

When looking at Naomi's current life situation, a 23 year old female without a college education facing severely limited work options, it might appear that strip club work provides an attractive alternative to a minimum wage job. Based on the portrayals of strip clubs that are seen in films and music videos, many understand stripping to be a easy way to make a large amounts of money with few negative consequences. We see HBO documentaries featuring women in the sex industry who praise the flexibility of working in a strip club, the amount of money they make, and the feelings of empowerment they experience from being paid to be lusted after.

If strip clubs did, in fact, provide a positive work environment for women and allowed them agency over their working conditions, then choosing to do this work could be a viable job option for Naomi. Yet for this to be true, we must assume the following: that most women working in strip clubs make large sums of money; that most of the money made in a strip club is from actual dancing; that Naomi will be able to have flexibility and negotiate her shifts and hours; and that the men who attend the club will be respectful and nonviolent.

However, extensive research about the stripping industry and personal narrative from women who have worked at strip clubs challenges these presumptions.

Making Money

One of the biggest misconceptions about strip clubs, and one that Naomi's scenario reinforces, is that they offer women the opportunity to make large sums of money. While it is true that some women do make substantial amounts of money during their time stripping, this is not necessarily the norm. Women in strip clubs are hired as independent contractors rather than employees. Most are not paid a wage and their income is dependent on their compliance to customers' demands in order to earn tips.

Women must also pay fees to work at clubs. These can include: providing money from their tips to give to bouncers and disc jockeys, meeting nightly monetary quotas, and fines imposed by club management. Dancers can be fined \$1 per minute for being late and as much as \$100 for calling in sick. They may be charged fines for "talking back" to customers or staff, touching stage mirrors, using baby oil on stage, being late on stage, dancing with their back to a customer, or being touched by a customer.

Where Money Is Made

Additionally, Naomi's understanding of the type of work done in strip clubs is a typical misconception. I have worked with survivors of the sex trade for the past five years. Many of the women I advocate for started working in strip clubs, and entered into prostitution soon after. As explained by Olivia Howard, a survivor of prostitution and an activist against sexual exploitation:

"When you get to the strip club to work you think you are actually hired as a dancer. But within two days you find out that the real money is

being made by the number and types of drinks you sell. To move the guys from cocktails to Champaign bottles, the most expensive drink, means you have to go to the back room where prostitution acts occur. It only took me two weeks to figure this out. At the first club I worked at the club owner set up a competition between the girls, and a bonus was given to those who sold the most expensive drinks. About 95% of women at the club eventually prostituted in the back room. Most of the time, the actual dancing on the stage and the loud music is a decoy, a distraction, from the prostitution occurring in the back.”¹

Club managers or owners often encourage drug and alcohol use in order to keep the women dependent on stripping, further, to ease them into prostitution. Though stripping may appear to be an easy way to make money, the dynamics of strip clubs are often much more complicated and the goal of management is for the owners, not the dancers, to walk away with the biggest profits.

Dictating Working Conditions

An appealing aspect of working at a strip club for Naomi is the opportunity to create her own hours and shift times. For her, a strip club is an environment where she can dictate her working conditions and schedule.

Though strip club work can offer some flexibility, this is not standard operating procedure. An example can be seen in the film “Live Nude Girls Unite”, where the women working at the Lusty Lady strip club talk about the challenges of taking days off or changing shifts. The club imposed strict rules about the racial and body-type make-up of the women dancing which had to remain consistent. Therefore, if you are an African American woman who wants a day off, you have to find an African American woman with your similar body type to cover your shift. This can prove incredibly burdensome.²

Additionally, women in strip clubs often talk about how their relationship with the club can become all consuming. As Olivia explains:

“For the first time in my life I felt that I was in control of my life. I had money, I could shop when I got ready, stay any place I wanted to, get an apartment here or there. You think, it is a sense of independence, but as it continues, it becomes a total dependent way of life.”³

Being a dancer interferes with living a normal life. The long and late hours, tiredness, alcohol consumption, and out-of-town bookings make it difficult to have productive lives outside of the club.

Substance Use

¹ Olivia Howard, interview by author, Chicago, Illinois, 6 January 2009.

