

BEYOND EXPLOITATIVE OR EMPOWERING: SEX WORK  
AND EMBODIMENT

by

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This thesis seeks to push beyond the idea that sex work is either exploitative and traumatic or empowering and pleasurable, two different stances that are often debated in feminist circles. The work is grounded in the experiences of sex workers themselves and highlights the ways in which sex work is an embodied experience. My work uses a qualitative approach to center the experiences of sex work through interviews. I use scholarly articles to inform and theorize my findings.

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## Introduction

Sex work is one of the oldest forms of paid labor. Yet to this day, it is stigmatized and criminalized. The nature of sex work has shifted over the decades, especially with the invention of the internet. My thesis looks at two different forms of sex work, neither of which involve having physical sex with the client for money — exotic dancing<sup>1</sup> and OnlyFans content creation.<sup>2</sup> There is much debate that centers on the idea that sex work is either inherently exploitative or empowering. I seek to push beyond that oppressive binary to create a more nuanced approach, that also acknowledges the pleasure the sex workers themselves may experience. Similarly, I argue that sex work must be decriminalized and destigmatized, in order to keep sex workers safe and recognize their choices as valid.

### How it Started

In the fall of 2020, I took J483: Journalistic Interview with Professor Peter Laufer. For our final assignment, we were required to write an article that included four or more interviews. I decided to focus on the experiences of sex workers on campus, talking to OnlyFans content creators, an exotic dancer and two women with Sugar Daddies. At the time, I was planning to write my thesis on a whole other subject — but

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use the terms exotic dancer and stripper in my work, although there are many terms used for this profession. I decided to use these terms because of how the sources I talked to self-identified and it is important to use the terms they are comfortable with. However, the term “exotic” can be problematic, sometimes used to fetishize non-white women. While I am not using it in this context, I would be remiss to not mention this and think about the ways in which it is a complicated term when used in contexts that seek to fetishize certain people.

<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that most of the research about sex work that has been done centers the experiences of people who identify as women. Similarly, when working on this thesis and talking to people about sex work, many assumed that the workers are women. While most of my interviewees did identify as women, not all sex workers are women. However, gender stereotypes expect sex workers to be women.

after conducting a number of interviews with college sex workers, I was moved by their stories and wanted to focus on some of the advice they had given to other sex workers or perspective sex workers, along with a variety of themes including body confidence and stigmatization.

### **Interview Subjects**

The sources for the interviews conducted were found using a variety of different methods. In total, I spoke with four OnlyFans content creators and two exotic dancers, all of who are either currently in school or were while they were a sex worker. Only Fans is an online platform that allows content creators to sell photos and videos for money, has become a popular site for sex work. Four sources identify as women, one source identifies as a man and one source uses both she and they pronouns. My goal was to talk to as wide of a range of sources as possible, especially in terms of gender identity because most conversations about sex work center solely on women. People of all genders are sex workers.

This piece talks a bit about racism in sex work — that being said, none of the interviews were particular to experiences that may be unique or exacerbated for sex workers of color. While it is always important to acknowledge how people of different ethnicities are treated differently in any industry, that did not turn in to a central theme of this thesis. My sources did identify as a variety of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, but it was not a focal point of my research.

Beginning my search for sources, I posted on three different UO Facebook pages: class of 2022, class of 2023 and class of 2024. I found four sources through that method — they all sought me out in private messages and expressed interest in my

story. The two other sources I got through other people reaching out to friends of theirs who are sex workers.

All of the sex workers interviewed for this thesis self-identify as sex workers and said they do this work by choice. Choice is complicated in this context because in a capitalist society — is it ever a choice to work? I choose to claim that these sex workers are in the industry by choice because that is how they identified it. I must make a clear distinction between sex work and sex trafficking, because the two are often equated. Likewise, the themes I found are based on the experiences of six different sex workers and by no means represent the experience of all sex workers. That being said, all of my work is guided by their voices and grounded in their experiences.

### **Limitations**

Due to factors such as time and the capacity I had, only six sources were interviewed. Because that is such a small sample size, it is important to clarify that this thesis does not seek to make a claim about the experience of all sex workers, but is specific to the stories and themes found from the six sources.

### **Central Claim**

While this thesis uses words such as empowerment and exploitation, the biggest piece it seeks to highlight is the fact that job satisfaction and pleasure can be had during sex work, which is often not equated with such. Questions get asked of sex workers that are not asked of other forms of work, such as ‘is it empowering or exploitative?’ The assumption for sex workers is that they are selling their bodies in a way that other forms of workers are not — what one of the stripper I spoke with pointed out is that in other areas, such as being a massage therapist, she argued you are also selling your body. In

fact, in most fields under capitalism, workers sell their bodies through the labor they are doing.

What this thesis seeks to do is ask ‘what is possible in sex work?’ especially that is not seen due to stigma and negative assumptions. Pleasure and enjoyment from the work itself is possible, just like in any other field.



## **Literature Review**

This literature review centers my work in queer theory because it allows us to push back on the idea that sex work is inherently exploitative, as many radical feminist approaches posit, and explore themes that are unique to online sex work and exotic dancing. The research I have found highlights the idea that although sex work is not inherently empowering, the parts of it that are disempowering stem not from the work itself, but how the work has been stigmatized and criminalized through societal connotations.

