers

It's too broad to be general about. There's such a cross section. There are people with PhDs, people who've never had a job before who wanted to raise their kids. There was a Hungarian girl who was a doctor in her home country. You don't go into private lives too much. Most of the time, very closed. It was the only job she could do.

the 'don't touch' rule...

The one thing the bouncers are good at is to stop clients doing that. Because they'd lose their licence. That was a rule that was quite strictly adhered to. There's a rule regarding distance. You're allowed to get closer than they say in the contract. It's supposed to be three feet, which is quite a lot. That is broken instantly.

You have a code of conduct but it's not adhered to too much. It's just to placate the local authorities. We weren't even encouraged to read it. You just sign it quickly. I was worried about signing it – but it became apparent it was all nonsense.

addictions

Performers become addicted to the money. They'd like getting extra money and spending it on designer clothes. There were a few people who were regularly taking drugs, but that might have been a result of working there. A lot of clients bring drugs into the clubs. People get drugs off clients. I did used to worry clients would spike my drink, but the orders were taken at the table by a waiter. They did that because of spiking concerns. You could always see it was coming from the bar.

body image pressure

There were lots of eating disorders. Nobody got to the stage where they were very skinny, but some people wouldn't eat for two days because they knew they were coming to work. They'd not eat so would feel the impact of the booze more. We had to buy own

drinks so people thought less ate the less drinks they'd get drunk quicker.

empowering?

I don't think anyone feels empowered. Ideas about it are very different. Some were so lacking in self esteem. People did it because they wanted to feel attractive to men. Others were not affected by it. A lot of people would drink a lot to get through it. The alcohol is so expensive it kept me from spending too much money. Girls would sneak in little bottles and top up their orange juice. Or people would turn up for work drunk. 90% were drunk by the end of the night. So they were more vulnerable.

There's no hierarchy. You can't be promoted. It's for quick money .There's no holiday or sickness pay. Shifts are booked on a weekly basis. If you're ill you can't work. There's no pension! Some of the people who did well had accountants and sorted out own pension schemes but on the whole people weren't very well organized. I didn't declare and very few people I knew did. Most people it was just cash in hand. Didn't declare they were working and club didn't enforce.

outside the club...

I'm surprised it hasn't affected me. I was cynical about men in general for a while after. So felt negative about men for a while. Any man I meet could be a client. But that diminished naturally. I had male friends and realised they weren't the same ilk. But I think you could come away very jaded and cynical. I think a lot of girls did it because they hated men. They were saying 'I'm going to get as much as I can out of them.'