

# Taking Back the Night? Gender and the Contestation of Sexual Entertainment in England and Wales

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## Abstract

Despite important moves towards gender equality, the experience of the night-time city remains profoundly different for women and men. The visibility of self-styled ‘gentleman’s clubs’ where female dancers perform for a predominantly male clientele has been taken as prime evidence of this persistent inequity. Opposition to such clubs has hence been vocal, with the result that many local authorities in England and Wales have moved to ban clubs within their jurisdiction utilising the powers of the *Policing and Crime Act, 2009*. This paper explores the arguments that have persuaded policy-makers to refuse licences for such venues, particularly the idea that sexual entertainment causes specific harms to women. The paper does not question the veracity of such arguments, but instead explores why sexual entertainment venues have become a target of feminist campaigning, situating this opposition in the context of long-standing debates about the vulnerability of women in the night-time city.

**Keywords:** Night-time, sex industry, gender equality, crime, UK

## Introduction

Spaces where nudity is presented as ‘adult entertainment’ have long aroused suspicion as spaces associated with multiple forms of ‘vice’ and criminality (Hubbard, 2011). Burlesque theatres, sex cinemas and strip-tease clubs have hence often enjoyed only a precarious existence in the city, pushed from the centre towards ‘municipal areas of ill repute’ where they exist out of sight of polite society (Liepe-Levison, 2002, p. 56). In this context, the recent emergence of highly visible and prominently advertised

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lap-dancing clubs at the heart of many British cities is worthy of note. Distancing themselves from allegations of sleaze and criminality, venues typically purport to offer entertainment that is harmless, tasteful and well-managed, with many styling themselves as upmarket ‘gentleman’s clubs’ (Colosi, 2010). Displays of nudity in such premises typically fall outside the boundaries of obscenity law and hence escape censorship controls, meaning that such clubs have generally been able to open with a waiver to a general alcohol licence.

In a period when many licensed premises have been struggling to survive, diversifying into lap-dancing has been a relatively common strategy: in Britain, dedicated lap-dancing clubs first appeared in the mid 1990s, but numbered over 350 just 10 years later (Colosi, 2010). From some perspectives (especially city leaders keen to attract tourist investment and conference tourism), lap-dancing clubs have added to the vitality and vibrancy of contemporary night life: however, they have also been accused by feminist groups of perpetuating immorality and promoting sexism (see Egan and Frank, 2005; Hubbard, 2009). This paper accordingly explores sexual entertainment venues (SEVs) as contested spaces, focusing on the ways they have been targeted by campaigners seeking to challenge sexism in the city. Most notable here have been the protests against lap-dancing venues orchestrated by the UK-based feminist groups Object (which campaigns against the sexual objectification of women) and the Fawcett Society (which promotes gendered equality). While the liberal feminist aim of promoting gendered equality does not always sit easily with the goal of ending gendered oppression (see Cornell, 1998), it is evident that lap-dancing has become a highly significant site of feminist protest precisely because it can be seen to promote sexual inequality whilst offering poor working

conditions for women (see Bindel, 2004; Jeffreys, 2008).

Irrespective of the arguments of those who have been more positive about the empowering potential of lap-dancing (for example, Ross, 2000; Colosi, 2010; Magnanti, 2012), the collaborative actions of these feminist campaign groups—which were supported by some MPs, local authorities and residents living near lap-dancing venues—led to clauses being added to section 27 of the *Policing and Crime Act 2009* (see Hubbard, 2009). This Act identified such clubs as a distinct form of night life needing to be controlled differently from other licensed premises. Where local authorities adopt this legislation, they can refuse a licence for any venue providing “live performance or live display of nudity ... provided solely, or principally for sexually stimulating any member of an audience” if the number of such venues “equals or exceeds that which a local authority considers appropriate” (para. 2A, Schedule 3, *Policing and Crime Act 2009*). Given that a local authority may determine the permitted number of clubs in a locality is zero, this provides local authorities complete discretion to refuse a licence should they wish (Kolvin, 2010).

While the *Policing and Crime Act 2009* acknowledged the widespread anxiety about lap-dancing clubs, it stopped short of banning them, leaving the ultimate decision about their suitability to local authorities. While the Act is not compulsory, the vast majority of local authorities have decided to adopt the provisions, with research by Poppleston Allen (2011) revealing that 89 per cent of local authorities had adopted the legislation by November 2011, including some which have no lap-dancing clubs within their jurisdiction. Some (including Hackney, Haringey, Mid Sussex, Richmond, Wellingborough, Whitley Bay and Winchester) have drawn up policies

specifying that new lap-dancing clubs are inappropriate anywhere within their jurisdiction, effecting a 'nil limit'. However, most have stated that each application for a lap-dancing club will be considered on its merits and in the light of local objections (an approach considered legally defensible given the prospect of judicial review).