### **The Politics of Sex**

Sex is always political, according to queer theorist and cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin. Unlike other aspects of life, sex is something that although in theory is usually a private activity, is one that many people are concerned with to a point that laws are enacted to dictate which forms of sex are legal. Rubin would argue that all people are concerned with sex, and particularly those who fall within the norm — heterosexual, married, etc. She calls for a radical theory of sex that seeks to “identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual oppression” (Rubin, 9). She argues that this is vastly different from the society we live in today. While this piece by Rubin was published in 1984, it holds true today as sex work is still criminalized and other aspects relating to sex are under attack, such as abortion rights. In 2022 America, only 39 states require sex education in schools and only 18 of those require it to be medically accurate, according to Planned Parenthood.<sup>3</sup> The lack of proper education,

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/sex-education/sex-education-laws-and-state-attacks>

along with many laws that make various forms of sex work illegal, point to the fact that we live in what Rubin would call a sex-negative society, that treats sex with suspicion (Rubin, 11).

Rubin points to a few key concepts that she believes highlight the sex-negative way in which Western societies typically view sex. She argues that sex is given an excess of significance, which she calls the fallacy of a misplaced scale (Rubin, 11). The excess of significance can be viewed in anti-prostitution laws and also the ways in which celebrity “sex scandals” are typically blown up, an example being the near impeachment of Bill Clinton because of an affair with Monica Lewinsky. He was impeached by the house representatives, and later acquitted by the senate. At the same time that sex is awarded too much importance, it is also a taboo subject which is highlighted in the lack of sex education throughout the country.<sup>4</sup>

Sex work falls outside what Rubin has called the “charmed circle” (Rubin, 13). The inside of the circle represents what she believes society sees as good, healthy sexuality. This includes mostly heterosexual, marital and monogamous sex. On the outside of this circle falls homosexual, casual and sex for money, among other categories. While some of these categories may have shifted slightly – gay marriage is legal although queerness is still stigmatized as shown in things as extreme as hate crimes and through microaggressions that queer people like myself may face on a smaller scale— sex work still falls within the outer circle. Sex is always political because modern society has forced it into the public sphere, creating definitions for “good” and “bad” sex/sexuality, according to Rubin.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/issues/sex-education/sex-education-laws-and-state-attacks>

## **Sex Worker Support Networks**

As sex work is vastly stigmatized and criminalized, many activists have called for the need for support that comes from within communities of sex workers. In an article highlighting the importance of sex worker support networks, author Crystal A. Jackson, a professor of sociology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, looks at the Desiree Alliance conference in 2010 as an example. She argues that due to criminalization and stigmatization, “sex worker support networks are a vibrant form of resistance and care” (Jackson, 170). She explains that conferences like Desiree Alliance are an important mode of organizing, providing a space for resources and relationship building among sex workers across many different modes of work.

Jackson found the support networks that formed through the conference to be a space of support that worked to fight stigma and affirm value (Jackson, 177). In a profession where the workers are often judged, providing a space that highlights the value of a person and their labor is essential. This was a common theme throughout my own interviews, and one of the pieces that was highlighted is how essential it is to talk to other sex workers who understand the nuances of the profession. This appears mainly through friendship building (Jackson, 178). Building relationships, whether at the strip club or through other modes, breaks down the stereotype of women who are pitted against each other. One of the places where this relationship building often takes place is at the strip club.

Jackson sets the stage of her article by arguing that the criminalization of sex work actually harms workers, even when it is often said to protect women and girls from sex trafficking (Jackson, 170). She furthers this by pointing to evidence that raids

of strip clubs that are suspected of sex trafficking happen more often in communities of color. People of color often face a whole myriad of different forms of racism and stigmatization within the industry.

### **Racism and Sex Work**

In her work detailing the experiences of Black and Latina dancers, Siobhan Brooks, a black feminist sociologist known for her work with sex workers, argues that racism greatly affects the working conditions for dancers of color — privileging lighter-skinned people — and explains that women are not objectified equally within the industry of exotic dance. She argues that Black women in particular have to work against hypersexualization and stereotypes about Black female sexuality. One example she provides is that of the “jezebel,” a term that has origins in slavery and was created to justify sexual violence against enslaved Black women (Brooks, 72). Another stereotype she describes is that of the welfare queen, which arose post-WWII to describe as sexually aggressive and manipulative, which was used to justify forced birth control and sterilization (Brooks, 72). Stereotypes such as these create an atmosphere in which Black women are treated differently than white women, especially in all forms of work, with negative consequences on their salaries.

Due to racism in the workplace, Brooks found that dancers of color deployed a number of different resistance strategies. “Dancers of color managed racism in two ways: racial passing or performing large amounts of emotional labor to appear non-threatening” (Brooks, 78). These strategies are a form of self-protection for the dancers who must navigate spaces where racism runs rampant, and can be especially dangerous when linked to sexualization.

## **Emotional Labor**

Because dancers rely on tips and customer interactions to make money, Tina Deshotels and Craig J. Forsyth argue that they deploy strategic flirting as a form of emotional labor. The authors explain that emotional labor is a required part of the job for dancers that requires them to either induce or suppress their feelings in order to stimulate the customer's fantasy (Deshotels & Forsyth, 226). They further argue that when women perform emotional labor it inherently leaves them in a subordinate position, while when men perform emotional labor it leaves them in a dominant one. This idea oversimplifies exotic dance and teeters toward the idea that sex work is inherently exploitative, stripping women of their power and leaving them in a subordinate position to men. This argument disempowers women by claiming that all female occupy subordinate positions in relation to their male clients, which is factually inaccurate. While power dynamics are certainly at play for sex work (they are part of any interaction between two or more people) — just like other interactions, sex workers are not always left in a subordinate position, and often are actively resisting exploitation.

