Beyond the Stage: 
A Gaze into the Working Lives of 
Exotic Stage Dancers in Western Canada 

by 
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Abstract

This policy analysis examines the working lives of exotic stage dancers in the stage-dancing circuit in two Western Canadian provinces: British Columbia and Alberta. The study explores their work experience, classification as independent contractors, lack of a social safety net, lack of employment protections, and their potential for collective resistance by forming an exotic dancers union. The mixed methods approach to data collection included an online self-administered survey (n=37) and ten semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with a purposive sample of exotic stage dancers. To add context, I draw upon my twelve years of experience working in the exotic dancing industry. Findings indicate that, because stage dancers face numerous obstacles—including poorly maintained workplaces, inadequate security, and inadequate support from strip club management and booking agents—they have limited means to resist poor work conditions.

Keywords: exotic dancers; strippers; strip clubs; working conditions; independent contractors
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Table of Contents

Approval.......................................................................................................................................................... ii
Partial Copyright License ................................................................................................................................. iii
Ethics Statement................................................................................................................................................ iv
Abstract........................................................................................................................................................... v
Acknowledgements.......................................................................................................................................... vi
Table of Contents........................................................................................................................................ vii
List of Tables....................................................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1. Introduction...................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2. Research on Exotic Dance ............................................................................................................. 5
2.1. Overview of the Literature on Exotic Dance.............................................................................................. 5
2.2. Working Conditions in North American Strip Clubs .............................................................................. 9
2.3. Independent Contractor Status .............................................................................................................. 18
  2.3.1. Control ............................................................................................................................................... 20
  2.3.2. Ownership of Tools and Equipment ................................................................................................. 22
  2.3.3. Chance of Profit and Risk of Loss ...................................................................................................... 23
  2.3.4. Payment ........................................................................................................................................... 23
2.4. Unionization ............................................................................................................................................. 26
2.5. Focus of the Current Study ....................................................................................................................... 28
2.6. Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................................................ 29

Chapter 3. The Methodology .......................................................................................................................... 30
3.1. Research Objectives .................................................................................................................................. 31
3.2. The Survey and Interview Schedules ....................................................................................................... 31
  3.2.1. The Online Survey ............................................................................................................................. 31
  3.2.1.1. Online Survey Content .................................................................................................................. 32
  3.2.2. The Interviews .................................................................................................................................... 34
  3.2.3. Sampling Method for the Online Survey and Interviews .................................................................. 34
3.3. Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................................................. 37

Chapter 4. Key Findings .................................................................................................................................... 38
4.1. The Sample ............................................................................................................................................... 38
4.2. Involvement in the Industry ....................................................................................................................... 40
  4.2.1. Dancers’ Initial Motivations .............................................................................................................. 40
  4.2.2. Most Positive Aspects of the Job ....................................................................................................... 42
  4.2.3. Most Negative Aspects of the Job ..................................................................................................... 43
  4.2.4. Encouraging Others to Become an Exotic Stage Dancer ............................................................... 45
4.3. Working Conditions .................................................................................................................................. 46
  4.3.1. Poorly Maintained Workplaces ....................................................................................................... 47
    4.3.1.1. Dangerous Stages ......................................................................................................................... 47
List of Tables

Table 1: Highest Level of Education Survey Respondents Reported Completing ........39
Table 2: Average Monthly Take Home Income ..............................................39
Table 3: Dancers’ Initial Motivations ...............................................................41
Table 4: Most Positive Aspect of the Job .........................................................42
Table 5: Most Negative Aspect of the Job .......................................................43
Table 6: Favorite Working Destination ............................................................62
Table 7: Reasons for Preferences in Working Destinations .............................63
Table 8: Negative Consequences Resulting from Independent Contractor Status ....66
Table 9: Dancers’ Recommendations for Strip Club Owners and Managers ........78
Table 10: Dancers’ Recommendations for Booking Agents .............................79
Table 11: Dancers’ Recommendations for Policy Makers ...............................80
Chapter 1. Introduction

Exotic dancing\(^1\), or stripping, is the exchange of a visual sexual fantasy for money. While there are variations in how this exchange is carried out, erotic dancing normally involves a woman\(^2\) removing her clothing in a sexually seductive manner for heterosexual male patrons within the confines of a strip club. While other types of venues have been known to offer exotic\(^3\) dancing, the focus of this research is on women working in strip clubs. Typically included under the umbrella of sex work because it involves the commodification of sexuality, striptease has commonly been referred to as the second oldest profession (Dragu and Harrison, 1998; Ross and Greenwell, 2005) and has historically been socially constructed as a deviant occupation (Scott, 1996; Skipper and McCaghy, 1970). Since the beginning of exotic dancing, Ross and Greenwell (2005) argue that one taboo has consistently endured: “the proper, self-respecting, morally upstanding, white Canadian woman did not undress in public with the explicit goal of sexually arousing men for a living” (p. 155). This stubborn legacy of thought has been instrumental in distinguishing the “good girls” from the “bad girls” (Cooke, 1985, p. 92). Outsiders to the industry have most commonly viewed strip teasers as lacking intelligence and education, being lower-class, hyper-sexualized, immoral, selfish, hardened, manipulative, prostitutes, and unable to do anything else for a living (Bradley-Engen, 2009; Ross, 2006). In effect, exotic dancers have always faced moral condemnation and state regulation (Bouclin, 2004a; Bruckert, 2002; Fischer, 2004).

\(^1\) In this thesis, the terms “stripper”, “exotic dancer”, “erotic performer”, “erotic entertainer” and “dancer” are used interchangeably to refer to a woman who is paid to perform a dance while simultaneously removing her clothing in a seductive manner.

\(^2\) For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on women in the exotic dancing industry; however, some men also perform this type of work.

\(^3\) The term “exotic” may be considered by some readers to have colonialist underpinnings. However, it is the dominant term used by Western Canadian dancers to describe their work, out of respect for this population, I use the term throughout this thesis.
Even in the context of women's liberation, the sexual revolution, and the relaxation of norms regarding women's sexuality, exotic dancers continue to create anxiety and ambivalence (Ross and Greenwell, 2005, p. 155).

Despite its stigmatization and marginalization, exotic dancing persists because of demand and the availability of female dancers willing to tolerate the stigma in order to profit from an industry that values their “edgy, non-traditional labour, the time-limited character of their careers, and the absence of male competitors” (Ross, 2006 p. 333). In comparison to other types of feminized work, most dancers in North America are able to make a more comfortable living (Chun, 1999) while also having time to pursue other endeavours including education, alternate careers, or motherhood.

Nevertheless, because exotic dancers “blur the boundaries between private and public, presentation and identity, work and leisure” (Bruckert, 2002, p. 16), they exist within a complex web of legal and moral regulation to which more reputable occupational groups are not exposed (Bradley-Engen, 2009). Erotic dancing does not qualify as “real” work and is not included in Canada Census employment data (Ross, 2006, p. 330). Classified as independent contractors by strip club owners and booking agents, exotic dancers are denied legal protection relating to the terms and conditions in which they earn their living. As a result, the occupational health and safety of these workers remains outside formal labour legislation (Chun, 1999; Ross, 2009). At the same time, owners of strip clubs take advantage of dancer’s marginalized status while tightly managing their working environment in an effort to extract maximum profit from their labour power (Bruckert, 2002; Chun, 1999).

Given the precarious position of exotic dancers within the Canadian labour force, this policy analysis explores the working experiences of women involved in the exotic dancing industry in Alberta and British Columbia. I aim to understand dancers’ own perspectives on their status as independent contractors as well as their day to day working conditions. The following questions guide this research:

- What are the positive and negative aspects of working as an exotic dancer?
- How satisfied or dissatisfied are dancers with their working conditions?
• To whom, if anyone, do dancers make complaints regarding poor working conditions, and what is the outcome of these complaints?

• Do geographic differences in working conditions and enforcement of municipal, provincial and federal regulations affect dancer’s preferences for where they work?

• Are dancers interested in becoming employees who are protected by the Employment Standards Act in each province that provides workers labour protections and a minimum standard of working conditions?

• Are dancers interested in unionizing in order to collectively resist poor working conditions?

To answer these research questions, I utilized a mixed methods approach including: a) an online survey examining working conditions, legal regulations surrounding the industry, reporting practices, and unionization; and b) semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten exotic dancers. Interviews covered similar topics to the survey but allowed participants to highlight topics of importance to them. In addition to the online survey and the interviews, I add context to the analysis by drawing on my twelve years work in the exotic dancing industry.

By centralizing the voices of the exotic dancers in this study, I hope to draw attention to certain labour practices without advocating abolition, draconian regulations, or condemnation of the industry. As a woman who has benefitted greatly from my work in the industry, I do not want to prevent anyone else from engaging in this work.

