



TOWARDS HEALTHY WORK ENVIRONMENTS FOR EXOTIC DANCERS IN CANADA

This policy brief is based on research by the Exotic Dancers Health and Safety Work Group published in *Exotic Dancing: Health and Safety*. The full report can be downloaded by accessing the Sex Trade and Advocacy Research (STAR) website at www.uwindsor.ca/star, or the website of the National Network on Environments and Women's Health at <http://www.yorku.ca/nnewh/STARReports.htm>. While the research and experience that informed this brief was restricted to women working as exotic dancers in Ontario, several of the issues have been found to be relevant to men working as exotic dancers and to regions beyond the borders of Ontario.

BACKGROUND

The vast majority of exotic dancers in the province of Ontario work freelance. As free-lancers they can choose when, where and how often they work, but they have no access to the protections available to employees through much of the federal and provincial labour legislation or through unions. Acts and sections of acts which use the terminology employer-employee do not apply to free-lance workers.

In Canada, we do not “shrug off” occupational health and safety issues as merely the cost of working, or the “personal lot” and responsibility of the worker, but rather, through advocacy, education, and legislation we work to eliminate or reduce occupational health and safety risks to workers.

THE ANALYSIS

Speaking with exotic dancers in the province of Ontario, researchers investigating the sex industry identified the risks to health and safety encountered in the work of exotic dancing, the causes of those risks, and ways to improve dancers' work environments. The following section describes some of the many occupational health and safety issues dancers cite as workplace hazards.

Risks to Physical Health and Safety

- Poor lighting, insecure stages, and poles and floors in poor repair contribute to slips, sprains, twists and falls, at times resulting in extended periods of time lost from work.
- Both the physical layout of the strip clubs and the policies of management towards dancers and customers can contribute to the likelihood of assault. While assault is not tolerated in other workplaces, dancers report that it is not uncommon for bouncers, managers and police to treat assault in and around a strip-club as an occupational hazard that dancers should expect and “deal with” without taking action against the perpetrator.





Risks to Contracting Infectious Diseases

- Exotic dancers are exposed to a variety of body fluids, including saliva, vaginal secretions, and semen which may be found on props, furnishings, equipment, costumes, clothing, and on body surfaces. They are concerned about the potential for transmitting infections and also for the general cleanliness of their work environment.
- The close physical contact between customers and dancers, and contact between each of them and clothing or furnishing contaminated with body fluids may expose both customers and dancers to infectious agents.
- While there is no research on the degree of risk posed to dancers, the general public health approach should be applied: whenever any type of risk is present, precautions need to be in place and implemented to reduce the chance of transmission.

Risks to Emotional Health and Well-being

- The cultural stereotype of exotic dancers as 'easy catches' or 'sexually available' is at the root of sexual assault of dancers, and also of their stigmatization and harassment. Many clubs do not have clear guidelines for what is permissible, which contributes to a situation where dancers must accept such treatment as part of the job.

Health Risks Associated with Substance Use and Abuse

- Clubs may encourage dancers to drink with customers as part of their 'entertainment' function. Excessive alcohol use may contribute to sexual harassment and assault on the part of customers and/or willingness on the part of dancers to move beyond the boundaries they have set for themselves. Beyond these immediate effects, there are longer term physical and mental health consequences of substance use and abuse.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Legislative provisions (provincial and municipal) already exist that address the physical condition of a strip club, the work expectations and work environment of exotic dancers, and specific threats to their health and safety. However, these are not adequately applied. The Exotic Dancers Health and Safety Work Group have reviewed the relevant legislation and by-laws and recommend greater clarification with respect to the status of exotic dancers and strip clubs. For example:

- Provisions exist under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* that are relevant to club owners and dancers. The current requirements, however, are often too general to be applied as measurable standards. Public Health Units need to establish specific criteria for what constitutes adequacy or sufficiency under each provision so that dancers and club owners alike know when they have met the standards for occupational health and safety.





- Because of the mobility of dancers and the free-lance nature of their work, strip clubs do not have the health and safety committees required under Occupational Health and Safety legislation to address health risks. Public Health Units – in consultations with the Ministry of Labour – should consider being responsible for facilitating regional health and safety committees with representation from owners and dancers.
- Public Health Units can be effective in addressing exotic dancers' health issues by forming coalitions with exotic dancer organizations to advocate for change in legislation and to provide the support services needed for dancers to improve their current situation and actively participate in change.
- The *Ontario Building Code Act*, *Fire Protection and Prevention Act*, and municipal licensing by-laws have provisions for the physical condition of strip clubs, but they need to be reviewed and amended in relation to ventilation, maximum occupancy loads, lighting, the construction of stages and floors, and the installment of props.
- Dancers, clubs owners, clients, police, and the public must have adequate education to eliminate risks to health and safety in strip clubs. For existing legislation to be effective, health inspectors must ensure the delivery and proper placement of posters in clubs so that workers know what they can legally expect in the workplace.
- It is imperative that *Human Resources and Social Development Canada* and *Citizenship and Immigration Canada* develop and provide immigrant dancers with information regarding relevant laws, by-laws, legislation, rights and responsibilities, services available, and how to proceed if they perceive that their rights are being violated or are in danger. These must be available in workers' own language.

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