Deshotels and Forsyth acknowledge that sex work needs to be looked at as a continuum, not simply exploitative versus empowering. Thus they posit a more nuanced conclusion, arguing that while sex work can be empowering on the individual level, it still reproduces uneven power relations (Deshotels & Forsyth, 225). They go on to argue that whether it is exploitative or empowering depends on the customer's reaction. This claim invalidates the experiences of the dancer themselves, and particularly the pleasure that they may also experience. At the beginning of the article, Deshotels and

Forsyth set the stage by explaining the difference between radical feminism that they describe as seeing all heterosexual sexual interactions as being male-dominated and thus oppressive versus sexual radicalism which posits the idea that sex is liberating (Deshotels & Forsyth, 225). They call for the need to look beyond this binary and see sex work on more of a continuum. Still, in the end, they call it inherently exploitative, thus falling within the binary way of looking at sex work that Rubin and others warn against.

### **The Whorearchy**

The whorearchy is a term used to describe the hierarchical way in which many sex workers arrange themselves and the work they do. According to Belle Knox, an adult performer and writer, “The whorearchy is arranged according to intimacy of contact with clients and police. The closer to both you are, the closer you are to the bottom” (Knox). She argues that sex workers who are directly performing in-person acts, are at the bottom as opposed to indirect sex workers. Knox speaks from her own experience as a porn actress (thus a direct sex worker) and the judgment she has received from the work she does. Some of this judgment comes from within sex worker communities themselves, further speaking to the need for sex worker support networks as previously mentioned as a form of solidarity.

The whorearchy itself is an arbitrary system, as seen by the fact that camgirls, people who perform sexual acts live online for money, may view themselves at the top but so do dominatrices, strippers, and many other types of sex workers, according to dominatrix and writer Mysterious Witt. She emphasizes that the whorearchy only serves to harm all sex workers, and create a community in which they

do not join forces and work together. She echoes Knox's sentiment that the whorearchy exists because society is hierarchical and furthers this analysis by looking not only at the types of sex work, but the workers themselves and the difference in privilege white, cisgender workers have as opposed to some other workers (Witt). She calls out the role of racism and transphobia not only from clients and outside people but within groups of sex workers themselves. "Dismantling the whorearchy isn't just about helping the most disadvantaged sex workers. It's about helping all of us," Witt wrote. "No sex worker is truly legitimate in our society. The only way to fight for more legal protections and less social stigma is to stop seeing ourselves as separate and different" (Witt). For both Witt and Knox, sex workers themselves, it is important that sex workers can band together and not perpetuate stigmatization of each other.

### **The Erotic As Power**

Women's sexuality, in general, is often stigmatized within this society. As mentioned earlier, women may experience this at different rates depending on their positionality, and in light of aspects of their identities such as race and class. While I acknowledge that not all sex workers are women, this section focuses on a particular fear of female and feminized sexuality that I argue perpetuates the stigmatization of sex workers. According to Knox, "All women are taught from an early age, through religion, media, and socialization that men do not respect women who are sexual outside of marriage but require they be hypersexual within it" (Knox, 1). Knox talks here about what has been called the virgin-whore dichotomy — the polarized idea that women are either pure and chaste or they are promiscuous. At the same time, women are expected to be virgins or have a minimal amount of sex while at the same time are

supposed to want it when men do and also be good at it. I argue that these contradictory concepts stem from an overall fear of female sexuality — a sexually empowered woman is powerful and this is threatening in a patriarchal society.

Audre Lorde, an African-American author, lesbian feminist, and civil rights activist, wrote a piece titled “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power.” In this, she expands the very definition of what “erotic” means, arguing that it is a source of power and knowledge for women that plays into every aspect of life and yet it has been vilified and devalued by Western society. “As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge,” she writes. “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (Lorde, 54). Yet the erotic has come to be equated solely with sex, which Lorde argues is dangerous because when our own erotic knowledge is not allowed to be embraced, we cannot be fully empowered within ourselves. She goes on to write “Women so empowered are dangerous” (Lorde, 55). Equating the erotic solely with sex stems from a misogynistic viewpoint that seeks to disempower women. While eroticism and sex are not synonymous, eroticism plays a role in sex work as well, particularly in terms of the ways in which sexually empowered women are feared in society, as Knox and Lorde point out.

### **Sex Work Online: The Positives**

Within the past few decades, many modes of work have moved online — including sex work. In a UK-based study published in the *British Journal of Sociology*, guided by experts from the sex worker community, the authors examined the changing



nature of safety with the shift to online sex work. This study focuses on people who market their services online but have sex in person, while my research focuses on workers who are based solely online. The authors of this study differentiate the two by describing in-direct sex workers as workers who do not engage in any in-person contact. While the study is geared more towards sex workers who meet clients online, the themes found about how the internet has changed safety in terms of sex work still apply to my research.