Noting this increased ability of local authorities to respond to opposition to lap-dancing clubs, this paper accordingly focuses on the objections raised to SEV licence applications since the new legislation was introduced in April 2010. Given that there was a 12-month 'transitional period' in which existing clubs were allowed to continue trade without the new licence, this paper considers the first year in which local authorities granted or refused SEV licences, drawing out the gendered dimensions of opposition to lap-dancing clubs through a discourse of analysis of the 1413 objection letters to applications made up to 1 April 2012 (see Table 1). While objections received to formal licensing applications cannot in any sense be considered as representative of public attitudes towards the emergence of lap-dancing venues, by examining the discourses alleging that such venues cause harm to women this paper seeks to highlight how lap-dancing clubs have been caught up in feminist debates about the gender inequalities that adhere to the city at night. Here, a central paradox of much feminist campaigning will be explored—namely, that women making claims to the city at night often deploy particular myths of women's vulnerability (see Carline, 2011).

## The Sexualisation of the Night-time City

The invention of night life as a specific realm of urban sociality is commonly traced

back to the great metropolitan centres of the 19th century, where experiments in lighting bequeathed opportunities to extend commerce into night-time, with particular sites—cafes, arcades, theatres, cinemas, restaurants—providing the basis of a new 'culture' of night life (Schivelbusch, 1988). However, the fact that the city at night was gendered from the outset is widely acknowledged (Wilson, 1991; Parsons, 2000; Wolff, 2006). Indeed, when discussing the origins of urban night life it is customary to begin by delimiting two paradigmatic figures—the flâneur and the prostitute. A well-worn trope in urban theory, the streetwise flâneur provides some of the most vivid representations of the modernising city at night, moving seamlessly from the brightest thoroughfares to the dimly lit back alleys as the quintessential observer of the urban scene (Buck Morss, 1989). Yet far from typifying the experience of modernity's public places, feminist scholars have argued that the flâneur encapsulated a *male* subjective gaze that was both detached and ironically objectified, enacting a profoundly sexualised penetration of the urban sphere. In contrast, the prostitute was an object to be gazed on by the flâneur, her presence on the streets regarded as both provocative and pitiful given that the rightful place of women was assumed to be the private sphere (Hubbard, 2011).

The relationship between flâneur and prostitute—much commented on in histories of the modern city—makes the point that women were an important part of the urban scene, but were allowed to occupy the night-time city only on male terms. As a multitude of feminist geographers have subsequently demonstrated, while the night-time city has opened in various ways to women since the 19th century, the idea that women are unable to handle nightlife's "darker social and sexual secrets" (Walkowitz, 1998) represents a persistent

**Table 1.** Sexual entertainment venue licence cases, England and Wales, up to 1 April 2012

<i>Name of venue</i>	<i>Licensing authority</i>	<i>Objections received</i>	<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Date of decision</i>
Urban Tiger	Northampton	78	Approved	3-Jan-11
Stir (Filliesnights)	Epsom	2	Approved	8-Jan-11
Browns	Hackney	25	Approved	15-Feb-11
Rainbow Sports Bar	Hackney	16	Approved	15-Feb-11
White Horse	Hackney	19	Approved	15-Feb-11
Ye Olde Axe	Hackney	24	Approved	15-Feb-11
Thirst Lodge	Oxford	29	Refused	3-Mar-11
Beavers	Watford	3	Approved	14-Mar-11
Blue Diamond	Cardiff	2	Approved	5-Apr-11
Blue Velvet	Cardiff	2	Approved	5-Apr-11
Fantasy Lounge	Cardiff	1	Approved	5-Apr-11
Sugar Lounge	Reading	2	Approved	17-Apr-11
X-posed	Reading	4	Approved	17-Apr-11
Purple Lounge	Margate	1	Approved	24-May-11
Lush	East Devon	5	Approved	9-Jun-11
Candy Bar	Westminster	5	Approved	10-Jun-11
Club Sakura	Westminster	5	Approved	10-Jun-11
Heaven The Arches	Westminster	13	Approved	10-Jun-11
Stringfellows Angels	Westminster	2	Approved	10-Jun-11
Platinum Lace	Westminster	2	Approved	10-Jun-11
Revue Bar	Westminster	2	Approved	10-Jun-11
Scotch St James	Westminster	25	Approved	10-Jun-11
Shadow Lounge	Westminster	8	Approved	10-Jun-11
Sophisticats	Westminster	4	Approved	10-Jun-11
Stringfellows	Westminster	2	Approved	10-Jun-11
Sunset Strip	Westminster	2	Approved	10-Jun-11
Boulevard	Westminster	2	Approved	10-Jun-11
The Box	Westminster	2	Approved	10-Jun-11
Gaslight	Westminster	15	Approved	10-Jun-11
The Mayfair Club	Westminster	7	Approved	10-Jun-11
Pleasure Lounge	Westminster	1	Approved	10-Jun-11
The Windmill	Westminster	1	Approved	10-Jun-11
Shades	Warwick	27	Refused	14-Jun-11
Blue Room	Cheltenham	4	Approved	21-Jul-11
Angels	Leicester	1	Refused	12-Aug-11
Katz	Basildon	2	Approved	Sept 2011
Tiger Tiger	Cardiff	2	Approved	4-Sep-11
Tiffanys	Torbay	1	Approved	15-Sep-11
Medusa	Birmingham	2	Approved	21-Sep-11
Scarletts	Birmingham	3	Approved	21-Sep-11
Lace	Newcastle under Lyme	1	Approved	21-Sep-11
Saints and Sinners	Bedford	21	Refused	28-Sep-11
Baby Blue	Manchester	3	Approved	14-Oct-11
Wild Cherry	Cornwall	81	Approved	31-Oct-11
Queen Charlotte	Medway	5	Approved	15-Nov-11
LA Confidential	Ealing	6	Approved	16-Nov-11
Dazzle	Ealing	54	Refused	16-Nov-11