The policy analysis comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study. In Chapter 2, I review relevant Canadian, American and English literature on exotic dancing. I begin with a broad overview of the literature and then focus in on research regarding dancer motivations, working conditions, their status as independent contractors, and the question of unionization among exotic dancers. Also I describe my theoretical perspective which is a feminist labour-rights framework, and my interest in
the work of exotic stage dancers as opposed to table dancers\textsuperscript{4}, or lap dancers\textsuperscript{5}. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology and data analysis. In Chapter 4, I articulate the study’s key findings, and in Chapter 5, I relate these findings to the significant body of research on exotic dancing in North America and England. In this final chapter, I provide specific recommendations for improving the occupational health and safety of exotic stage dancers, and describe the limitations of the research.

\textsuperscript{4} Table dancers, also referred to as “private dancers”, typically work in one club for months or even years at a time. In contrast, stage dancers are contracted to perform for one week at a specific club. Table dancers are not paid to perform on stage but rather generate their income through selling private dances to different customers. Table dancers pay the club a ‘floor fee’ (usually $30-50) for access to the premises and the customers. In a typical table dance, the stripper dances in between the customer’s legs without making contact with him or her. Table dancers create their own schedules by working the days and hours they prefer.

\textsuperscript{5} Lap dancers are similar to private dancers in that they generate their income from selling private dances to individual customers; they are not paid by the club manager to perform on stage. Customers paying for lap dances expect to have a significant amount of contact with the dancer. Lap dancers often sit on their customer’s laps during a dance or maneuver so that their breasts or genitals are only inches from the customers face.
Chapter 2. Research on Exotic Dance

In the first part of this chapter, I provide an overview of the academic literature on exotic dance in North America. Next, I review literature describing the structure and organization of the exotic dancing industry in North America, the interpersonal relationships—among dancers, between dancers and their customers and between dancers and support staff and management— and the physical environment of the typical strip club. I examine research which suggests that exotic dancers should be classed as “employees”, not “independent contractors”. I then discuss some of the ethnographic accounts of former exotic dancers who view themselves as entrepreneurs, thereby challenging proponents of the view that, under provincial legislation, exotic dancers should be classified as “employees”. The chapter concludes by examining research on collective bargaining and unionization efforts among exotic dancers in the United States.

2.1. Overview of the Literature on Exotic Dance

Compared to other forms of sex work6, exotic dancing historically has been viewed as somewhat more respectable, in part, because it has been socially and economically integrated into North American popular culture (Wahab, Baker, Smith, Cooper and Lerum, 2010). For example, exotic dance has been showcased on television talk shows, in Sundance Film Festival movies, feature films, exercise and self-esteem videos, and in dozens of memoirs written by exotic dancers (Egan, Frank, and

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6 Other types of sex work include, but are not limited to, on-street sex workers, massage parlor attendants, escorts, phone sex operators, peep show performers, dominatrixes, independent sex workers, etc.
Federal and municipal governments allow strip clubs to be highly visible in cities, suburbs, and residential areas by permitting them to advertise provocative images of scantily clad women on their marquees and on billboards along highways. Despite the visibility of the exotic dancing industry, the morality of strip clubs has remained the subject of community and academic debates.

In North America, the exotic dancing industry has been the subject of significant interdisciplinary inquiry by academics in the social sciences (sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and women’s studies), history, public health, and law. As a result, exotic dancers have been studied by various practitioners using a “variety of theoretical frameworks and methodologies” (Frank, 2007, p. 502). Since the emergence of literature on exotic dance in the 1960’s, a broad array of topics have been studied, including erotic dancer identities (Rambo-Ronai, 1992; Reid, Epstein, and Benson, 1994; Wesely, 2003a), the impact of dancing on the dancer’s lives (Barton, 2006; Deshotels and Forsythe, 2005; Wesely, 2002), self-esteem, relationship satisfaction, emotional and psychological stability of dancers (Downs, James, and Cowan, 2006), the process by which dancers are socialized into the exotic dance community (Lewis, 1998), and stigma management strategies that exotic dancers use (Bradley, 2007; Thompson and Harred, 1992).

Several academics have examined the relationship between the dancer and her customers (Egan 2006a; Frank, 2002; Rambo-Ronai and Ellis, 1989), dancer’s emotional labour (Barton, 2007; Frank, 1998), dancer’s use of ‘counterfeit intimacy’ (Enck and Preston, 1988; Pasko, 2002; Sijuwade, 1996), and gender and power relations within the strip club (Murphy, 2003; Wesely, 2002; Wood, 2000). Others have sought to classify the characteristics of customers and dancers (Egan, 2006a; Enck and Preston, 1988; Ericson and Tewksbury, 2000), and the organizational characteristics of different types of strip clubs (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009). Some literature has developed on strip-club working conditions (Fischer, 1996; Holsopple, 1998, Lewis, Maticka-Tyndale, Shaver, and Schramm, 2005; Maticka-Tyndale, Lewis, Clark, Zubick, and Young 1999 and 2000). Wesely (2003b) has studied the pressure by managers on dancers to make modifications to their bodies.
Other academics interested in exotic dancing have studied the ways in which various systems of social control affect dancers and their customers, the resistance of dancers and customers to these social controls (Egan, 2004; Montenurro, 2001), legal battles dealing with strip club location, so-called community effects, the regulation of strip clubs (Frank, 2005; Hanna, 1998, 2003; Ross, 2000), and the effect of regulation on dancers experiences (Bruckert and Dufrense, 2002; Lewis and Maticka-Tyndale, 2000). Exotic dancing also has been analyzed for its potential to transcend and invert social norms and gender roles (Schiff, 1999; Schweitzer, 2001) and for its links to other types of performance art, dance, and burlesque (Hanna, 1998; Liepe-Levinson, 2002).

Although the exotic dance literature has covered a wide range of topics, Frank (2007) suggests that deviance studies and feminist analyses have predominated. While each "trajectory has been motivated by different assumptions and intellectual concerns, [they] both have led to theorizations of stripping as labour" (Frank, 2007, p. 503). Deviance studies have tended to focus on the biological, psychological, or sociological motivations for entry into a deviant occupation (Forsythe and Deshotels, 1998; Miller, 1978), on the job socialization techniques and rituals (Lewis, 1998), the stigma associated with exotic dancing and its management (Forsyth and Deshotels, 1997; 1969; Skipper and McCaghy, 1970; Thompson and Harred, 1992), micro level interactions between dancers and their customers (Enck and Preston, 1988), and dancers as lesbians (McCaghy and Skipper, 1969). This literature tends to pathologize dancers, treating exotic dancing as a social problem in need of redress.

Although deviance studies use the language of work and include the voices of exotic dancers, their analyses continue to contain moral and social biases, and treat exotic dancing as a form of deviance. The worker’s own views are discredited when they are treated as rationalizations (Thompson & Harred, 1992). These studies do not challenge the classification of stripping as a deviant occupation, or the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate work (Bruckert, 2002). The deviance literature inadequately theorizes sexuality and gender because it examines face to face interactions, usually between dancers and their customers, without taking into account the effect of larger social, economic, and political forces on those interactions (Bruckert, 2002). The result is a one-dimensional view of exotic dancers as deviant or victimized. For example, Boles and Garbin (1974) and Salutin (1977) asserted that women enter
and remain in exotic dancing because of oppressive factors in their social and personal lives including: lack of a formal education, abusive family or partners, addiction, and financial hardship. These authors failed to examine larger issues, including the position of young working-class women in the broader labour market. Because deviance theorists fail to examine their own social, economic and political positions, they use themselves as a yardstick by which to measure the behaviors of their research subjects, which leads them to other those subjects (Bruckert, 2002).

In her examination of the North American literature on exotic dance, Frank (2007) claimed that the “most ubiquitous question in the strip club literature to date concerns gendered power – whether dancers are exploited or exploiters, subjects or objects, agentic or oppressed” (p. 504). Indeed, the pervasive examination of gendered power within the exotic dancing industry stems from the feminist “sex wars” of the 1980’s – an ongoing debate dividing radical feminists and liberal feminists on the issue of sex work. On the one hand, many radical feminists (Dworkin, 1987; Farley, 2004; Raphael and Shapiro, 2004; Raymond, 2003) assert that the sex industry exists as a result of women’s social and economic subordination. Therefore, they call for the abolition of sex work arguing that sex workers are disillusioned victims who are incapable of understanding how their work perpetuates the objectification, devaluation, and dehumanization of all women, thereby supporting a system of male domination. On the other hand, liberal feminists assert that sex work subverts and, therefore, destabilizes patriarchal definitions of conventional femininity, arguing that many sex workers enjoy their work. Sex workers in the latter group, including current or former exotic dancers, claim to be empowered actors who have the right to their own self-expression through performing erotic labour in its various forms and, therefore, to have their work afforded the appropriate workplace protections (Califia, 1994; Pheterson, 1987).

Since the late 1990’s some feminist researchers have begun to identify the limitations of these one-dimensional depictions of sex work as either exploitation or empowerment (Barton, 2002 and 2006; Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009; Bruckert, 2002; Egan, 2004; Murphy, 2003; Wood, 2000). These researchers recognize that there is sufficient variation across time, place, and sector to indicate that sex work cannot be seen one-sidedly as either oppression or empowerment. Broad social, economic, and political conditions create an unequal distribution of choice, oppression and job
satisfaction in the sex industry (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009; Bruckert, 2002). Scholarship and activism by sex workers has contributed to a reconceptualization of sex workers as active agents who exercise power within the constraints of a patriarchal, capitalist society (Barton, 2002; Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009; Bruckert, 2002). Indeed, these researchers have concluded that sex work can be simultaneously empowering and oppressive; the best way to understand various forms of commercial sex is as legitimate work.