Emphasizing the dangers of sex work while ignoring other aspects can continue the reductive narrative that sex work is inherently exploitative. Dr. Angela Jones, a professor of sociology at Farmingdale State College, wrote an article about webcamming that focuses on the pleasures that can accompany this form of sex work. She argues that because of the relative safety of the online environment, the pleasure in online sex work is more often mutual between worker and client (Jones, 231). She found that erotic interactions experienced on-camera often provided the workers a sense of increased confidence, a theme I did run into in my own interviews with people. Dr. Jones found two primary forms of pleasure experienced by the sex workers online: physical and affectual, which comes from what she describes as a “touching interaction” (Jones, 235). For Dr. Jones, the touching interaction she describes refers to endearing encounters between clients and sex workers. The pleasure she emphasizes is significant because it counters the emphasis many other studies place on danger and the degrading aspects of the job.

Dr. Jones directly counters the idea that sex work relies on emotional labor. She argues that in many cases, sex work is actually a refusal to engage in emotional labor.

An example she provides is how in webcamming, many of the models she talked to dictated the interactions they had and rarely felt a need to fake pleasure in order to appease the customer's fantasy (Jones, 236). While this may be true in exotic dance as well, in-person interactions can be more complex due to expectations within the club, from management and clientele, and the added fear of negative customer interactions that could end in violence. In the same vein, Dr. Jones calls to look beyond the reductive binary of exploitation versus empowerment to instead recognize the nuances of sex work, such as the pleasures sex workers themselves often experience. The pleasures she describes come in a variety of different forms — enjoying one's body through sexual arousal and body self-esteem are both forms of pleasure Dr. Jones found that sex workers may experience while working.

### **Sex Work Online: The Dangers**

The internet has provided both new methods of safety and new dangers for sex workers. The types of harassment found to be most common in a study in the *British Journal of Sociology* included: persistent attempts to contact the worker, non-payment or underpayment, and threats, (Campbell, 1545). In my interview with Alice, a former OnlyFans content creator and student at the University of Oregon, she described her own experience with harassment unique to the online realm. Three months into her work as a content creator, in which she said she made upwards of \$30,000, her personal information was leaked.

“I got doxxed by an anonymous person. They found my real-life Instagram, they found my full name. They sent out everything I posted to my parents, my grandparents, people at the school, maybe even faculty. They tracked me down, found out where I

lived. Even stalked me for a little bit,” Alice said. “I was getting death threats, rape threats. It was really scary.”

Alice’s story highlights the fears sex workers confront and the threats of violence they encounter. She shut down her account immediately after this experience. One of the hardest parts of this experience was how prior to being “doxxed,” she felt empowered and confident in herself, and then within a day these feelings turned to fear. It is easy to look at Alice’s story as a warning against sex work and the dangers that can ensue, but she clarified that she does not want to scare people away from sex work, but instead wants them to be aware of the risks that can accompany it. The risks specific to sex work come from a society that is sex-negative and misogynistic, as Rubin describes it, and stigmatizes the work in a way that can make people particularly vulnerable to harm.

Due in large part to the stigmatization and criminalization of sex work, strategies for staying safe online often fall to the workers themselves. Campbell et. al detailed some of their findings about how some sex workers stay safe online. Many of the strategies they collected are specific to workers who meet with their clients online, such as telling a trusted individual where you are meeting the client and seeing mostly the same clients (Campbell, 1551). For those who work solely online, most safety strategies are about not sharing personal information that could be linked back to the worker.

### **Perceptions of the Body**

Some theorists argue that the body should be looked at as an event or experience — instead of simply viewing the body as an object it should instead be looked at in a

way that honors a person's sense of self and their relationship with their own body.

Shelley Budgeon, an author and an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Birmingham in the UK wrote that “the body is the negative term, and if woman is body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be” (Budgeon, 38). She furthers this by explaining that the association with the mind and masculinity leads to the association with the feminine and the body, the body as something needing to be defined and controlled. This ties back to the idea of the erotic and the fear of the sexually empowered woman. The female body in western society is often seen as a thing to be used as an object, with strict rules about how it should and should not look. These expectations for the feminine body have different rules that are influenced by race and class.

Budgeon furthers her discussion of the body by explaining that much feminist thought views the body as a way in which oppressive cultural norms surrounding femininity are both expressed and policed — yet this ignores the agency of women, (Budgeon, 39). This connects to how Western society views sex work — as inherently oppressive — thus ignoring the agency of women as well. Budgeon urges her readers to consider what choice means in relationship to one's body and how this is influenced by factors such as race, class, gender, and ability (Budgeon, 51).

The norms for femininity are also different depending on a variety of factors such as a person's race, class, or sexuality. The policing of cultural norms influences sex workers in particular — an example of this is the different expectations for Black dancers, as discussed in my previous section about racism and sex work. The feminine body is expected to act and look a certain way.

Thinking about sex work from a theoretical approach that centers queer theory and seeks to move beyond sex negativity is important background for the articles I am writing for my thesis. In order for sex workers to be safe, we must decriminalize and destigmatize sex work. While these articles mostly focus on things sex workers can do to keep themselves safe, emotionally and physically, the rest of society must also provide a place of support. This literature review serves as a backdrop to guide the lens through which the next articles are viewed: centering the voices of sex workers themselves is important to see real ways in which some sex workers experience both pleasure and trauma at work. The articles do not seek to speak for all sex workers but instead provide a voice for a few to come forward and share their honest experiences.