*(continued)*

**Table 1.** (Continued)

<i>Name of venue</i>	<i>Licensing authority</i>	<i>Objections received</i>	<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Date of decision</i>
Pandoras	South Bucks	201	Refused	28-Nov-11
Shadow Lounge	North Somerset	1	Approved	29-Nov-11
Ts	North Somerset	8	Approved	29-Nov-11
Thirst Lodge	Oxford	24	Approved	7-Dec-11
I Candy	Hyndburn	23	Approved	10-Dec-11
Bohemia	York	2	Approved	19-Dec-11
VIP Upstairs	York	2	Approved	19-Dec-11
Platinum Lace	Leicester	5	Approved	21-Dec-11
Panache	Leicester	6	Refused	21-Dec-11
Baby Platinum	Manchester	3	Approved	9-Jan-12
Long Legs	Manchester	2	Approved	9-Jan-12
Urban Tiger	Bristol	69	Approved	19-Jan-12
Lounge@30	Bristol	57	Refused	20-Jan-12
Central Chambers	Bristol	61	Approved	23-Jan-12
Piano Lounge	Richmond	88	Refused	23-Jan-12
Temptations	Bristol	57	Approved	25-Jan-12
Secrets	Hammersmith & Fulham	9	Approved	3-Feb-12
Casino Rooms	Medway	2	Approved	14-Feb-12
Some Like it Hot	Newcastle	4	Approved	15-Feb-12
Purple Door	Newcastle	1	Approved	16-Feb-12
Heaven	Colchester	1	Approved	17-Feb-12
Krystals	Chesterfield	1	Approved	20-Feb-12
Kings Club	Harrogate	6	Approved	23-Feb-12
Wildcats	Harrogate	5	Approved	23-Feb-12
Spearmint Rhino	Sheffield	56	Approved	1-Mar-12
Angels	Sandwell	1	Approved	4-Mar-12
Halos	Cornwall	74	Withdrawn	7-Mar-12
ST Lounge	East Cheshire	13	Approved	15-Mar-12
Old Northwood	Pinner	20	Approved	15-Mar-12
Shades	Warwick	76	Refused	15-Mar-12
Flying Scotsman	Islington	1	Approved	26-Mar-12
Platinum Bar	Islington	6	Approved	26-Mar-12
The Horns	Islington	3	Approved	26-Mar-12
Krystals	Wakefield	1	Approved	28-Mar-12

*Note:* this excludes applications which were licensed without objection.

myth shaping both attitudes towards women as well as to the night-time city. This idea has nevertheless been challenged, with feminist campaigners and advocates repeatedly arguing for the right of women to go about their business free from the advances of the 'ungentlemanly' (Wilson, 1991). For example, in the 1970s, varied feminist groups organised 'Take Back the

Night' marches and rallies designed to challenge the patriarchal attitudes that produced the streets at night as essentially male spaces. Since the first protest in Philadelphia in 1973, related attempts to reclaim the night spread rapidly, first across North America, but also to Belgium, France, Italy, Australia and Britain, where the 1977 Leeds' Reclaim the Night marches

were a response to the 'Yorkshire Ripper' murders and the police's advice that women should stay at home at night (Bronstein, 2011).

In many cases 'Taking Back the Night' marches targeted the emerging 'red light' districts where adult bookstores, peep shows and sex cinemas clustered (Self, 2008). Reflecting on US attempts to reclaim red light districts, Hickey (2011) suggests adult businesses were perceived to have significant impacts on the surrounding streetscape, changing its ambience and normalising retrogressive attitudes towards women which encouraged sexual harassment. Here, moral panics about the availability of pornography clearly fuelled women's anxieties, given that the pursuit of sexual pleasure by men uncoupled from the 'moral discipline' of family and religion was widely described as something that could lead to criminal acts of sexual violence (Sides, 2006; Self, 2008). For those protesting against pornography in society, the rhetoric of 'Taking Back the Night' hence became an important rallying cry that enabled connections to be drawn between the decline of particular communities as they became 'over-run' by vice and the apparent rise of (sexual) violence against women on the street: one of the initial protests in the 1970s was in the North Beach district in San Francisco, with 3000 women marching with candles and torches through streets lined with adult bookstores and sex theatres, exhorted by speaker Andrea Dworkin to destroy pornography to loosen the "claims that men made on women's lives" (Bronstein, 2011, p. 165). Hence, sex cinemas, adult bookstores, striptease clubs and (in some jurisdictions) brothels became the subject of campaigns in which interests of anti-pornography lobbies and 'neighbourhood feminists' coincided (Hickey, 2011).