Exotic dance literature that combines a labour framework and a feminist framework is relevant to my research for a number of reasons. First, these theorists argue that exotic dance is a legitimate form of work that can be simultaneously empowering and oppressive. Second, dancer’s voices are centralized in analyses of their labour, including its organization and regulation. Third, these academics recognize that despite exploitative and oppressive working conditions, stigma, and social marginalization, dancers exercise agency; they are active subjects attempting to create more favourable conditions for themselves within their work environments. Fourth, these texts recognize that exotic dancing is located within broader labour relations and larger social institutions that define legitimate labour and legitimate labourers. In the next section, I draw upon existing exotic dance literature that uses a labour framework informed by a feminist framework to examine working conditions and occupational health and safety in North American strip clubs. The current study of the lived experience of exotic dance regulation and working conditions intends to add to this body of literature.

2.2. Working Conditions in North American Strip Clubs

As is the case with all social phenomena, the exotic dancing industry is affected by the social, political, and economic context in which it occurs (Maticka-Tyndale et al. 2000). Erotic performers are members of the larger social world which is characterised by prescribed sex and gender roles and the distribution of power associated with them. Women’s ascribed sexual role is to appeal to and attract male attention, which is precisely what female exotic dancers do in their work. At the same time, women’s culturally ascribed gender role calls for sexual passivity, allowing men to initiate physical sexual contact. Moreover, especially for women, sexual interaction is expected to be
private, non-commercial and monogamous. Therefore, while female exotic dancers do not violate their sexual role, they do violate their gender role (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000). Moreover, because exotic dancers behave beyond the bounds of acceptable femininity by engaging in explicit public displays of sexuality, they are treated as social outcasts, and ultimately stigmatized and labelled as immoral “bad girls” (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000, p. 88). An exotic dancer’s immorality serves to disenfranchise her from the rights of ordinary citizens, including protection from abuse, exploitation, harassment and violence that occurs at the hands of customers, employers, police and other citizens (Cooke, 1985; Lewis et al., 2005; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000).

In spite of the stigma and resulting lack of legal protections experienced by exotic dancers, when considering the economic position of young working class women in Canada it becomes clear that erotic dancing provides a viable opportunity for them to earn an above average income with little educational attainment. According to Cerilli (2005), while the majority of adult women in Canada work, their labour is shaped by an economic structure that advantages men relative to women. Women continue to be disadvantaged, earning 66 cents on every dollar earned by their male counterparts (Cerilli, 2005). Over 70% of Canadian women continue to be employed in traditionally female occupations, including health care, teaching, clerical work, sales and service (Bruckert, 2002). Typically, women are also responsible for the majority of housework and child care duties; their double day thus affects the type of work they are able to do within the paid labour force. According to Bruckert (2002),

in terms of labour-market location, opportunities and obligations, it is immediately apparent that strippers are choosing their occupational location in an economic climate characterised by unappealing choices. Stripping may not always be a ‘nice’ job, but neither are the alternatives. For some [women], stripping may be a viable strategy to realize the economic and social benefits afforded by participation in the paid labour force while also offering sufficient flexibility to accommodate their many other commitments. (p. 31)

Therefore, many women choose to engage in exotic dancing despite the lack of legal protections afforded to them.
Despite the lack of legal protections for exotic dancers, some municipal governments in Canada nevertheless require that erotic performers register for annual licenses (Cooke, 1985). For example, Calgary and Edmonton require exotic dancers to submit to a criminal record check and pay between $150 and $300 in each city if they want to work in local strip clubs. According to Cooke (1985), the provincial government’s argument behind its licensing of dancers in Ontario is that it would help to legitimize their work and improve health and safety for the workers. However, when examining the impact of licensing on escorts in Windsor, Ontario Lewis and Maticka-Tyndale (2000) found that while the “potential exists for such policies to enhance the health and well-being of sex workers”, the way in which the policy was being used did more harm than good (p. 437). They assert that licensing merely provides the municipality and police with information about who is or has ever been an escort—information that could be used against her if and when she applies for a job outside the industry (Bruckert, Parent, and Robitaille, 2003). Cooke (1985) claimed that some dancers were afraid to apply for a license if they have an existing criminal record related to prostitution or drug offences. As a result they were pushed into more underground forms of sex work.

While erotic dancers contend with formal legal regulations, they must also deal with the informal industry regulations imposed by club owners and managers. According to Bruckert (2002), owners and managers of strip clubs in Ontario are members of professional associations that fight potential threats to their collective economic well-being. This close communication between strip club owners leads to similar approaches to the way they manage erotic performers. Bruckert (2002, p. 59) found that “innovations (read strategies of exploitation) that are successful in one club are quickly adopted throughout the industry”. When economic shifts threaten the profitability of strip clubs, owners throughout the industry often adopt new oppressive approaches to labour management even though they operate independently of each other. The best example of this is the introduction of lap dancing in Canadian strip clubs during the 1990’s. As we shall see, this trend toward heightened expectations of labourers and introduction of non-standard labour practices mirrors the experience of many working class women in Canada (Bruckert, 2002).

During the 1980’s, when Canada’s economy suffered a severe decline, there was a shift toward deregulation of the private sector and downsizing of the public sector,
including education, health and welfare (Bruckert, 2002). These economic shifts resulted in consequences for the types of work available and how labour was organized (Phillips, 1997). With manufacturing jobs being moved to developing countries where labour was cheap and minimally regulated, the service sector in Canada grew (Phillips, 1997). Services that had previously remained outside the capitalist market economy, such as child and elder care, were now subsumed under the umbrella of the capitalist market, thereby creating a host of semi-skilled jobs (Cerili, 2005). Within the exotic dancing industry, a similar trend took place: dancer’s work was de-skilled and de-professionalized when, in an effort to save money, club owners began refusing to pay dancers for their elaborate stage performances and, instead, required dancers to earn their money from individual customers by providing fee-for-service face-to-face erotic and emotional labour in the form of lap dances (Ross, 2009).

For working class women, including exotic dancers, the move to service based work was accompanied by the introduction of non-standard labour practices that resulted in workplace marginalization, including low pay, no employment benefits, long hours, no collective bargaining, unhealthy or dangerous working conditions, and exploitive atmospheres (Cerili, 2005). Today, lap dancers in many jurisdictions are not paid by strip club owners for their labour but are required to pay a floor fee—$30 to $50 a shift—to the club for the privilege of having access to strip club patrons from whom to solicit private dances. Moreover, by reducing the costs of providing live entertainment, strip club owners are able to hire more dancers and promote lap dancing as a fresh attraction. According to Cooke (1985), this practice helped to establish “a highly competitive atmosphere in which the women are forced to encourage hands-on entertainment, rather than dance, in order to make their money” (p. 98).

While lap dancing provides women the opportunity to make significant amounts of money if they work hard, and the ability to work in a single club rather than travel the circuit, lap dancing increases threats to the health and safety of individual dancers (Maticka-Tyndale, Lewis, Clark, Zubick and Young, 1999). According to Maticka-Tyndale et al. (1999), the social and cultural context in which lap dancing takes place contributes to a “chronic state of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the strip clubs” whereby the women are pressured by economics and customers to engage in sex for pay (p. 19). However, where club policies are supportive of dancers – by, for
example, providing adequate protection against harassment and assault, keeping
dancing in high visibility areas of the club, and enforcing no touch rules—dancers were
much less vulnerable (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1999).

Nevertheless, Lewis (2006) found that, in order to resist strip club management’s
exploitive labour practices, dancers often “tip” strip club support staff in order to break
the rules regarding “physical or sexual contact with customers” (p. 306). By drawing
parallels with the service industry, particularly the “tipping system”, Lewis (2006, p. 297)
examined the strategies strip club workers use to enhance their autonomy on the job,
their income, and the resources they use to resist club policies (p. 297). Because the
club does not pay them a salary, dancers become private entrepreneurs who work
collectively with other workers—dancers, waitresses, shooter girls, bartenders, disc
jockeys, doormen/bouncers, and hostesses—to secure support, future opportunities to
earn money and the ability to violate club policies without being reported to
management.

