Sex work: the ultimate precarious labour?

Teela Sanders and Kate Hardy assess sex work within wider processes of ‘flexibilisation’

The last decade has seen an increased interest in non-standard forms of labour as processes of casualisation, outsourcing, subcontracting and flexploitation dominate global employment trends. Such processes have lead to the normalisation of instability, uncertainty and permanent change in working life. Flexibilisation, a result of the deregulation of labour standards as nation states seek to increase competitiveness by pursuing labour market flexibility to the benefit of capital, has meant an increase in part-time, temporary, casualised and contingent work (Standing, 2011). Although these forms of flexible working have often been sold on the idea that they create freedom for workers, in practice flexibilisation has made work more precarious, as increasing numbers of jobs become characterised by poor working conditions, low pay, temporary contracts, lack of security and benefits. Young people, women and migrants are disproportionately represented amongst the most precarious groups in society. ‘Precariousness’ has been mobilised particularly by feminists as a concept for understanding the general condition of women’s labour.

Women in particular are peculiarly placed within informal and insecure forms of work and the growth of such forms of work has in itself been understood by some authors as the ‘feminisation of work’ (Standing, 2011). This is a multifaceted process including increased (official) female labour participation, but most importantly the decentralisation and irregularisation of work (Chhachhi and Pittin, 1996). Despite offering the apparently archetypal form of precarious labour, there has been little more than fleeting references to sex work as the sin qua non of precarious labour (Precarias a la Deriva, 2004). Little sustained theoretical or empirical attention has been paid to the working conditions of sex workers and the wider political economy in which the work takes place. Furthermore, references to sex work and precariousness have focussed on less regulated areas of sex work, rather than on more mainstream or formalised activities, partially connected to the structures of official regulation.

Working conditions

Our recent research on the UK striptease industry (Sanders and Hardy, 2012) has taken on the challenge of examining a formally regulated industry, where strip venues are licensed by local authorities, checked and validated by civil and police enforcement officials yet operate on the ground as an informal, cash-in-hand economy. Our empirical research captured those groups most often found amongst what is sometimes termed the ‘precariat’ (Ros, 2008): all respondents were female (100 per cent, n= 197), although we recognise the presence of male sex workers, young (73 per cent under 30 years old) and migrants (34 per cent). Students also represented a core part of the striptease labour force (28.6 per cent). Core groups of traditionally precarious workers, particularly students and migrants, constituted the majority of workers within the stripping industry (Sanders, 2013).

The focus of our research was specifically on the working conditions and experiences of dancers who worked in regulated strip venues in the UK. The vast majority of dancers had made a decision to do dancing/striping as a flexible, relatively high earning (although unpredictable), cash-in-hand form of work. Dancing was a popular employment option for some women who were working in low paid, unskilled jobs, motivated by an apparent opportunity for future mobility. Dancers identified a number of advantages and attractions. Key amongst these were, flexibility and independence, instant remuneration, earning more than in other roles, keeping fit and an opportunity to combine fun and work. This resulted in a steady flow of labour supply and one intricately linked to students and higher education (Roberts et al., 2013). Some of these characteristics could be disadvantages, as dancing remained precarious in terms of a stable income, high overheads, no employee protection and a competitive environment. Coupled with fewer customers and expenditure during the recession (Sanders and Hardy, 2012), dancing proved to be a difficult job without guaranteed income.

Almost three quarters (74.1 per cent) of dancers reported high levels of job satisfaction. No dancers rated their job satisfaction as poor. However, they faced a number of problems in the work place, relating to customer behaviour, insecure work and financial exploitation. What was most insidious in terms of precarious conditions was the ways in which club owners made profit from dancers who had very little recourse against exploitative
practices. Notably, dancers had to pay house fees ranging from £0-
£200, though the average was around £20-30 in the North and
around £80 in the South, without any guarantee of earnings. In
addition to fees, dancers paid commission. This ranged from 0-66
per cent, though it was usually 30 per cent for each dance. Also, 61 per
cent of dancers were also fined frequently (often arbitrarily); the most
common fines were for chewing gum, using
mobile phones on the floor, incorrect clothing, lateness or
missing a shift. The high
overheads also meant that 70 per cent reported
leaving a shift without making
any money. The
experience for many strippers in the
UK is a story of making choices about how to earn money to fund
other activities, such as studying,
other work, or lifestyles, while
enjoying the advantages as
described, but at the same time
putting up with the precarious and
unpredictable nature of the work.

Inevitably precarious?
Governed by locally imposed criteria
under sex entertainment venue
policies since 2012, strip venues are regulated in relation to nudity,
customer and dancer conduct
and community safety issues. Yet the actual management and
operations of clubs are left largely
unchronised and unaccountable.
Our observational work revealed
that some clubs were appropriately
managed where the dancers were
treated justly as workers, whereas
others (and their managers) saw
dancers merely as a route to profits.
It was clear that the regulation
process had very little impact on the
working conditions and experiences of
dancers. Accordingly, we surmise
that the variable working conditions
and experiences of strippers (in our
project), reflect very similar working
conditions for those who work in the
adult voluntary indoor sex markets
such as brothels and working flats.
These other sex markets, essentially
made illegal by the plethora of
laws which make the organising of
commercial sexual services outlawed
in the UK, are equally left to the
discretion of ‘good managers’ and
‘bad managers’ in terms of standards
of working
conditions and financial fairness/
exploitation.
It is important to reflect on how
a regulated strip industry, with
proper standards of working
conditions written into the regulation
and enforcement
process, offers a regulation model to
transform existing illegal sex markets.
There have been some small but
significant changes made to the
sexual entertainment venue policies
in at least 25 local authorities in
England and Wales. Impact and
dissemination partnership work has
enabled close collaboration with
licensing officers, committees and
the Institute of Licensing to
implement recommendations to
improve dancers’ welfare, safety
and working conditions in strip venues
(Sanders et al., 2012). Successful
changes to policy included, for
example, the banning of ‘fines’
(Camden): limiting the number of
dancers working each shift
(Blackpool); improving safety by
removing enclosed booths (Leeds,
Manchester, Liverpool). In models of
regulation evident in the legalised
system of the Nevada brothels or the
decriminalised employment
frameworks favoured in New
Zealand, where safety and welfare
for sex workers are prioritised, the
precariousness of sex work is
questioned, challenged and, for
some, even reversed. Where the
governance of sex work relies on
criminalisation to manage sex work,
or pushes commercial sex only to the
margins of the informal or illegal
economies, precariousness will
dominate. In more sophisticated
models of governing sex work, where
human rights approaches shape
employment structures and the
organisation of prostitution, perhaps
the positive aspects of precarious
work might prevail.

Dr Teela Sanders is Reader in Sociology
and Dr Kate Hardy is Lecturer in Work and
Employment Relations, both at University of
Leeds.

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