While not all feminists were supportive of the action, taking back the night from pornography and 'vice' was viewed in the

1970s and 1980s as a particularly important strategy for asserting gender equality, with the gradual removal of visible vice at the heart of the city often read as a victory for feminism (Lederer, 1982). More positive readings of women's experience of night life have unquestionably emerged in the wake of such movements, with Wilson (1991), for example, writing of the varied pleasures of the city for women, noting that nightlife provides opportunities for women to escape the narrow confines of traditional assumptions about sexuality and gender and develop socialities which do not privilege male, heterosexual values. As O'Brien *et al.* (2008) describe, this has included women taking roles in the night-time economy previously reserved for the 'hyper-masculine' (such as bouncers); at the same time, some young women are using spaces of night life for forms of hedonistic drug and alcohol use more traditionally associated with young men. The visible presence of 'hen parties' in the night-time economy has also been read as a sign that women are increasingly able to use the city at night as a site of empowerment and female bonding (Roberts and Eldridge, 2007).

However, since the 'porn wars' of the 1970s, it is possible to argue that counter-vailing tendencies have come to the fore, with the 'sexualisation' of society that has gained pace since the 1990s being accused of undermining many of the victories gained by feminist campaigning in preceding decades. According to Brents and Sanders, this sexualisation possesses both social and economic dimensions, with

bodies, physicality, and sexuality as modes of commercialization in all aspects of consumerism having allowed the direct and indirect purchase of sexual services to become more visible and accessible on the high street and in public spaces' (Brents and Sanders, 2010, p. 57).



Parallelling the rise of sexual content on the Internet, it is possible to argue that sex has become more, rather than less, visible in British cities over the past two decades, whether in the form of erotic 'love' super-stores, lingerie chains or the aforementioned 'gentleman's clubs' which offer striptease entertainment (Hubbard, 2011). In this sense, a shift of commercial sex from less-visible 'sleazy' backstreets to the high street can be seen as integral to sexualisation, signalling a social acceptance of sexual entertainment and its increasing centrality within the leisure economy (Attwood, 2006). For those convinced that adult entertainment is dominated by men (Jeffreys, 2008)—a notion disputed by sex-positive feminists (see Egan and Frank, 2005)—this points to the continuing dominance of male values in spaces of night life, and the perpetuation of modes of night life in which women are put 'on display' as the object of the male gaze (Rendell, 1998).

## Opposing Lap-dancing in British Cities

The idea that cities have become increasingly sexualised provides the context in which current debates about the gendered impacts of lap-dancing clubs has unfolded. While such clubs have been depicted as sites providing opportunities for some young women to perform empowering (and sometimes profitable) identities (Colosi, 2010), opponents have suggested that lap-dancing venues represent a repository of male values, and perpetuate gendered inequalities (Bindel, 2004; Jeffreys, 2008). Indeed, when launching their campaign for the reform of lap-dancing licensing law, 'Stripping the Illusion', in 2008, Object suggested that there was a need for the government to respond more effectively to local complaints about the inappropriateness of lap-dancing

clubs, as a form of "commercial sexual exploitation", that "normalise the sexual objectification of women" and "create 'no go' areas for women" (see Object, 2008). It has also been stated that clubs have criminogenic tendencies (see Eden, 2007) and encourage forms of sexual violence: in campaigning materials, Object have highlighted the

heightened statistical link to physical, verbal and sexual assaults against women who live or work in the vicinity of strip clubs (Object, 2011, p. 2).

Thus, it is unsurprising that concerns about the gendered impacts of lap-dancing clubs have been repeatedly voiced in objections to such venues opening in the UK, made under the new licensing regime. Yet here it should be stressed that the Home Office (2011, para. 3.23) have advised local authorities that "objections should not be based on moral grounds/values", meaning that those who feel that lap-dancing is sexist are unable to cite that as a legitimate ground for licence refusal, but must instead argue that a venue is unsuitable in a given locality. This means that in letters of objection to lap-dancing venues, objections based on grounds of gendered inequality entwine with those made on environmental, safety or aesthetic grounds, with many opponents of clubs arguing that they pose a threat to community cohesion and public order, and will impact on all local residents, not just women.

This has meant that the campaigns against lap-dancing led by Object and Fawcett have not ceased, with these organisations using their existing networks and websites to encourage those opposed to lap-dancing to make reasoned arguments for licence refusal. For example, Object has made three 'toolkits' available to those opposing lap-dancing clubs: one

encouraging local authorities to adopt the new licensing powers, one encouraging them to make full use of these powers and another designed to be used by residents when opposing the licensing of a particular club. In relation to the latter, the example of a letter written by a protestor against a club (*Shades*) in Leamington Spa is provided as a model representation, alongside advice as to how the letter might be tailored in response to local contingencies. Here, two grounds for objection are emphasised—namely, the uses to which premises in the nearby vicinity are put and the character of the relevant locality. In both cases, opponents are encouraged to draw attention to the incompatibility of a lap-dancing club with other neighbouring land uses, and to emphasise the potential impact on local residents and businesses. Hence, Object note that it is appropriate to argue that

the location of important amenities in the immediate vicinity of the applicant's premises directly exposes residents and commuters to the harms and disturbance associated with the sex industry (Object, 2011, p. 2).

For example, rather than just arguing that a club is unsuitable near a bus stop, it is suggested that objectors need to describe the particular problems this might cause. For example

it is unacceptable that people, especially women, the vulnerable and minors, who wish to use the bus service are forced to wait outside a strip club and are faced with the threat of the 'patrons' who pass by on a regular basis and are invariably under a state of intoxication and arguably sexual excitement (Object, 2011, p. 3).