Lewis (2006) drew on Bruckert’s “informal economy of favours” to describe these
reciprocal relationships that operate outside the control of management (p. 297). For
example, Lewis’s (2006) interviewees described how important it is to have a good
relationship with the DJ, which includes the dancer tipping him so that he promotes her,
provides a good light show, and shortens her songs while she is on stage. One dancer
stated:

   It’s symbiotic. Everybody’s out to help everybody else so everybody can
   make as much money as possible. The more you help other people, the
   more they’ll help you. (p. 303)

Lewis (2006) also reported monetary exchanges between dancers and waitresses to
“encourage” waitresses to “look the other way” so that dancers can violate rules
regarding physical/sexual contact with customers (p. 306). This study indicated that, in
spite of a gendered organizational context, it is easier to do one’s job with a supporting
cast; by working together, the staff experience “a greater sense of autonomy, personal
empowerment and enhanced economic security in an ever more exploitive work
environment” (p. 310).
Price (2008) examined workplace dynamics in one strip club in the United States. She found that the organization of the club reproduced the gender and sexuality hierarchy of wider society, which prevented collegial relationships between different categories of workers. She found that bartenders, bouncers, DJ’s and cocktail waitresses do not support dancers in their jobs; rather they reinforce stereotypes and gender hierarchies. Price argued that:

rather than focusing on the need to regulate patrons’ behaviors through the strippers – maintaining the notion that strippers are allies in these tasks – men workers often underscore stripper stereotypes that amplify the need for oversight in the first place. By contrast, men coworkers view cocktail waitresses more as partners in their labor. (Price, 2008, p. 377)

While the support staff in this particular study treated dancers as unreliable, untrustworthy and immature, cocktail waitresses were not subject to the same surveillance and distrust. According to Price (2008), this difference in treatment results from the good girl/bad girl dichotomy, a mechanism for dividing and ranking women based on their feminine virtue. In contradistinction to the cooperation between strip club staff described by Lewis (2006), dancers in Price’s study were not supported by coworkers; rather, they were treated as if they were expendable, leaving dancers vulnerable to abuses from both coworkers and patrons.

Holsopple (1998) confirmed the gendered nature of control in strip clubs and echoed Price’s (2008) findings by arguing that “the common underlying element in strip clubs is that male customers, managers, staff and owners use diverse methods of harassment, manipulation, exploitation, and abuse to control female strippers” (p. 2). Holsopple’s results indicate that staff, owners and managers often used verbal abuse and name calling to control dancers. Entertainers were continuously called “whore”, “slut”, “bitch” and “cunt”, club staff put dancers down by calling them “stupid”, “fat”, “dog”, “crack head” and “junkie” (p. 13). Holsopple (1998) found that dancers were being robbed, beaten, threatened with a weapon and verbally and sexually harassed or assaulted by customers because the bouncers in her research refused to walk dancers to their cars after their shifts. She found that when her respondents reported an abusive customer to management they were dismissed and told that they should expect abuse in
their line of work. These findings signal a lack of cooperation between bar staff and dancers, indicating that managers do not support dancers.

While the potential exists for dancers to experience stigmatization, exploitation and sexual abuse from bar staff, managers and owners while at work, Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009) argued that dancer’s workplace experiences depend upon the social organization of the particular strip club in which they work. After critiquing previous research on exotic dance for its narrow focus on either a specific strip club, or a handful of strip clubs within a small geographic area, Bradley-Engen and Ulmer’s (2009) research was much broader. Bradley-Engen worked as an exotic dancer for three years while doing participant observation and conducting interviews with dancers in 37 strip clubs spanning the southern and north eastern United States. She found three distinct club types characterised by different organizational structures leading to different interpersonal relationships that create differences in the working experiences of exotic dancers. In “hustle clubs” dancers are required to meet minimum sales targets by selling private dances to individual customers (p. 42). However, in these clubs managers do not enforce the bar’s “no touch” policy, and therefore, dancers labour in an environment that “tolerates, if not encourages, harassment” (p. 42-43). In hustle clubs, dancers usually remain nameless and faceless to managers, which made Bradley-Engen and Ulmer characterise them as creating a hostile, competitive, and isolating environment. “Social clubs” are located in rural areas where there are fewer dancers who are willing and able to work (p. 45). In these clubs, dancers felt valued because management cared about their concerns and took them seriously. Although dancers working in “show clubs”, the third category, are relatively powerless in their negotiations with management, they are, nevertheless, highly valued for their beauty and physical ability to perform unique pole moves while on stage; consequently, these dancers reported feeling a sense of personal power (p. 53).

As we have seen, researchers studying exotic dance have found that the moral, legal, and social organizational context, and the interpersonal relations that flow from
these contexts, affect dancers’ workplace experiences, including their health and safety on the job. However, little attention has been paid to the effect of the strip club’s physical context on dancer experience, apart from Lilleston, Reuben, and Sherman’s study (2012)\(^7\), which examined the ways that the moral, legal, social organizational and physical contexts of a club interacted with each other to affect perceptions of safety among exotic dancers in a U.S. strip club. Lileston et al. (2012) argue that “understanding the contextual factors, which influence how dancers understand and prioritize risk in their work settings, is crucial for creating policies and programs, which effectively reduce risk in this environment” (p. 561). In line with this goal, my study adds to the sparse literature examining how the physical space where dancers ply their trade interacts with the moral, legal, and social organization of the work. With this purpose in mind, I turn next to the organization of the exotic dancing industry in British Columbia and Alberta in order to provide a context for the results presented in ensuing chapters.

The shift to mandatory lap dancing described above has not been uniform across Canada. In British Columbia and Alberta, the exotic dancing industry still provides various options for women depending on their level of comfort and willingness to interact with customers. Dancers can choose whether to work as paid stage performers, lap dancers, or both depending on the expectations of a particular strip club owner(s). While some dancers earn their income performing on stage, others perform paid stage shows while supplementing their weekly salary by doing lap dances in between their stage appearances. All stage dancers, including those who also perform lap dances, are booked through an agent to whom they pay fifteen percent of their weekly salary. Stage dancers are also expected to travel a circuit by working one week in a particular club and then travelling to a booking in another city.

\(^7\) Two other studies mention the impact of physical environment on dancer experiences, but only in passing—Holsopple (1998) briefly mentioned the effect of “cheaply constructed” stages (p. 8) and “frigid” and “damp” change rooms on dancer experiences (p. 10) and Maticka-Tyndale et al. (2000) mentioned the general lack of cleanliness in strip clubs.
Dancers who prefer not to perform on stage or who do not wish to work the circuit typically work as lap dancers. They pay a floor fee to the club owner in return for access to customers. Regardless of whether a dancer is a paid stage performer or a lap dancer, for each lap dance performed, dancers are expected to pay the club a percentage of the earnings; for lap dancers this fee is in addition to the floor fee they already pay for access to the customers.

For the purposes of this research, I am interested in the work of stage dancers because they travel a circuit, which means that their working conditions are constantly changing. In addition, because stage dancers have short-term contracts—usually a week—they typically have limited power in their interpersonal relationships because of the structural organization of the strip club. Club rules and expectations vary depending on the club. For these reasons, stage dancers labour in a constantly changing environment. I provide some information about their work and then examine the dancer’s status as an independent contractor.

While dancers in British Columbia and Alberta still have the option to earn their income from stage performances, show prices have been capped. Consequently, most dancers are paid approximately the same amount per show regardless of their physical appearance, costumes or dancing ability. Strip club owners have reduced the number of paid stage shows they schedule, which means that stage dancers perform fewer shows than they did in previous years, creating a situation where they are forced to supplement their income by providing lap dances if they want to earn as much. While owners of strip clubs pay stage dancers for their performances, many of them require dancers to be on the club floor at certain times throughout the day. The expectation behind this club policy is that dancers will mingle with customers and/or provide lap dances, thereby keeping patrons in the bar and spending money on alcohol and lap dances, for which the club owners receive a percentage. Stage dancers are not paid for this time.

The club floor refers to the public areas of the strip club where customers are permitted to mingle with the dancers. Aside from when the dancer is on stage, management encourages dancers to spend time on the club floor conversing with customers.
In Alberta, the majority of strip club owners require dancers to perform lap dances in addition to their paid stage shows; dancers who are not willing to comply cannot get bookings in Alberta strip clubs that offer lap dancing. Many club owners in Alberta have implemented a weekly quota; a specific number of lap dances – usually between 60 and 100 – that stage dancers must perform between their stage shows. As with club policy in British Columbia, dancers are expected to pay the club a percentage – usually between $15 and $20 per dance– of each lap dance performed. The price of a lap dance typically costs the customer between $30 to $50 dollars per song. If dancers do not reach the quota set by the strip club owner, they are still required to pay the $15 or $20 for each dance they did not perform. This exploitative labor practice makes dancers literally pay out of their own pockets for lap dances they did not perform; the policy means they end up paying their own weekly stage performance salaries.

In order to reach their weekly quota, dancers put an enormous amount of pressure on themselves. Wesely (2003b) argues that some dancers become very fluid in their boundaries with clients, altering them on a customer by customer basis, depending on the attractiveness of the customer and the amount of money he pays them. At the same time, dancers regulate each other to ensure that no dancer creates a monopoly for herself by providing a dirtier dance than other dancers deem acceptable (Bruckert, 2002).

In the following section, I examine one aspect of the legal context shaping the working experiences of exotic stage dancers in Alberta and British Columbia: their status as independent contractors. This status limits a dancer’s right to occupational health and safety standards that other service workers enjoy.

