



OPINION

## “Closing down strip clubs only drives women into more precarious work”

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In condemning stripping as an act of “violence against women”, ministers in Holyrood have failed to consider the perilous impact this could have on women working in Scotland, says

Megan Wallace



By *Megan Wallace*

Is it ever in someone’s best interests for their livelihood to be stripped away?

The answer is rarely a resounding “yes”. However, ministers in Holyrood, Scotland, may well be doing just that to Scottish strippers – in a misguided bid for gender equality.

In July, laws were approved by the Scottish government that could lead to the closure of strip clubs across the country. As part of a licensing framework, these measures grant councils the power to determine the maximum number of strip clubs in their area, which could be set at zero. Although the laws have not yet been implemented, dancers and club owners are concerned about impending closures, particularly as pre-existing strip clubs are offered no protection.

Defending their decision, the Scottish government has stated that they are not condemning strip clubs, but, rather, "allow[ing] local licensing authorities to decide what is right for their area". Yet, the laws form part of a governmental strategy that classifies stripping and lap dancing as "violence against women and girls," alongside sexual abuse and workplace sexual harassment.

Putting aside the paternalistic notion that measures such as these "protect" strippers, little thought has been given to the women who will be hit hardest by the regulations. Unsure of their future, aware that local councils could be closing in on their source of income, I spoke to women working in the industry about their opinion of these controversial measures.

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Throughout our discussions, it became clear that women in the industry felt that their voices were not being listened to. Jane\*, 25, who has worked in various strip clubs in Edinburgh, Glasgow and the North of England for three years, is sceptical of the government's classification of her job as a form of gender-based violence. "It is beyond obvious to me that this is just a moral condemnation masked as concern for dancers and strip clubs," she said. To her mind, the conversation around sex work needs to change, and the welfare of dancers needs to become a priority: "I've yet to hear from any dancers or managers that they've been approached with a reasonable enquiry about the health, safety or livelihood of any of us (in and outside of work)."

Emily\*, 28, who has been working in strip clubs across Glasgow for the past two years, felt that the women's groups supporting the regulations needed to rethink their perception of women in the industry. "There are so many misconceptions about dancing/stripping," she said. "Many of these have been converted into theoretical generalisations, portraying the female stripper as a weak, powerless figure who has found no other option but to sell her body and soul to please men. It is easy to see how focusing on

these generalisations has lead these ill-informed 'heroic' activists to protest strip clubs."

When we spoke to a representative from the East London Strippers' Collective about developments up north, they echoed Jane and Emily's concerns. "What the Scottish government is proposing is a moralistic and ill-judged response to a labour-conditions issue. Workers who have no employment protections or workers' rights will be exploited in any industry regardless of their gender. The problem here is not women taking off their clothes for money – the problem is workers having no legal protections from unscrupulous workplace practices.

"We don't see the government proposing to close down the nail-salon industry or the food industry if there are workers found to be mistreated or exploited. If they want to end violence against women, the strip-club industry needs to be regulated under employment law, not shut down. Closing clubs only drives women out of work, into more precarious work, into more coercive conditions without the safety of a licensed premises. Criminalising the sex industry doesn't save anyone."

*@\_go\_fish*

*\*Names have been changed*

Photo: Alamy