This noted, allegations that clubs are inappropriate near religious facilities, schools or any areas frequented by children can be

identified in the numerous objections made to the licensing or relicensing of lap-dancing clubs. In Oxford, for instance, the conversion of an existing nightclub *The Thirst Lodge* to lap-dancing club, prompted the formation of an opposition group, led by the Rev. Vaughan Roberts, who stated

We would be concerned about a lap-dancing club opening anywhere in Oxford, but all the more when it's on such a public thoroughfare and when it's next door to a building that is used every day of the week by the elderly, the homeless, and children from very young to teenage, all who attend our church during the week (*Oxford Times*, 2009, p. 3).

This invokes particular ideas that lap-dancing clubs are inappropriate near religious spaces not because they are sanctified spaces but because they are used by vulnerable populations. In this case, the club was refused a licence on the basis that it was inappropriate in the locality, with many of the 29 objection letters highlighting proximity to St Ebbe's church. In Twickenham, a club that had been open since 2003 was similarly refused a new licence on the basis that "the locality is characterised by residential streets, which include a number of family houses, and by a mix of shop serving the local community", with the Council citing that the road on which the club was located was "a busy thoroughfare attracting a wide range of people, particularly families with young children", noting that two schools, although over 500 yards from the club, were "part of the fabric of the local community" (London Borough of Richmond on Thames, 2012). As one objector argued, "the club is in such a bad location, it beggars belief [as] several hundred children walk past [the club] every day", continuing that "it has been horrible to have the club as an area of sleaze in an otherwise child-friendly area" (London Borough of Richmond on Thames,



2012, p. 139). In another objection to the same club, a parent argued that it is “quite amazing, outrageous, that this nuisance is inflicted on children”; another that they “are afraid to let their twelve year old daughter walk back from leisure facilities given the presence of drunk, loud, obscene punters” (London Borough of Richmond on Thames, 2012, p. 147). In many letters of opposition, the protection of children is hence stressed. As Hayes *et al.* (2011, p. 45) argue, in a society where children are viewed as incapable of understanding and consenting to sexual activity, the logic of removing them from sexuality altogether is unquestioned, meaning that the inverse—distancing sexuality from them—also appears logical.

As well as the safeguarding of children, the theme of vulnerability has also routinely been extended in letters of objection to encompass local women. For example, in February 2012, Sheffield City Council Licensing Committee considered 55 objections to a Spearmint Rhino gentleman’s club which regularly invoked the idea that its location in Sheffield’s Cultural Industries Quarter, and close to Hallam University, was inappropriate, with “the atmosphere and impact of the pole dancing club [*sic*]” affecting “women’s feelings of safety and well-being when visiting the many cultural and other venues’ nearby, including galleries, pubs, cafes and the Student Union (representation 8). The identification of clubs as inappropriate near facilities such as universities suggests that the boundaries of vulnerability, if not innocence, can extend to incorporate women above the age of consent, as one objection underlines:

I am a female student living in close proximity to [a lap dance club]. The bus stop directly opposite the club is my most convenient stop. ... I often arrive at that stop after 10pm ... I have often felt vulnerable walking past the entrance because of the sex establishment

nature of the place. I always ask male friends to walk with me to my house after 9.30 because I feel very vulnerable in the area ... I have been assaulted once before (the details of which I do not wish to discuss) and so I am more alert and feel vulnerable to the potential type of customer [the club] is likely to attract (representation 74, cited in Warwick District Council, 2012, p. 5/105).

The argument here that lap-dancing clubs expose women to particular risks and threaten their sense of safety is highly significant given debates about the night-time city, suggesting that the campaigns against lap-dancing clubs are motivated, in part, by a concern that such venues reproduce a series of gendered inequalities, making women feel vulnerable when in the night-time city.

## Gendered Discourses of Opposition

In the first year of licensing SEVs, there was a very uneven geography of objection to lap-dancing clubs, with some facing hostile objections from local residents while others were licensed without any representations being made. Where licences have been refused, in a couple of cases this has been because the manager does not appear a ‘fit and proper person’, but more routinely rejection is because residents have persuaded local authorities of the inappropriateness of a specific location. For example, in the case of Leicester, three clubs (*Panache*, *Angels* and *Baby Blue*) were refused licences in December 2011 because they were too close to a residential district (in the case of *Panache*), too near to a university sports centre (in the case of *Angels*) and adjacent to a major shopping centre (in the case of *Baby Blue*), with the Council accepting representations arguing that these clubs would have detrimental effects on the quality of life in

these areas (cited in Leicester City Council, 2011, Appendix B3).

Given that the grounds for licence refusal tend to state only that the granting of a licence would have been inappropriate given the nature of the locality, it is hard to evaluate what weight is given to objections which emphasise the effects of clubs on local women. Yet given that clubs are not permitted to open at times when children are routinely on the street, and noting that the environmental nuisances of noise, parking and littering associated with lap-dancing clubs are rarely equivalent to those associated with pubs or nightclubs, it can be hypothesised that licensing committee decisions are partly informed by ideas about gendered vulnerability in which lap-dancing clubs appear to cause particular harms to women. These relate to the discourses evident in objections which argue, first, that lap-dancing clubs exploit and demean the women who work within them; secondly, that clubs make the city centre at night a potential 'no go' area for women; and, finally, that such clubs normalise the sexual objectification of women, via the display of overt female sexuality.