2.3. Independent Contractor Status

While there is some variation in the organization of the exotic dancing industry across provinces, strip club owners in all provinces are able to implement exploitive labour practices without penalty. Bruckert (2002) claimed:

Unlike more reputable labour sites, the industry itself is subject to particular restraints that are imposed by the state precisely because it
operates on the margins of morality. In practice, this regulation not only operates contrary to the interests of strippers, but actually positions clubs to exploit the vulnerability of their workers. (p. 60)

In this statement, Bruckert (2002) refers to exotic dancer’s status as independent contractors⁹ – i.e., they are self-employed – as opposed to employees. She argues that, when strip club owners classify dancers as self-employed, they are denied a whole series of rights, protections, and benefits afforded to employees. As independent contractors dancers do not have access to protective labour legislation, including the right to collective bargaining, Employment Insurance (EI), Canada Pension Plan (CPP), Workers Compensation, or employer provided medical benefits including medical, dental and disability insurance (Bouclin, 2004a; Bradley-Engen, 2009; Bruckert et al., 2003; Cerilli, 2005). Indeed, according to Fudge et al., (2002), being classified as an independent contractor results in, not only a lack of legal protections, but also a lack of economic security and social recognition.

By classifying dancers as independent contractors, club owners and agents avoid the responsibilities and costs associated with hiring employees. These include: providing workers with a minimum standard of working conditions as set out in the Employment Standards Act in each province, paying premiums into the employment insurance system and Canada Pension Plan, informing workers of their health and safety risks, paying into the workers’ compensation system, and making deductions from each employee’s paycheque for income tax and Employment Insurance payments. Additional costs for employers include health benefits and sick leave. Instead, these

⁹ According to the B.C. Government, Ministry of Labour, in order to be an independent contractor, the person performing the service has to be in business for him/herself. Designating a person as an independent contractor does not necessarily make them one. To help decide, several tests have been developed by the courts and applied by the Employment Standards Tribunal. Not all elements of the tests apply in all situations. Similarly, according to the Alberta Labour Relations Board, an independent contractor is a person carrying on an independent business. An independent contractor retains the power not only to direct what work is done but also to control the manner of doing the work. If a person can be overseen or directed as to the manner of doing the work such person is not an independent contractor.
responsibilities and costs are transferred to the worker, who is expected to submit both her portion as well as the portion usually paid by an employer (B.C. Government, Ministry of Labour, 2012).

Nevertheless, the fact that an exotic dancer contract (Appendix A) refers to a dancer as an independent contractor does not make her one; it is the actual work relationship that determines if a person is an employee or an independent contractor. The Employment Standards Tribunal has provided tests to assist with the determination of whether a worker is an employee or an independent contractor (Alberta Labour Relations Board, 2013; B.C. Government, Ministry of Labour, 2012). The four tests concern: 1) control over a person’s work environments, 2) ownership of tools and equipment, 3) chance of profit and risk of loss, and 4) method of payment. Generally, the more control an employer has over a worker, the more likely it is to be deemed an employee/employer relationship (Alberta Labour Relations Board, 2013; Bouclin 2004b; B.C. Government, Ministry of Labour, 2012; Cerilli, 2005; Chun, 1999; Fischer, 1996; Wilmet, 1998).

In Canada and the United States, several scholars have used these legal tests to argue that lap dancers are not independent contractors; they are employees (Cerilli, 2005; Chun, 1998; Fischer, 1996; Wilmet, 1998). They imply that a lap dancer’s lack of employment status creates a significant vulnerability by hindering her ability to collectively organize to resist exploitive labour practices and poor working conditions. However, aside from my previous analysis (Althorp, 2010a), as far as I know, the tests have yet to be applied to the work of stage dancers in Canada or elsewhere. What follows is an application of the legal tests to the work of stage dancers in Alberta and British Columbia. Here, I draw heavily on my twelve years work experience as a stage performer in these two provinces.

2.3.1. Control

First, club owners and managers exert a significant amount of control over dancers and their working environment (Bouclin, 2004b; Bruckert, 2002; Cerilli, 2005; Chun, 1998; Fischer, 1996; Wilmet, 1998). For example, performers are given a strict schedule that states the time they must be at work and their show times. The schedule
may change on a daily basis; therefore, it is the club that determines when the dancer will earn her income. By setting a schedule, the club owners are able to serve their own needs by ensuring that they will always have performers available to do shows for the customers (Fischer, 1996). If a dancer is late for her show, even by a minute or two, or she misses her show altogether, the club reserves the right to fine her (Bruckert, 2002). In my experience, these economic sanctions typically range from $25 to $300 per infraction of club rules.

In addition, club owners often have significant amount of control over the details of a dancer’s performance. Generally, dancers are required to perform shows eighteen minutes in length, and are subjected to fines for short sets. Performers must dance to music that has been deemed acceptable by the club (Egan, 2006b). While dancers provide their own costumes, clubs may impose boundaries on what is acceptable (Fischer, 1996).

In British Columbia and Alberta, according to the Liquor Control and Licensing Act in each province, performers are not permitted to have any physical contact with customers while on stage. Therefore, if customers wish to tip the dancer they must place the bill on the stage in front of them. In order to avoid a violation of the liquor laws, clubs often have specific rules detailing when a dancer can pick up her tips. Some clubs require that a dancer finish her set and cover-up – i.e. put on a robe or dress – before she gathers her tips. This policy enables customers to take back their tips if they feel they are not receiving sufficient attention from the dancer. If the stage is very large it may be difficult for a dancer to provide individual attention to each tipping customer, in which case club rules may interfere with her earning potential.

Dancers are expected to get involved in special events held by the club (Chun, 1999; Fischer, 1996). For example, most clubs demand dancers do shower shows that involve the dancer performing her last song in the shower located on the stage. Dancers are not able to opt out of this type of performance (Ross, 2009). During the past five years Jell-O wrestling contests have become very popular in Vancouver. These contests involve two women, clothed in bikinis, wrestling in a large pool filled with Jell-O. Other events include what the women refer to as cattle-calls and the gauntlet. Cattle calls are occasions when all the performers –usually 5 or 6 women – dance on the stage
at the same time for two songs. The gauntlet involves two women on stage at any one time, with all of the stage dancers rotating on and off the stage for about an hour. This means that the women perform three ten-minute shows during the hour.

In addition to rules regarding the performances of stage dancers, most club owners impose strict personal grooming requirements. Dancers may be told to apply more makeup, brush their hair, and get their fingernails and toenails manicured and pedicured. Some clubs are very particular about tattoos; depending on the type of tattoo, a woman may be told to cover it up with makeup. In some cases, dancers are told to get a tan and shave their pubic hair (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000). Some clubs demand their dancers have large breasts and a very thin body (Holsopple, 1998).

While the prevalence of floor time has decreased over the past ten years, some clubs still require dancers to be present in the club mingling with customers for a specified number of hours during the day and night. Usually, there is an hour of floor time at lunch time and another hour in the early evening. During this time, performers are expected to sit and talk with customers in the bar even though they are not paid for this time. These various requirements that club owners use to tightly control dancer activities indicates that their relationship is that of an employer and employee, and that the dancer is not an independent contractor.

2.3.2. Ownership of Tools and Equipment

Exotic dancers do not own all of the tools and equipment required to do their jobs. While stage dancers invest in their own CD’s, costumes, jewellery, makeup, toiletries, and sometimes promotional materials such as posters, these minimal investment requirements do not rise to the level required to indicate independent contractor status (Fischer, 1996). Some dancers incur additional expenses, such as plastic surgery, which increases their personal investment in their work. Nevertheless, the most valuable tool for a dancer is her physical body, which does not constitute equipment under the meaning of the test (Fischer, 1996). Furthermore, dancers would not be able to carry out their work if club operators did not provide a stage with a brass pole, a DJ, sound and light equipment, security staff, liquor licence and supplies, thus
making dancers reliant on the provisions offered by the club in order to make money. This further indicates that a dancer is not an independent contractor but an employee.

2.3.3. **Chance of Profit and Risk of Loss**

The third aspect of the test to determine the status of stage performers is the *chance of profit and risk of loss*. This aspect of the test seeks to determine if a dancer is dependent upon the business to which they render a service. Dancer’s opportunities for profit or loss are not entirely dependent on their own entrepreneurial skills, as they are in the case of independent contractors, but on the ability of club managers to create a successful business. A dancer’s opportunities vary with a club’s hours of operation, and sufficient advertising and promotion by club owners/managers to attract enough customers for dancers to be able to perform. In British Columbia, most clubs require a minimum number of customers before they will put a dancer on stage. If there are not enough customers in the bar at a particular dancer’s show time, then management will cancel her show and the payment she would have received for it. Therefore, dancers are not afforded an interest in the business beyond decisions regarding their costume, music in situations where it is not specified by the club, and the provocativeness of the performance. They have no role in the organization of the premises where their work occurs, in which case they are financially dependent on the club, thereby making them employees as opposed to independent contractors.