## Article 1

### **Headline: The Other Side of the Pole**

**Dek: Despite the stigma and danger that surround the industry, sex workers in Eugene still find empowerment and confidence through their jobs.**

Taking the stage in chunky platform heels and a custom-made black glitter bodysuit, Nena Pratt started a slow reveal striptease inspired by years of being a burlesque performer. “Living Dead Girl” by Rob Zombie blared on the speakers. Pratt spent many nights at Bobby’s VIP Lounge, surrounded by mirrors, broken lights and other dancers.

“I had somebody compare my dancing to strip clubs in the 80s when it was all pole tricks. And it was just hot girls being hot on stage,” Pratt says.

In 2018, Pratt decided she wanted to go to massage school and needed to come up with an extra \$1,000 to pay for her year of classes. She says she was intrigued by her roommate, who had been stripping at a club in Springfield for a few months. Unsure it would be a good fit for her, she did not immediately consider it.

“I took one pole dance class and dislocated my knee and couldn’t walk for four months. So I was pretty put off by that experience,” Pratt said, although she was already involved in other aspects of sex work through a phone sex hotline and the online platform OnlyFans.

Her roommate, a dancer at a different club at the time, recommended that Pratt apply to Bobby’s VIP Lounge in Springfield, Oregon, a club with a “lower bar” where she

wouldn't need an audition or be expected to pole dance. She worked at the club until March 2020, dancing as an independent contractor.

At the time, Pratt got questions like: "How could you do that while you have respect for yourself?"

"For me, the idea was especially funny because people saw it as using my body for work, which I don't know that I have ever had a job that didn't require me to actively use my body to accomplish the job," Pratt said.

Sex work is just that: work. But it is set apart due to the stigma it can carry.

Sex work is the consensual exchange of sexual services for money, including exotic dancing and photos or videos via OnlyFans, according to the [Human Rights Watch](#). According to the [Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness](#), a nonprofit focused on building social connection and combating social isolation, the stigma surrounding sex work is often characterized by "a mark of disgrace, a social discrediting, or a spoiled identity." It argues that the root of this stigma is likely grounded in how the law treats sex work. According to [Amnesty International](#), the criminalization of sex work makes the workers less safe, allowing more instances of abuse and harassment. Prostitution is illegal in all 50 states, except for a few areas in Nevada. While stripping is legal, the act of sex work remains stigmatized.

Eugene is no exception.

Claire, who prefers to use a pseudonym due to safety concerns, is a content creator for OnlyFans based in Eugene, selling photos and videos for money. She says that she sees stigmas surrounding sex work all the time.

“There are also a lot of assumptions that people that do sex work are troubled or did not choose to become a sex worker,” Claire says. “But in my opinion, it’s just like any other job. I think something that’s really important is that people should be comfortable with their bodies.”

Pratt and Claire don’t have physical sex with their clients, but they are still sex workers who experience both the stigma and empowerment that comes with it.

“I think sex work has a unique ability to be more exploitative than other lines of work because it’s criminalized in so many ways,” Pratt says. “And because then it lacks legal protection.”

Pratt worked at Bobby’s for about a year. Although she enjoyed some aspects of the job, there were aspects that she did not like, mostly due to management.

On an average night, Pratt brought home \$50. Many clubs have a rule that if clients are not spending money on the entertainment, they are required to leave, according to Pratt.



Bobby's rule is looser — customers are asked to leave if they aren't spending money on tipping dancers, gambling or buying drinks, according to Jessica Hills, a bartender and fill-in manager at Bobby's. Pratt remembers nights when more than 10 people would be in the club, but none of the dancers made any money because customers were spending it elsewhere.

“In an environment where nobody is making sure that the people who are working are making money, it led to a lot of unpleasant interaction between people working and customers,” Pratt says. “It just felt like there was a lot of lazy management that led to these things.”

Sometimes, Pratt says those customer interactions would get messy, and it often fell on the dancers themselves to take care of it.

Pratt says that she did not have to deal with many problematic customers, but it did happen on occasion. For her, one of the best ways to handle it was setting boundaries, like holding customer's hands while giving a lap dance to keep them from touching her and sometimes even refusing to help a customer altogether if they gave her a “bad vibe.”

“In an environment like sex work where there is, by design, some element of mystery and slowly moving things forward,” Pratt says, “there are always going to be people who want to push that along and see how far it will go.”

For Pratt, although these experiences were uncomfortable, she treated them as a way to practice setting clear boundaries, she says.

Dealing with customers who crossed boundaries is not unique to Bobby's. Diana, a dancer in Lane County who also prefers to use a pseudonym due to safety concerns, says that she also has to deal with customer harassment and boundary-crossing almost daily. She says she is often touched by men even when she tells them not to, is called degrading names and was once even punched in the face.

There are bouncers at the club who are supposed to help protect the dancers, but Diana says that oftentimes when she brings a concern forward, the customers are only told to leave for the night with a simple handshake.

"I think that a lot of people don't realize that someone's worst day is your every day. And it's consistent sexual assault and consistent abuse," Diana says. "I think that people don't acknowledge the other side of dancing."

Diana says sex work is not all it is made out to be. One of the ways she copes with the abuse is by talking to a therapist she trusts and finding support in those she is close with.

Pratt says she wishes it wasn't all her responsibility to care for herself in an exploitative industry.