### Harms to Performers

While many of those opposing SEVs stress that they have no moral objection to lap-dancing and emphasise the impacts of clubs on the local community, others make clear that they find it distasteful and consider it to offer a form of entertainment that is degrading for performers. Here, despite the existence of male striptease (Pilcher, 2011), objections to lap-dancing clubs are about the harm they do to female performers (noting that most clubs seeking licences advertise only female dancers). A key idea is that performing striptease represents a debasement of femininity whereby women

must perform sexually for paying customers, reducing their sense of self-worth

Lap-dancing clubs are venues where customers pay female performers to visually sexually stimulate. It is clear that as part of the commercial sex industry they have more in common with peep shows and sex cinemas than with Pizza Express or Odeon cinemas (Object, 2008, p. 8).

Objecting to the licensing of *Halos* in Newquay, one resident argued that

lap-dancing is not a good enough job for any of the vibrant, wonderful young people, who deserve to be in a community where they feel protected by their town (representation 14, Cornwall County Council, 2011, n.p.).

The idea that striptease is more demeaning than any other service-sector job is contestable, given that some dancers and ex-dancers have identified ways in which lap-dancing can be empowering or even emancipatory (see Mavin and Grandy, 2011, on 'dirty work'). Despite this, a frequent argument in objections is that owners and customers pressurise dancers into providing sexual services. For example, objecting to the relicensing of a number of clubs in Bristol, the organisation Bristol Rape Crisis identified a number of forms of harm, including

Sexual harassment of women working in the clubs from both employers and customers, with common complaints including: drunkenness, heckling during cabaret shows, trying to grab women, asking for sexual services, touching their own genitals ... Increased harassment from men leaving the club or touts outside ... Increased fear of violence & fear of travelling ... The coercion of women into prostitution (Bristol Rape Crisis, 2010, pp. 1–2).

Such assumptions of coercion have led to descriptions of club owners as “cynical, self-serving, manipulative and morally bankrupt parasites” (representation 5, East Cheshire District Council, 2012, n.p.), and clubs as ‘brothels’ (for example, representation 22, Cornwall County Council, 2011, n.p.).

The idea that performing striptease is demeaning to performers, and that the women who are employed in such venues are subject to emotional and physical harm, feeds on widely cited critiques of the lap-dancing industry (for example, Bindel, 2004; Eden, 2007; Jeffreys, 2008). The notion that lap-dancing is a form of labour different than any other is something which is stressed here through a language which mirrors Jeffrey’s view that

there is no other forms of work, except in the sex industry, where women have to battle to keep their bodies away from men’s fingers and ejaculate (Jeffrey, 2008, p. 161).

Tellingly, in August 2010, the Coalition government also banned the advertising of jobs involving ‘sexual stimulation’ in publicly funded employment services from August 2010 on the basis that these services have a duty to “eliminate unlawful harassment and discrimination” (DWP, 2010, p. 10), apparently accepting Object’s argument that lap-dancing is not a “harmless bit of fun” and that financial and sexual exploitation may be rife across the sector (see DWP, 2010, p. 72).

### Harms to Local Women

The focus on worker safety clearly has wider gendered dimensions given that the clientele of lap-dancing clubs is (assumed) male and the object of their gaze is (assumed) female. A concern here is that the scopic regimes of the club reinforce ideas that women solely exist in the night-time city as the object of the male gaze, with the club acting as a

repository of retrogressive attitudes towards women which always threaten to ‘spill out’ into public space (Jeffreys, 2008). Multiple representations allude to the routine harassment associated with “patrons who are generally intoxicated and arguably in a state of sexual excitement”, noting that venues often target “stag parties which are renowned for their negative impact in relation to crime and disorder” (representations 51, 52, and 52a, Bristol City Council, 2012, pp. 27–28).

Our street serves as the car park for the groups of often drunk, loud and obscene punters who roll up, clearly seeing a visit to a lap-dancing club as the end of a glorious night’s drinking. These men travel in packs, and engage in displays of bravado, frequently swearing, urinating in gardens and egging each other on ... Nobody in our neighbourhood can take a walk without risking encounters with the clients (representation quoted in London Borough of Richmond on Thames, 2012, p. 135).

Allegations of actual crimes perpetrated by clients against women are, however, rare, with the most frequent accusations being that clubs attract ‘unsavoury’ male visitors (for example, see representations in Leicester City Council, 2011, Appendix B.8), making the areas around clubs feel unsafe for female passers-by

Living in close proximity to the sex industry carries a negative impact of local residents because of the anti-social behaviour which patrons bring with them. Such behaviour in Newquay has ranged from verbal assaults, public displays of nudity and obscene physical gestures through to serious instances of crime and disorder ... This type of business fosters certain attitudes, which can normalize the abusive treatment of women nearby, creating no-go areas for half the community (representation 28, Cornwall County Council, n.p.).

Studies of the actual impacts of adult entertainment on local crime have reached decidedly mixed conclusions (see Eden, 2007; Magnanti, 2012). However, in US studies where rises in crime have been demonstrated, this is often thought to be about the robbery of male customers by opportunist thieves who view those arriving at or leaving strip clubs as ‘soft targets’ (Weinstein and McLeary, 2011). Such issues of the safety of clients are not mentioned in any of the representations made to local authorities.

