

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 flexexploitation dominate global employment trends. Such processes have led 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 of 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 multi-faceted 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' (Ross, 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/stripping 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

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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 unscrutinised 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

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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. ■

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