“If people actually cared about people being exploited in sex work, they would be able to shift the conversation to increasing protections and giving sex workers legal working status,” Pratt says. “I think making them all legally employees would go a long way in preventing a lot of workplace abuses.”

While trauma and mistreatment are part of the job for both Diana and Pratt, there are other parts that they both find pleasurable. They both expressed an increased sense of confidence in their bodies at some point while working. The confidence fluctuated, but a common theme of body and sexual empowerment remained.

Since 2020, Pratt has learned there is more to sex work than meets the eye. There are some challenges, but most stem from systemic issues resulting from a lack of legal protection. However, there are parts of sex work that are uniquely pleasurable.

Pratt said working in a club has helped her stop worrying about whether people found her attractive. One of the first things she learned while stripping is you’ll always be someone’s type.

“I have a little bit of a belly. It’s something I’ve always been insecure about because it’s something society wants us to be insecure about,” Pratt says. “I did not think that anybody would be into my stomach or my stretch marks until we have a customer come

in who's like, 'I will pay you \$100 to sit in my lap and just squish me right now for 20 minutes.'”

That same confidence carried over into other areas of her life as well, teaching Pratt a new sense of self-love and appreciation for her own body. That body confidence has stuck with her even now that she is no longer stripping.

“It made me stop worrying so much whether or not anybody could find me attractive,” Pratt said. “Not only was I not so insecure about having a belly, but I kind of stopped caring if anybody could tell. That mental attitude of not caring stuck with me after I was no longer on the clock.”

Diana says she feels this heightened sense of body confidence as well.

When Diana first started dancing, she says, she assumed she would be required to do makeup and hair and wear expensive lingerie. In reality, she gets to come to work wearing what is most comfortable to her, which is often underwear from Target and a crop top.

Being able to dress how she chooses has helped Diana feel more comfortable on the job. She has also noticed physical changes in her body as a result of dancing, something she says she is proud of.

“Now I can do pull-ups, and I’m strong, and I have muscle. I’ve never loved my body so much,” Diana says. “And I have a very womanly body. I have hips. I have stretch marks. It’s a body that’s not normally appreciated, and it’s so appreciated in my line of work.”

For Claire, OnlyFans serves as a platform that has helped her claim and embrace her sexuality.

“I’ve always been very sex-positive; nothing is ever taboo to me,” Claire says. “I just thought OnlyFans was a really cool way people were embracing their bodies and claiming themselves as sexual beings.”

In July 2021, Claire started an OnlyFans account, a platform that had long appealed to her. Depending on how much time she puts into the work, she says she can easily make upwards of \$600 a month from posting photos and videos for her followers.

While money is an added bonus, what really compelled Claire to become a content creator was the increased confidence she thought it would bring.

“I’ll make jokes because people that I haven’t talked to for years will all of a sudden be hitting me up, sliding into my DMs,” Claire says. “It’s a sense of confidence for sure — people that didn’t give you any attention before are now all of a sudden literally paying you to look the way you do. It’s empowering.”

Facing stigma and mistreatment at work is common, but Pratt and Claire say that is not unique to sex work. Pratt says she still feels empowered by her work while also acknowledging a need to challenge the stigma and create better working conditions.

“I think that the more that people embrace sex work, the less taboo it becomes,” Claire says. “And the more conversations that we have around just sex in general and OnlyFans and sex work, the more that it can be less of a shameful thing.”

## Article 2

**Headline: Advice from sex workers, to sex workers**

**Dek: Three OnlyFans content creators and two exotic dancers provide advice to current or prospective sex workers.**

As a stigmatized profession, sex work is oftentimes not talked about in a positive light — the focus is usually on legalization, sex trafficking, and other more negative aspects.

This article is guided by the voices of five sex workers. The sex workers I talked to do not have physical sex with their clients — I spoke with OnlyFans content creators and exotic dancers.

This story covers sex work and abuse. Most of the people in this story do not use their real names in order to protect themselves from harm.

Here is a list of five pieces of advice from five sex workers I interviewed:

### **1. Find a support network.**

OnlyFans is an online platform that is most often used to buy and sell sexual content. Sofia, a content creator since mid-2020 found that because many of her friends could not understand the nuances of the work she does, like posting nude photos and videos and flirting for money, having a support system was key.

While talking to trusted friends can be helpful, unless they are doing similar types of work, it can be hard for them to understand what you are going through.

“Try and find a support system,” Sofia said. “I’m not sure if I would have stuck it out for as long as I have without the support group. Try and find a support system, that’s the biggest thing.”

Sofia met another OnlyFans creator through a friend of hers, who then added her to a group chat of women who are content creators for OnlyFans. The group chat is a place for these women from around the country to build a sense of community — from ranting about men they have dealt with online to giving each other advice.

Because dancing is an in-person form of work, most dancers have co-workers, and the relationships with them vary like in any job. Diana, a dancer in the Lane County area, found that one of the things that helps her get through the daily abuses from customers at the club, such as being touched inappropriately and called names, is talking to the women she works with who can understand her experiences.

“The girls I work with are the only people who get it. I feel like you can tell your friends about it, but they don’t really understand,” Diana said. “The girls are an amazing support system to talk to. When you feel like an object and for them to say ‘no, you’re a person.’”

## **2. Understand the risks.**



The people I talked to did not describe these risks to dissuade people from becoming sex workers but to help them be prepared and “really think about how comfortable with that risk you are,” according to Nena Pratt.