² *Live Nude Girls Unite!*, DVD, directed by Vicki Funari and Julia Query (2000; San Fransico, CA: First Run Features, 2000).

³ Jody Raphael, *Listening to Olivia: Violence, Poverty, and Prostitution* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 54.

Due to the verbal and physical harassment that are normal aspects of most strip clubs, women who strip often turn to substances as a way to disassociate from their experience. As Olivia states:

“It is a myth that any woman can get up there and do that and not have something in her. It doesn’t have to be hard-core drugs, but you have to take something to help you deal with it.”⁴

Many women start self medicating with alcohol, and can transition to harder drugs easily. Some club owners actually provide drugs and alcohol as a way to have the dancers become more dependent on the club and more willing to perform sex acts in the Champagne Rooms.

Male Patrons of Strip Clubs

Often, women who work in strip clubs experience both physical and verbal abuse. Many dancers report that customers spit on them, flick them with cigarette butts, and pelt them with ice, trash, condoms, or bottles and cans. Strip club patrons also frequently grab dancer’s breasts, buttocks, and genitals. Stories are common of patrons attempting and succeeding in penetrating strippers vaginally and anally with their fingers, dollar bills, bottles, and cell phones. Additionally, most clubs have private VIP rooms where dancers are alone with patrons. Behind these closed doors, abuse is common.

Another common experience that women face is being stalked. Customers follow women home, harass them at the clubs, and visit nightly in a manner that is intimidating. And even when women complain, management still expects them to greet and service these men if the customer is one of the club’s big spenders.⁵

Though most physical wounds eventually heal, verbal abuse can leave emotional scars and psychological damage for a lifetime. One variable that Naomi may not be considering is what it will be like to be called derogatory names on a daily basis by customers, owners, managers, and staff. And even when physical and verbal abuses do not occur, there is an emotional impact of being fondled and touched consistently. Olivia explains:

“Within thirty days the awful reality sets in. There are 50,000 hands touching me, you begin to feel dirty, the guys are smelly, they are usually drunk. Some of them sit and drink so much until they are physically sick. Even talking about it now, I can still smell them. That is the most disgusting part. They were animals.”⁶

The Role of Stripping In a Rape Culture

Even though Naomi states that she is not bothered by being objectified when stripping, there are broader implications for participating in an industry that reinforces notions of male entitlement to women’s sexuality. Rape and sexual

⁴ Raphael, 54.

⁵ Olivia Howard, interview by author, Chicago, Illinois, 6 January 2009.

⁶ Raphael, 53.

assault impact the lives of women and girls at alarming rates. In Illinois alone, it is estimated that there are at least 670,000 women who have experienced *forcible rapes* sometime in their lifetime, and those are only reported sexual assaults.⁷ Female bodies are continually commodified and used to sell every type of product and service imaginable; there are even restaurants where you can eat food off of the body of a model.

At the same time that women's bodies are undergoing increased commodification, constructs of masculinity continue to incorporate messages that real men are sexually dominant and have continual sexual access to women.

And so, a "rape culture" is created, where sexual violence against women is normalized and even condoned. One of the many harms of living in a "rape culture" is that women's bodies are not viewed as their own. Strip clubs further this by putting a price tag on women's sexuality, reinforcing the message that sexual access to women is a male entitlement.

Continuum of Exploitation: The Commercial Sex Trade Industry

Participating in the sex trade industry is not a moral, issue but an issue of social justice. Women who enter prostitution, phone sex, pornography, or other forms of the sex trade do so for very similar reasons. These include a lack of viable work options, feeding a substance addiction, attaining survival needs like food or shelter, or escaping a domestic violence situation. Most women enter the sex trade as a last resort, not a first choice. Therefore, if we are going to use the word "morality" in this discussion, the more relevant question would be whether it is moral for men to patronize the sex trade, particularly when many of them know the negative life circumstances that draw women to prostitution. A man who purchases sex explained:

"I would imagine that prostitutes have had some sort of psychological and/or physical trauma as a child. Women who are prone to that sort of lifestyle are trying to repeat the cycles they encounter. Women who have been sexually molested."⁸

How Men View Women in the Sex Trade Industry

My organization, the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, worked in partnership with Prostitution Research and Education to interview 113 men who purchase sex. Many of our questions centered on how the men viewed women in the sex trade. Some men viewed women as objects, instead of human beings:

"I usually call for a girl, you know, like a pizza."⁹

⁷ Illinois General Assembly, House Resolution 1177, (2008), 2.