The academic consensus is that, while it is young men who are most prone to violence in public space at night, sexual assault and harassment are more frequently experienced by women, with fears of attack limiting their access to, and control of, night-time spaces (Pain, 2001). Significantly, surveys suggest that it is the fear of sexual and violent crime perpetuated by men that limits many women’s engagement in night life: for example, the 2008/09 British Crime Survey reveals that women fear rape more than any other crime, with 35 per cent of 31–60-year-old women reporting feeling very unsafe when walking in the city after dark, as opposed to 2 per cent of men in the same age category. For some women, this encourages a profoundly domocentric existence where staying in is viewed as preferable to dealing with the imagined dangers of the city at night. For those going out, adaptations of behaviour take different forms. Kavanaugh and Anderson (2009), for example, distinguish between individual-level risk management, whereby individuals modify their behaviour in specific leisure spaces, and environmental-level risk management, which can entail changes in the leisure spaces that an individual frequents. The latter includes switching venues or avoiding specific spaces altogether based on judgements of where risks are most apparent (Boyd, 2010). Examples of the former include visiting venues only in a

group, carrying a personal attack alarm, avoiding interactions with strangers and leaving a venue in a taxi rather than on foot (Sheard, 2011). In this context, the presence on the street of men who have been presented with “titillating and arousing sexual entertainment” raises particular concerns for the safety of women visiting other night-time spaces of leisure—including clubs, pubs and nightclubs—as well as for “women walking home alone” (representation 4.8.6, Oxford City Council, 2011) and for “female employees travelling to and from work out of hours” (London Borough of Islington, 2012).

### Harms to Women in General

Given women’s fear is generally regarded as ‘normal’ and their spatial assertiveness at night thought to be risky (Sheard, 2011), the emergence of SEVs targeting male consumers has obviously reawakened a series of debates about women’s right to the nocturnal city. Yet beyond concerns about safety within and around the club itself, there appears a wider concern about the particular role of lap-dancing clubs in effecting the sexualisation of society. Here, a third key discourse implies that lap-dancing does not just harm the women who perform and work in clubs, or passers-by, but *all* women

People in this ward do not want a sex establishment close to their communities. Women and girls in particular feel frightened that a sex entertainment venue attracts men who see some women as objects for their instant gratification on demand and so is likely to lead to lewd comments, harassment or even sex attacks, not just on the doorstep but when these men travel home, which may be some miles away (representation 17, Warwick District Council, 2012, n.p.).

Here, a link is made between the forms of entertainment provided at lap-dancing clubs

and the objectification of women. This is noted in a number of representations

While under the influence of pornography, some men are likely to perceive the woman they encounter as less warm, less likeable, less moral, lacking in mind etc. In short—less human. It requires no great leap of the imagination to realize that when under the influence of alcohol, some men may enact their attitudes in a way that is both harassing and discriminating against the women that they meet whether in the club, the street, the workplace or the home (cited in Bristol City Council, 2012, n.p.).

The idea that the representation of women as sex objects in lap-dancing clubs is capable of normalising retrogressive gendered attitudes stresses that *vision* is crucial in the making of sexual subjectivities. Yet it is not just the men who visit clubs who are thought to be influenced by them, with the prominence of premises promoting female lap-dancing accused of perpetuating the idea that women can be “used for sex” (representation 43, Bristol City Council, 2012, p. 18), “fuelling demand for sexual commerce” (representation 62, Bristol City Council, 2012, p. 27).

Important here is the way that gendered images and representations are embedded in urban space through clubs’ flyers and signage. While local authorities demand that advertising is discrete and non-explicit, the names of clubs (for example, *Beavers*, *The Pussycat Club*) are sometimes far from subtle, with ever-present images of sexualised bodies on billboards, signage and advertising hoardings effectively reminding viewers that the city is a sexual marketplace where bodies are constantly on display and all is for sale, with the female form being used to *seduce* the viewer. At the same time, local authorities demand that no part of the interior of a club is visible from the outside,

meaning that the nature of the entertainment is concealed from passers-by. This suggests that clubs effectively sexualise the city via an aesthetics of concealment and seduction (Green and Singleton, 2008). The look, ambience and texture of clubs have capacity to *affect*, creating nightspaces that feel sleazy, dangerous and/or sexy, depending on one’s perspective. The idea that a club can make an area feel threatening was hence played up in multiple representations, including one suggesting that a club contributed to “a sleazy atmosphere with its blacked out windows” (representation 51, Sheffield City Council, 2012) and another which argued that the “necessary darkening of windows gives the visual appearance of being sinister” (representation 4.86, Oxford City Council, 2011, n.p.).

It has been argued elsewhere that sexualised advertisements make women feel fearful, with the display of pseudo-pornographic pictures and women in a state of semi-nudity constituting a form of sexual harassment (Rosewarne, 2007). According to one objection to a lap-dancing club in Bristol

Prevalent street sexual harassment by men is related to men’s sense of ownership of public spaces and to their sense of entitlement to sexually objectify women which is related to the normalising effect of the presence on the high street of the sex industry (Bristol County Council, 2012, n.p.).