Pratt started their sex work journey at a phone sex hotline back in 2018 before moving on to OnlyFans content creation and then stripping to help pay for massage school.

For Pratt, they are aware of the fact that their past work as an OnlyFans content creator and a dancer could affect them in the rest of their life. As someone who works in education, there is a potential that a boss could see their past content and they could be fired for it.

Due to the criminalization and stigmatization of sex work, many workers face similar risks in other jobs when it comes to being judged for their past work. This is one of the many reasons why sex work needs to be decriminalized. Beyond just a job setting, sex workers risk judgment, or worse, from both strangers and friends and family.

Because OnlyFans is an online platform, Pratt’s advice for those who are considering content creation is different than for dancing.

“With OnlyFans, my big thought is just, everything on the internet is permanent. So I knew early on that I was going to be identifiable no matter what I did,” Pratt said, referencing the unique tattoos on their knuckles in particular.

Simply not using your real name is not always enough to keep you from being recognized.

In March 2020, Alice started her OnlyFans, advertising on Reddit where she already had a large, anonymous following. Less than a year later, someone discovered who she was and leaked her information to her friends and family.

Alice immediately deleted her OnlyFans in February of 2021, and now has negative associations because of her experience. What started as a platform that helped her feel empowered in her body, led to a place of fear due to the actions of some other anonymous person, according to Alice.

“I just want people to know the risks,” Alice said. “I thought I was doing everything right.”

### **3. Find a club or marketing strategy that works for you.**

The people I talked to who were dancing, operated as independent contractors and the OnlyFans content creators were similarly self-employed. As a result, it was important for many of them to find a club they were comfortable at or use a marketing strategy that worked for them.

Some strip clubs have a reputation for not being a good place to work — either due to management or clientele or a combination of factors. Pratt worked at one such club —

they described the management as not really caring about the upkeep of the club or the way clients treat the workers.

Diana, a dancer in Lane County, found a club that defied her expectations when it came to how she is required to dress.

“At most clubs you have to wear heels and certain things. And most clubs are run by men that have a lot of control,” Diana said. “This club is run by a man but I wear my Birks and socks when I go to work.”

When she first started, Diana would spend hours doing hair and makeup — now she gets ready in 15 minutes and wears underwear from Target and a crop top, instead of spending lots of money on fancy lingerie.

While Diana enjoys the ability to dress however she is most comfortable at work, there are aspects of the club that she does not like.

“I think that at every dance club there could be stricter rules placed,” Diana said, speaking to the aggressive and inappropriate interactions she often has and the lack of response from her club management. Her main message: figure out what works for you and only do what makes you comfortable.

Claire echoed the same sentiment in her advice for people who are looking for marketing strategies for OnlyFans. For Claire, her strategy is to mostly market to people she knows, using Snapchat and Instagram. This strategy requires being comfortable with having OnlyFans subscribers that know who you are in real life.

“For me, it’s more comforting that it’s some guy that I knew from high school rather than some random person on Reddit,” Claire said.

Some content creators, like Alice, feel the opposite — there is no best practice, only finding what works best for you.

#### **4. Go for it. Be bold. Own it.**

Sex work is surrounded by stigma that is rooted in misogyny and sex negativity. As a result, there is sometimes a certain amount of shame around the work itself. Claire believes that in order to confront that stigmatization and shame, it is necessary to be strong in your own self.

Just go for it,” Claire said. “I think that the more that people do it, and the more people embrace sex work, the less taboo it becomes. And the more conversations that we have around sex in general, and OnlyFans and sex work, the more that it can be less of a shameful thing.”

In light of the risks that accompany sex work, all of the people I talked to advised those considering sex work to be strong in their decision.

“If it's something that you want to do, I think it's the kind of decision that you have to make boldly. I think a lot of girls go into the industry very shy, and very nervous about being found out,” Pratt said. “It's a lot of work to try to keep that out of your personal life and to keep that away from your identity. And a lot of girls do spend a lot of time and energy on that, and it still doesn't work. And I found it just a lot less stressful to just be a sex worker.”

## **5. Take care of yourself.**

Mental health struggles are a reality for many people, and sex work is no exception. As a dancer, Diana explained that she deals with abuse at work on a daily basis — mostly as a result of societal norms that make it acceptable to mistreat sex workers. Diana urges all people who are doing any type of sex work to prioritize their own mental health. For her, one of the best coping strategies has been to find a therapist she trusts, and who does not judge her.

While there are aspects of her job that Diana loves, she said that she finds the recent glamorization of stripping through mediums such as TikTok to be problematic. Diana does not seek to dissuade people from sex work but encourages them to take care of themselves if it is a path they pursue.

“Know your own emotions when it comes to sexual experiences,” Diana said. “Because this work can be very traumatizing, which is not something that's spoken about.”

Everyone I talked to echoed the same sentiment while giving advice to other sex workers — take care of your needs and watch out for yourself because you are important.

## Article 3

### **Headline: Empowerment versus Exploitation**

**Dek: How four sex workers push beyond the binary assumptions of what sex work is and highlight the simultaneous pleasure and trauma it entails.**

In mainstream feminism, sex work has been debated as either inherently empowering or inherently exploitative to women. Theorists like Gayle Rubin would argue that assuming sex work to be exploitative stems from a society rooted in sex negativity, that criminalizes sex work thus surrounding it in a cloud of stigma.