⁸ Rachel Durchslag and Samir Goswami. Deconstructing the Demand for Prostitution: Preliminary Insights from Interviews with Chicago Men Who Purchase Sex. *Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation Independent Research* (May 2008): 20.

⁹ Durchslag and Goswami, 16.

Other men felt that women in prostitution actually have a different emotional make-up from other women.

“They just have to have really low self-esteem and be numb on the inside, and be able to turn their emotions on and off.”¹⁰

One of Naomi’s questions is if engaging in the sex trade industry might make her less desirable to a potential mate. Based on the answers provided by our interviewees, there is a good likelihood that men will not want to be romantically involved with Naomi if they know about her sex trade involvement.

“You can’t transfer a ho to a housewife.”¹¹

We asked men a variety of questions to further assess their attitudes about women in prostitution. Below is an example of how men in our study feel about having a close relationship with someone in the sex trade:

- 85% would never marry a women who had been in prostitution.
- 93% would not want their daughter to become a prostitute.
- 76% would not want their daughter to work in a strip club.
- 70% wouldn’t marry someone who had sex for money.¹²

Supply And Demand

We hold a double standard of accountability when it comes to understanding the sex trade industry. In many ways, our culture views purchasing sex as a male right. When I first decided to do research on the demand side of the sex trade, one of the motivating factors was the lack of research on the subject. There was an abundance of research investigating why women sell sex, but the number of studies about men purchasing sex in the United States was almost nonexistent. I believe one of the reasons that we do not analyze why men purchase sex is because we do not view it as something abnormal.

For some families, purchasing sex is seen as a right of passage. In our study, 17% of the men first purchased sex with a relative present. The experience was seen as coming into manhood.

“Like here is your first sip of beer, here is your first hooker.”¹³

Others viewed buying sex as a normative part of male behavior. These men viewed prostitution as something natural and even beneficial to individuals and society. 95% felt that prostitution would always exist and 63% felt that most men go to prostitutes once in a while. 52% thought that it would be fine if their son visited a brothel.

What is the Solution?

¹⁰ Durchslag and Goswami, 17.

¹¹ Durchslag and Goswami, 19.

¹² Durchslag and Goswami, 1-33.

¹³ Durchslag and Goswami, 14.

There are countless women who are in similar situations to Naomi. The question should not be whether or not they should enter the commercial sex trade; the question is why there are such limited options for women to make a living wage?

If we want real solutions, we need to focus our advocacy efforts on ensuring viable economic opportunities for women, ensuring access to substance abuse counseling and safe shelters for women, preventing childhood sexual abuse, and confronting institutions that normalize sexual violence and sexual exploitation. As a man in our study indicated:

“Prostitution would stop if we could stop molestation, economics, forcing children into sex, and domination by men.”¹⁴

Equally as important, we need to prevent men from patronizing the sex trade and intervene with those currently purchasing sex. As long as there is a demand to purchase sex, vulnerable individuals will continue to be recruited and harmed in systems of sexual exploitation. When asking those who purchase sex what the solution to this problem is, he aptly responded:

“If there were no customers, there would be no prostitution.”¹⁵

Works Cited:

Durchslag, Rachel and Samir Goswami. “Deconstructing the Demand for Prostitution: Preliminary Insights from Interviews with Men Who Purchase Sex.” *Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation Independent Research* (May 2008): 1-33.

Howard, Olivia. Interview by author. Chicago, Illinois, 6 January 2009.

Illinois General Assembly, House Resolution 1177, (2008), 2.

Live Nude Girls Unite! DVD. Directed by Vicki Funari and Julia Query. 2000; San Francisco, CA: First Run Features. 2000.

¹⁴ Durchslag and Goswami, 24,

¹⁵ Durchslag and Goswami, 24.

Raphael, Jody. *Listening to Olivia: Violence, Poverty, and Prostitution*. Boston:
Northeastern University Press, 2004.