2.3.4. **Payment**

The fourth element of the test examines *payment*. This aspect of the test considers whether a worker is paid at set intervals, and whether the payment is made regardless of customer satisfaction or customer payment. Stage dancers are paid a salary by the club at the end of their working week despite customer approval or customer tips. This aspect of the test also indicates that club owners/managers have an employer/employee relationship with dancers.

In the United States, a fifth element exists within the test used to determine a worker’s status: special skills. Aside from interacting with customers, dancing provocatively, and attaining a socially accepted standard of beauty, Fischer (1996) and Wilmet (1999) assert that there are few skills involved in exotic dancing and
consequently, a dancer’s compliance with job requirements does not rise to the level of *special skills* indicative of independent contractor work. While Fischer and Wilmet’s view of the skills involved in dancing is debateable, the special skills measure is not relevant in Western Canada anyway.

The above examination of the tests used by the Employment Standards Branch in each province to determine the status of a worker as an employee or independent contractor reveals that, on all four elements, stage dancers in Alberta and British Columbia qualify as employees. According to this analysis, dancers would thus have access to protective employment legislation and a means of recourse for sexual harassment and sexual assault, in addition to making clubs accountable for arbitrarily firing dancers or withholding their income (Bouclin, 2004b). If classed as employees, exotic dancers could build relationships with unions and potentially gain access to collective bargaining rights. Through formal unionization, dancers could provide input into their working conditions (Bouclin, 2004b).

In the United States, hundreds of lap dancers in Alaska, Texas, California, and Minneapolis have relied on the legal tests for employment status to establish that they are employees and should have the labour protections afforded to employees (Fischer, 1996). In each of these states, the courts found that lap dancers were employees, not independent contractors, with the result that thousands of dollars have been awarded to dancers as back pay for floor fees (Fischer, 1996).

While proponents of the employer/employee model have provided a strategy for improving exploitive working conditions in the exotic dancing industry, this approach does not necessarily resonate with all dancers. Several academics, some of whom are former dancers, have argued that claiming employee status does not respect dancers who view themselves as self-employed entrepreneurs. For example, Bruckert (2002) demonstrates how dancers employ “linguistic strategies” (p. 106) to highlight their independence. She argued that when listening to dancers speak about their labour, it quickly became clear that they see themselves as their own bosses who are able to determine if and when to work. In this way, dancers reveal their disdain for the constraints of more mainstream occupations, particularly mandatory work-day hours.
Dancers appreciate the ability to engage in flexible, mobile work that allows them to fulfill other responsibilities and engage in other endeavours (Bruckert, 2002).

While dancers recognize that their classification as independent contractors may lead club owners and managers to view them as expendable “objects that facilitate profit” (Bruckert, 2002, p. 106), if strip club owners or managers impose expectations that dancers deem unreasonable, then dancers will signal their independence by withdrawing their labour and moving on to another strip club. Even though dancers are subject to club owner imposed economic sanctions in the form of fines, many dancers assert their independence by noting they are not obliged to work in a specific strip club (Bruckert and Parent, 2006). In this way, dancers reclaim their status as legitimate business women who operate in the market for themselves (Bruckert, 2002; Cooke, 1985; Frank, 2002; Rambo-Ronai, 1992; Ross, 2009).

Other researchers regard the portrayal of exotic dancers as entrepreneurs as problematic in several respects. While many dancers view their independent contractor status as the foundation for their independence, the idea that they are self-employed entrepreneurs is illusory (Fudge, Tucker, and Vosko, 2002). According to Fudge et al., (2002), while the number of self-employed workers in Canada has grown significantly in the past four decades, most of the self-employed are women in service occupations. In comparison to the employed, although the majority of self-employed are more likely to work a greater number of hours each week, they have substantially lower incomes. While some self-employed individuals own the means of their production and accumulate large amounts of capital, there is a sharp income polarization among the self-employed. Seventy-five percent of self-employed women have incomes of $20,000 or less per year, making them economically insecure. Women often are self-employed so that they can accommodate child care and family responsibilities while generating an income (Fudge et al., 2002).

According to Cerilli (2005), as the number of self-employed workers has increased, the line between paid employment and self-employment has blurred. This blurring indicates growth of what the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) refer to as disguised employment—the employer’s practise of treating workers as independent
contractors in order to avoid the responsibilities and costs associated with being an employer, such as UIC and CPP contributions. When club owners treat dancers as independent contractors they avoid these expenses and the administrative costs associated with payroll and deduction remittances (Alberta Labour Relations Board, 2013; B.C. Government, Ministry of Labour, 2012). This way, club owners reap the benefits of dancers’ services while being able to disregard their interests. This enables club owners to tailor their provision of work to the needs of the business while simultaneously leaving a group of workers in a precarious situation. While we should not ignore dancers who see themselves as independent entrepreneurs, it is important to examine the practical repercussions of their being denied employment status. The current study attempts to do just that by examining the lack of a social safety net and the lack of recourse to report workplace problems afforded to stage dancers in Alberta and British Columbia.

2.4. Unionization

The most recognized form of labour resistance in Western countries – the formation of self-defence organizations like unions – has been, with some notable exceptions [...] , rarely embraced by dancers. This speaks not to a lack of consciousness but perhaps affirms that traditional forms of labour action do not always lend themselves to all labour conditions. (Bruckert, 2002, p. 100)

While only a few hundred American lap dancers have used the courts to successfully challenge their status as independent contractors, even fewer have attempted to further their interests by building relationships with labour unions in an effort to collectively resist exploitive managerial practices. Of notable exception are the female peep show dancers at the Lusty Lady adult theatre in San Francisco who, in 1997, became the first group of exotic dancers in the United States to unionize (Bruckert, 2002; Chun, 1999; Ross, 2009). Having joined forces with the Service Employees’ International Union (SEIU), Local 790, these dancers fought for a collective agreement that included the right to health insurance, sick pay, an end to arbitrary firings by club managers, the implementation of health and safety standards, and an end to scheduling practices based on ethnicity and breast size (Ross, 2009).
In spite of this success, there are numerous social and political barriers to erotic dancers forming unions (Chun, 1999; Ross, 2006 and 2009). First, in order to unionize, dancers would have to secure formal status as employees. Indeed, for dancers who view themselves as entrepreneurial business women, this would not be a desirable outcome. Dancers may lack interest in unionizing because they may deem unions to be as controlling as club managers, since they would be obligated to pay union dues and abide by union decisions that would be made with or without their personal approval (Chun, 1999). Many dancers may not have the time or energy to invest in organizing, or see the point of collective action in an occupation that is restricted mostly to young women, and in which there is the potential for burnout (Bruckert, 2002). In light of this weak commitment to the industry, it may be easier for dancers to accept workplace inequities rather than risk having their careers cut short by adversarial club owners and managers. With limited legal recourse afforded to exotic performers, dancers who make efforts to organize their co-workers are likely to find themselves blacklisted and unable to get work anywhere in their booking agent’s region (Ross, 2006 and 2009).

Dancers willing to accept the risk of blacklisting if they attempt to unionize would also have to have convictions strong enough to be able to withstand stigmatization if they are open about how they earn a living. Women who are not open with family and friends may not be willing to out themselves. The desire to remain discrete or anonymous may limit a dancer’s desire to participate in public demonstrations or outreach programs geared to help their co-workers (Chun, 1999). Due to the mobility of exotic dancers who work the circuit, it may not be possible to bring enough dancers together in the same room in order to organize to effect positive change in the industry (Ross, 2006 and 2009).

Given the numerous barriers, it is not surprising that attempts by Vancouver-based dancers to unionize in the late 1960s were ineffective. According to Ross (2009), when Vancouver dancers attempted to unionize at that time, they encountered five obstacles:

a) the small and transient work force; b) competition among dancers as independent contractors; c) working conditions in a quasi-criminalized, stigmatized business; d) the resolute efforts of club owners and agents to
stymie agitation and punish 'ringleaders'; and e) barriers to organizing intrinsic to provincial labour law. (p. 329)

A consensus about the benefits of unionizing was never reached despite the efforts of a handful of bold and spirited dancers. Decades later, their contemporary counterparts face a similar set of barriers to unionizing.

Nevertheless, several organizations have emerged over the years as a collective voice in response to specific labour concerns among Canadian dancers, including the Toronto-based Exotic Dancers’ Alliance of Ontario and Dancers’ Equal Rights Association in Ottawa (Ross, 2009). A website created by a Vancouver based dancer to support the interests of exotic dancers has proved to be a valuable space for dancer activism in British Columbia. These loosely structured groups prove that, while efforts to formally unionize may prove difficult, dancers do sometimes work collectively in an effort to secure their interests.

2.5. Focus of the Current Study

The foregoing review identified several gaps in the extant research literature on exotic dancing. My study is designed to fill two of those gaps: first, it focuses on the working experiences of stage dancers in British Columbia and Alberta, whereas most published Canadian studies focus on lap dancing in Ontario. Second, it examines the experiences of stage dancers in multiple strip clubs as opposed to a single club.