Three OnlyFans content creators and one exotic dancer tell their stories, highlighting the nuances behind sex work and pushing beyond a binary debate that does not center the voices of sex workers themselves.

Claire started her OnlyFans content creation journey last summer. She appreciates the extra money though more of the appeal for her was a way to “claim herself.” She started her account after a breakup which pushed her to explore something new, she says.

While OnlyFans has been a space that has fostered Claire’s own sense of confidence, there are many negative assumptions about sex work that she has to navigate. As a college student herself, one of the primary assumptions she has witnessed is that sex workers are uneducated and come to this type of work out of a lack of other options.

For Claire, OnlyFans is a place of sexual empowerment for women.

“It’s just another way of claiming yourself as a sexual being,” Claire said. “We’re going to be sexualized, regardless of anything that we do. And that’s a really tough thing to go through. So for women to claim themselves as sexual and take that back and take that power away and turn it into something more empowering, I think that’s really important.”

As debates center on sex work as either pleasurable and empowering or traumatic and exploitative, the stories of sex workers themselves highlight that it is so much more complicated than that — like with any job, there can be aspects of both for any given person.

Alice first turned to OnlyFans when she found herself needing an income. In November 2020, the restaurant Alice was waitressing in shut down for the second time due to COVID-19. Finding herself unemployed, Alice created an OnlyFans account.

Within days, Alice began earning money after gaining a following by posting her Only Fans page on anonymous Reddit forums. In three months, she says she made upwards of \$30,000. To make that money, Alice posted daily content for her 700 subscribers.

“I was really body positive,” Alice said. “OnlyFans was really fun for me and I felt really successful.”



But Alice has also experienced the dangers of sex work, which stem from a society that stigmatizes the work, according to cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin, and a misogynistic society that allows for the mistreatment of women. Creating content for OnlyFans started out as empowering — teaching her to love her body in new ways — but quickly led to the worst month of her life.

In February 2021, Alice bought a brand new car that she paid for in full. That same day, someone discovered Alice’s real identity and shared her OnlyFans information and pictures with her friends, family and most of her social media followers. The person who leaked her information sent Alice anonymous death threats, rape threats and even pictures of her own front door. That person was never found.

Even though the end of Alice’s OnlyFans career was traumatic, there was a time in which she felt empowered. She recognizes that sex work still is a source of empowerment for many, while also urging people who are considering creating an OnlyFans or getting involved in any type of sex work to know the pros and cons involved and have a plan to stay safe.

“I just want people to know the risks. I was being so safe about it, I thought I was doing everything right,” Alice said. “I don't want anyone to feel scared like I did.”

Alice’s story with OnlyFans began as a source of confidence, but ended in trauma. She acknowledged that the trauma was not because of the work itself, but a result of

misogyny, stigma and the doxxing that often targets women in particular. According to this perspective, which echoes Gayle Rubin's arguments about sex negativity, outside response to the sex work is where disempowerment lies, not within the sex work itself.

Conversations about sex work tend to focus on the experiences of women, but people of all genders are sex workers.

When he was 18, Ian created an OnlyFans account. He started with a free page, posting nude and provocative photos for subscribers and not requiring them to pay for his content.

He soon started making money by charging for content such as photos and videos, and began enjoying the positive attention it garnered.

"I felt the appeal of being wanted," Ian said, adding that there were "ebbs and flows of body confidence."

In the fall of 2020, less than a year after Ian began his OnlyFans, he was doxxed by two girls from his high school. Ian got a text from his dad, asking about what OnlyFans is, and that is when he knew someone had spread his information.

Because the two girls were under 18, Ian explained that he could have pressed charges, but did not want to "ruin the rest of their future." He choose to not press charges in

order to protect the two girls from having such a serious charge relating to underage distribution of pornography on their record.

Ian's story highlights a similar pattern as Alice's, illustrating some of the dangers of online sex work and the risks involved. However he, like Alice, did not urge other to stay away from sex work just because of his bad experience.

While it could be easy to point to these two stories that end in trauma as proof that sex work is dangerous and exploitative, that would ignore the pleasure and empowerment some sex workers also experience along with outside factors that contribute to the dangerous circumstances.

Nena Pratt, a former dancer and OnlyFans content creator, urges people to realize that negative circumstances do not mean that all sex work is bad or dangerous. She points to other factors that contribute to the disempowerment faced.

“Sex work has a unique ability to be more exploitative than other lines of work because it's criminalized in so many ways,” Pratt said. “But any job has the ability to either be an empowering position or an exploitative one.”

Using the example of someone who works in fast food, Pratt sought to highlight the ways in which other types of jobs also have elements of exploitation and empowerment, but they do not get asked the same questions as sex work does.

Pratt originally started dancing to help her pay for massage school, and she is now a licensed massage therapist. One of the judgments she sometimes had to face was the assumption that because she was using her body for work while dancing, that she had no self-respect, Pratt said.

“I really believe that those two jobs are equally physical and equally require you to, in a way, sell your body,” Pratt said, referencing dancing and massage.

These stories all highlight that although many sex workers do face experiences that are scary, harmful or otherwise disempowering, that stems from the social conditions that create an environment in which the negative experiences are seen as acceptable. The empowering parts of sex work are still empowering.

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