Here, it is also worth considering the effect that this might have on children who see clubs

I object strongly to this sort of club being situated in a busy shopping street, a thoroughfare for families, within striking distance of three Churches, Primary and Senior schools. I am a mother of two small boys who will of course grow up to be young



adults within what I believed to be a safe village environment...The title of the premise 'Gentleman's Club and Champagne Bar' is fully visible to passing children, indicating the use to which the premises are used, conveying information from which the young ought to be protected (East Cheshire District Council, 2012).

My nine year old daughter attend Brownies within 200 yards of this club and I often take her into [newsagent nextdoor to the lap-dance club] to buy her books ... it is completely inappropriate for her to pass a sexual encounter venue given the characters lurking in the vicinity (Cornwall County Council, 2011, Appendix 4, objection 5).

These quotes stress the different impacts that clubs might have on girls and boys respectively: while the former are described as vulnerable to the clientele of clubs, the latter are seen as potentially seduced by the presence of clubs, making it hard for parents to raise them "as wholesome and well-adjusted" men with "healthy attitudes towards women" (London Borough of Richmond, p. 129).

The contention that lap-dancing clubs feed into a culture which promotes a sexist and sometimes violent masculinity is an argument made in Object's denouncement of lap-dancing clubs as one of the 'last bastions of male privilege' and a space promoting gender stereotypes and attitudes which suggest it is acceptable to treat women as sexual objects, rather than real people (Object, 2008, p. 2).

Furthermore, recent media and policy debates on sexualisation have similarly taken lap-dancing to symbolise the sexual objectification of women and girls, linking this to: negative body image and self-esteem issues; high rates of eating disorders; seeking plastic surgery; sexual bullying and damaging sexual relations between young people

(for example, Papadopoulos, 2010). The links between lap-dancing and some of these may be tenuous, but there is certainly a sense in which clubs perpetuate the idea that only some bodies—and some women—are constructed as desiring and desirable sexual subjects. The general privileging of young, slim, White bodies in lap-dancing clubs (see Wesley, 2003) is certainly problematic given the proliferation of pro-sex feminist discourses which place emphasis on female freedom, individuality and fulfillment (for example, Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2007). Whether or not this justifies the stress that is placed on the protection of (assumed) young, White, middle-class girls in the discourse of those opposing lap-dancing clubs is, however, debatable: as Hayes *et al.* (2011) argue, focusing on the risks posed to girls and young women by the sex industry should not distract from the forms of abuse, sexual exploitation and neglect which can occur in the 'happy family' spaces which protestors are seeking to protect.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that the existence of 'gentleman's clubs' at the heart of the city underlines the gendered nature of the evening economy, a space/time which continues to privilege the male sexual gaze by putting women on display for men's consumption. The removal of lap-dancing clubs from British cities has accordingly been hailed by some as an important step in the creation of more gender-equal cities, challenging long-standing assumptions that women's access to night life can only be on men's terms. This paper has nonetheless noted that it has been notions of nuisance, safety and public order, and not women's rights *per se*, which have provided the semiotic battlefield on which debates about the rights and wrongs of adult



entertainment have been played out in British cities because of the emphasis in the licensing system on these particular issues rather than questions of morality and disgust (see Nussbaum, 2006, on the use of disgust in law). Despite this, it has been shown that opposition to lap-dancing remains strongly gendered, with both women and men making representations suggesting that the harms of lap-dancing are most sharply felt by women and girls (including those who perform in venues). Thus, while it is sometimes stated that men and boys can be corrupted by the presence of lap-dancing clubs, it is women and girls who are depicted as vulnerable to their continued existence.

Precautionary attempts to regulate lap-dancing venues are therefore entirely explicable given the responsibility which the government has to gendered equality, with moral concerns about sexism in society coalescing with more general concerns about community safety to promote 'anti-sexual' cities in which male consumers of adult entertainment are effectively pathologised and stripped of rights to view sexually stimulating performance on the basis of the crimes they *might* commit. As Sanders (2007) notes, the anti-sexual city is one in which those with certain sexual predilections or tastes are labelled as anti-social, with their disciplining seen as a way to reaffirm the boundaries between the dangerous and the respectable. The licensing of SEVs thus serves to distinguish between the vulnerable and the culpable, positioning exploited workers and fearful female residents on the side of the former, and the client on the other. While prioritising the rights of the former over the latter appears uncontroversial given 'common sense' assumptions that lap-dancing has undesirable gendered effects, such assumptions are thus grounded in a set of contestable assumptions about "gendered responsibilities and culpabilities"

(see Sanders, 2007, p. 521). Accordingly, we defer from the view that the closure of lap-dancing clubs represents a clear-cut victory for women, noting that policies designed to protect women can often inadvertently position them as inferior to men (see Carline, 2011; Sheard, 2011; Wilkinson, 2011), with the regulation of SEVs perpetuating ideas that men can handle the dangers of the city at night, but women need the protection of the state and the law. It is here that the central paradox of feminist campaigns opposed to lap-dancing becomes apparent, for, in making an argument about the harms of lap-dancing, the claim that women need equality with men is subsumed beneath a discourse that proclaims women's vulnerability and inability to negotiate the sexual city on their own terms.

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