The current study utilizes a feminist labour-rights framework to examine the moral, legal, social organizational and the physical context of exotic stage dancing. Examining the ways in which these contexts interact to shape interpersonal relationships in strip clubs allows for a nuanced understanding of the working experiences of exotic stage dancers in Alberta and British Columbia.
2.6. Theoretical Framework

This policy analysis examines the exotic dancing industry in British Columbia and Alberta as a form of marginalized labour. The research is guided by a labour-rights framework informed by a feminist analysis which examines the experiences of women in the exotic dancing industry from their own vantage point. This framework stems from the belief that all workers should be afforded at least a minimum standard of working conditions and occupational health and safety. Considering that exotic dancing is largely women's work, the current study highlights the need to situate the labour of exotic dancers within the broader context of women's economic position, continued marginalization in sales, service and clerical occupations, and domestic responsibilities, all of which are exacerbated by the gradual dismantling of Canada's social welfare net (Bruckert et al., 2003; Cerilli, 2005; Phillips, 1997).

Utilizing a feminist labour-rights framework allows an examination of the structure of labour in conjunction with the process of labour which, in turn, facilitates a more complete understanding of the workplace organization of labour. This feminist labour rights framework allows for skills and competencies, social and work relations, and worker's experiences of the physical, emotional, and sexual dimensions of the work to be identified (Bruckert et al., 2003). The feminist labour-rights framework facilitates an understanding of the unique set of challenges and problems that confront women engaging in stigmatized forms of work. Examining the federal, provincial, and municipal legal regulations pertaining to the exotic dancing industry allows us to determine their impact on the organization of the labour and the labour process, the ways in which these regulations increase the danger and uncertainty that workers face, and the relations between workers, workers and support staff, and workers and customers. This analysis enables the complex interplay between labour, exotic dancer's subjectivity and law to be more easily understood (Bruckert et al., 2003).

The proposed study recognizes that the intersection of race, class, and gender affects the production of knowledge. In an attempt to redress the imbalance that has kept marginal women's voices off the record, this research will centralize the voices of the women involved in the exotic dancing industry in British Columbia and Alberta and, hopefully, produce knowledge that can be used to improve their working experiences.
Chapter 3. The Methodology

In this policy analysis I chose to focus on stage performers in British Columbia and Alberta because their working conditions are constantly changing, depending on where they are performing; house rules and expectations vary from club to club. Because stage dancers’ contracts are short term – usually a week – they typically have limited power in the interpersonal relationships with managers and staff that stem from the organization of the strip clubs where they work. Because each stage dancer chooses her own circuit from approximately 60 strip clubs, she may never work in the same club twice, but prefer to return to the clubs that provide more favourable working conditions than the others.

The research was designed to capture the perspectives and experiences of exotic stage dancers by employing two components: 1) an online survey examining legal regulations surrounding the industry, working conditions, reporting practices, and unionization; and 2) semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten exotic stage dancers. The survey and interviews covered similar topics, although the interviews were much more open-ended, allowing participants to highlight topics of importance to them. Also I draw on my experience working as a stage dancer in Alberta and British Columbia for twelve years to add context to the interviews and survey.

In order to contextualize the operation of the industry within the framework of state administration, regulation and broader discourses, I reviewed the Employment Standards Act of British Columbia, the Employment Standards Code of Alberta, the Liquor Control and Licensing Act of British Columbia and Alberta, the Canadian Criminal Code, specific municipal by-laws in cities relevant to the study, Land Use and Development Policies and Guidelines, and exotic dancer contracts. This review was designed to substantiate the participant’s responses to survey and interview questions pertaining to exotic dancer contracts and municipal, provincial, and federal regulations surrounding the industry.
3.1. Research Objectives

This policy analysis has five objectives:

- to contribute to an understanding of the working lives of exotic stage dancers by exploring their experiences working in strip clubs located in British Columbia and Alberta;
- to describe the working conditions of stage dancers and identify their needs as workers;
- to explore the legal ramifications of hiring dancers as independent contractors rather than employees;
- to make available to academics and the legal community the opinion of a sample of exotic stage dancers;
- to improve the occupational health and safety of exotic stage dancers.

3.2. The Survey and Interview Schedules

My research set out to examine specific themes identified as important areas of inquiry in the existing exotic dance literature in Canada and the United States, and in an exploratory study of Vancouver-based stage dancers that I conducted in 2010 (Althorp, 2010b). In addition, my twelve years working as a stage dancer has meant an ongoing interaction with other dancers that has allowed me to ascertain issues of importance to them. This experience together with the themes identified as important areas of inquiry in the extant literature helped structure the online survey and the interview schedule.

3.2.1. The Online Survey

In an effort to encourage the participation of as many stage dancers as possible I used an online survey as my primary method of data collection. The advantage of the online survey is that it is convenient and anonymous, thereby mitigating potential barriers to participation. On the website housing the survey I provided information about the study that enabled dancers to make an informed decision regarding their participation. The online survey allowed my personal contacts to easily pass along the web address to their contacts.
Another benefit of the online survey was its automated skip patterns, which made it much easier to follow, and reduced the length of the survey and the potential for human error\textsuperscript{10}. This method of data collection is easily monitored and managed as data is fed directly into a secure database.

Chris Atchison provided technical assistance with the design of the online survey, monitored and maintained the survey on a secure server during the period it was active, and compiled the data. The survey was posted from September 21, 2011 to February 3, 2012 at www.dancersworkplace.ca. Survey data were analyzed using SPSS, which generated various frequency distributions and crosstabs.

3.2.1.1. Online Survey Content

An introductory home page (Appendix B) provided participants with the purpose of the study, the areas of inquiry, and information about how to contact me. This page also informed participants that they were able to skip any questions they did not wish to answer, provided information about how the data would be stored, and guaranteed participant anonymity. Participants were told that, by clicking on the “Begin Survey” button at the bottom of the introductory page, they were indicating their voluntary consent to participate in the online survey.

The survey (see Appendix B) was divided into seven sections: 1) Involvement in the Exotic Dancing Industry; 2) Geographic Specific Experiences; 3) Working Conditions; 4) Legal Regulations; 5) Reporting Practices; 6) Unionization; and 7) Personal Information. The first section asked respondents about their motivations for becoming a stage dancer, how old they were when they started in the industry, positive and negative aspects of their work, and whether they would ever encourage others to become a stage dancer.

Because stage dancers are expected to work a circuit by travelling from city to city, the second section of the survey sought information about whether dancers

\textsuperscript{10} See Palys and Atchison (2008).
preferred to work in particular cities. Respondents were asked about their work in three British Columbia cities – Vancouver, Victoria, and Kelowna – and three in Alberta: Edmonton, Calgary, and Grande Prairie. I anticipated that dancers would prefer certain cities based on a variety of factors including the enforcement or lack of enforcement of liquor laws, variations in working conditions and audiences, and earning potential.

The third section of the survey asked respondents about their thoughts regarding their working conditions, including the physical work environment, the provision of security in strip clubs, and their relationships with the booking agents and club managers and owners. Dancers were asked if they had ever been physically hurt while performing on stage, if they felt that adequate security and health standards were in place to protect them while working, and if they felt that club owners and managers helped them meet their contractual obligations as an entertainer. An open-ended question allowed dancers to indicate what club owners and managers could do to better support stage dancers.

In the fourth section of the survey, dancers were asked questions pertaining to the federal, provincial, and municipal legal regulations governing their labour, their status as independent contractors, and about informal rules in strip clubs.

The fifth section of the survey asked respondents if they had ever made complaints about their working conditions. If they had made one or more complaints, they were asked to whom they made them, and the outcome. If dancers had not made any complaints regarding their working conditions they were asked to explain the reasons why.

To determine the potential for unionization among exotic stage dancers in Alberta and British Columbia, respondents were asked if they would ever join a union. Respondents who indicated that they would not join a union were asked why not.

The final section of the survey asked participants to provide personal information, including the year they were born, their sexual identity, their educational attainment, other occupations they might have, monthly income, marital status, if they had any dependents, and their birth country. Dancers also were given the opportunity to share any other information they deemed to be important. A final question, asked respondents how they found out about the research.
3.2.2. **The Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten stage dancers. Having a similar topical structure to the survey, the interviews were used to contextualize and further develop the descriptive statistical information gathered in the survey, as well as allow dancers to speak about any additional topics they felt were important (Appendix C). Having worked as an exotic dancer myself, I was able to gain access to this marginalized population. Knowing that I shared many of the same experiences made the women feel comfortable in speaking openly and confident in my ability to understand and report their experiences.

Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were informed about the purposes of the study and asked to provide their verbal consent to participate. Interviewees were promised confidentiality. Interviews lasted between half an hour and one and a half hours.

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Once I had transcribed the interviews, all identifying information was removed and the audio files were erased. Interviews were hand coded according to the previously identified themes emanating from the extant literature and my 2010 pilot study.

3.2.3. **Sampling Method for the Online Survey and Interviews**

While it is impossible to know exactly how many exotic stage dancers there are in Alberta and British Columbia, it is possible to create an estimate based on the number of exotic dancers advertised on the websites of booking agencies in each province. In Vancouver there are three booking agencies, only one of which lists 100 dancers on its books. From my experience, I would estimate that another 100 dancers work through the other two Vancouver agencies bringing the total in British Columbia to approximately 200. In Alberta, the largest agency boasts approximately 600 dancers. Allowing for some overlap between the rosters of each booking agency, I estimate that there are approximately 700 women working as stage dancers in the two provinces.

In order to generate a purposive sample of survey and interview participants, I posted recruitment letters on: a) The Naked Truth (www.nakedtruth.ca), a Vancouver-
based online social community for sex industry workers; b) the FIRST listserv, a coalition of feminists in support of sex industry workers; and c) the CSWRPCAN (Centre for Sex Work Research and Policy Canada), a virtual centre for excellence for coordinating research on sex work and advocating evidence based policy in Canada. Following the posting of the initial recruitment letter in these three online locations, I followed up with a second and a third call for research participants in each one. The recruitment letter informed readers of my twelve years involvement in the industry as a stage dancer, provided information about the study, my contact information, and the address of the research website. Responses to survey question 45 indicate that only five respondents were recruited this way.

In addition, I emailed and texted requests for participation in the study to my personal industry contacts, all of whom I have known for a minimum of one and a half years and a maximum of twelve years; most I have known for approximately nine years. The youngest of these contacts was twenty-two years old and the oldest was in her early forties; the majority were in their late twenties or early thirties. All of my personal industry contacts had worked as exotic dancers between four and eighteen years, however, one of them had only been dancing for one and a half years. Nine survey respondents and nine interviewees were recruited this way. Several of my contacts then passed along the information to their contacts, which resulted in approximately fifteen more dancers filling out the survey. Many of the participants not known to me personally indicated that they only participated because one of their friends, who was my personal contact, had recommended it to them. As far as I am aware, five of my personal contacts helped to recruit additional participants for my study.

During the data collection period I worked several week-long contracts in Vancouver strip clubs. While at work, I talked about my research with the women in the change room in an effort to get them to participate. On several occasions, I brought my laptop to work and allowed the women to use it to complete the survey during their breaks between shows. Approximately ten surveys were completed this way. Two of the ten interviews were conducted in the change room of a Vancouver strip club.

The remaining interviews took place in my home, my participants’ homes, or in a coffee shop. Three dancers were interviewed over the phone, as they lived in cities
other than Vancouver. Nine of the ten interviewees were personal contacts; one woman contacted me after seeing my call for research participants on the Naked Truth website. While two additional women offered to be interviewed, I was unable to connect with them despite numerous attempts. When asked why my participants took part in this research, a handful of participants stated that they knew me and wanted to support my academic work, while the majority wanted to let mainstream society know what it is really like to work in the exotic dancing industry; as well, they hoped to see positive changes to stage performers working conditions. The following selection of responses captures these various motivations:

“I’m actually really curious to see how this is gonna turn out. I don’t think, well to my knowledge, nobody has ever done anything like this and I think somebody has needed to do this for a while. There’s so many politics in stripping that people don’t realize…it’s a really weird industry and there’s a lot that needs to be explored and there’s a lot that needs to be spoken about to people other than dancers. So, I definitely wanna see where this goes. (Anna\textsuperscript{11})

I want other people to know what the reality of our industry is and to see it’s not all glitz and glamour. There are a lot of things I wish dancers had in terms of their working conditions and I’m happy you’re doing this and I hope it has some benefit for dancers one day. (Karen)

I think this is a topic that isn’t talked about in the public…it’s not talked about openly. People think dancing is glamorous but just look at the working conditions – we’re getting taken advantage of. I think it’s really important to show that side of the story and to potentially change it. (Stacy)

Because our voices are rarely heard and counted. I think the research paints an important picture of a social group that is marginalized and, for the most part, discounted. (Anonymous survey participant)

I feel that it’s important for all areas of sex work to be de-stigmatized and that involves talking about it. Also, employment of all kinds should adhere to certain standards – so many people do not know their rights, and therefore, do not have any. (Anonymous survey participant)

\textsuperscript{11} All names are pseudonyms.
As a business insider, I was able to request the participation of my personal industry contacts as well as ask them to pass the study information along to their personal industry contacts. Despite this advantage, data collection for the online survey was much slower than I expected.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

I received approval from the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University on February 28th, 2011. After deciding to use an online instead of a hard copy survey, I received approval for this amendment on September 21, 2011.

Because many women engaged in exotic dancing do so without the knowledge of their partners, family or friends, I understood the importance of keeping their information confidential. Because of the potential harm that could come from disclosing their names, I guaranteed my participants that their identities would remain completely confidential.

In the interests of protecting them, I provided each participant with information regarding the purposes and intentions of the study and how their contribution would be used. I requested verbal informed consent from interviewees because I felt that a written informed consent form could harm the camaraderie that often exists among dancers, and I did not wish to make the participants feel as though they were engaging in a hierarchical exchange, especially given that I am a member of this community. Participant interviews were anonymized; all identifying information was removed, including names, geographic information, and any other information that could be used to identify participants. Survey respondents and interviewees were given the option not to answer certain questions if they felt uncomfortable doing so. In situations where I questioned the accuracy of my interpretation of an interviewee’s experiences, I went back to the participant to ask for clarification; in each case my initial interpretation proved to be the one that had been intended by the participant.
Chapter 4.  Key Findings

This chapter focuses on the four key themes explored in the survey and the interviews: involvement in the industry, working conditions, independent contractor status, and unionization. Forty-seven people started to fill out the online survey, with thirty-seven completing it. The ensuing analysis is based on the 37 complete surveys and 10 interviews.

4.1. The Sample

The survey respondents ranged in age from 23 to 42 years, with an average age of 30. They had worked as dancers from 2 to 24 years, with an average of almost 9.9. Respondents were asked to indicate when they started work as a dancer; 29 (78.4%) reported starting between the age of 19 and 25; three started dancing in strip clubs before they turned 19. The earliest initiation into the industry was at age 16 and the oldest was at 25 years of age.

Of the 32 survey participants who responded to the question asking where they were born, 27 (84.4%) reported being born in Canada, 2 (6.3%) were born in the Ukraine, 1 (3.1%) was born in the United States, 1 (3.1%) was born in Croatia, and 1 (3.1%) was born in Jamaica. Of the 33 respondents who answered the question regarding marital status, 11 (33.3%) were married or lived in a common-law relationship; 18 (54.5%) were single, 3 (9.1%) were separated or divorced, and 1 (3%) was widowed. Just over 11 (33%) survey participants had children.

Table 1 reveals participants’ educational attainment. A third of participants who responded to the question indicated they had a certificate or diploma. These figures reveal that dancing was not the only option for many of the women in my study.


**Table 1: Highest Level of Education Survey Respondents Reported Completing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest level of education completed</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some elementary school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college/university</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some trade/technical/vocational school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma or certificate</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters (inc. LLB)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>99.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 31 women who responded to the question about their income from dancing (see Table 2), 21 (67.4 %) reported making between $2,000 and $5,000 per month while 5 respondents (16.1%) indicated earning over $5,000 per month, i.e. over $60,000 annually.

**Table 2: Average Monthly Take Home Income**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average monthly take home income</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $1000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1000 - $1999</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2000 - $2999</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$3000 - $3999</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$4000 - $4999</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$5000 - $9999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 or more</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview participants had similar demographic characteristics to the survey respondents. The average age of interviewees was 29 years; the average time spent in the industry was 5.5 years with a range from 1 to 18 years. Five of the ten interviewees
reported having some university education; two reported having graduate degrees. Nine out of ten participants were Caucasian, and two were mothers.

My sample thus comprised fairly well-educated, financially stable, Canadian women close to the age of thirty. This is comparable to other studies of exotic dancers in North America (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009; Bruckert et al., 2003; Lilleston et al., 2012; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000). A noteworthy difference is that these studies included many more African American participants than does the current study. This is not surprising given that these studies were carried out in the United States and in Eastern Canada where there is a much higher percentage of African Americans. In my experience, the women in this sample are typical of dancers in Western Canada.

4.2. Involvement in the Industry

Questions pertaining to participant’s involvement in the industry were used to understand dancer’s initial motivations for entering the industry, their perception of the positive and negative aspects of the work and if they would encourage other women to become an exotic stage dancer.

4.2.1. Dancers’ Initial Motivations

To begin the survey, respondents were asked to “identify the reasons you became involved in the exotic dancing industry as a stage performer (why did you start dancing?)”. Survey participants were given a list of reasons and asked to check all that apply; table 3 shows the frequency of the different reasons cited.
Table 3: Dancers’ Initial Motivations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dancers’ initial motivations</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Money is better than other jobs</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I needed a job to pay my bills</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I love to dance</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounded like a fun job</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A dancer friend suggested I try it</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I liked the idea of travelling and working the circuit</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I needed a job with flexible hours</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t know what else to do</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The top two reasons cited by participants for becoming involved in the exotic dancing industry relate to the financial rewards of the job. Several interviewees complained about the low paying jobs they had before they started dancing and how they struggled to pay their bills. Many of them started dancing because it was a job that paid more than minimum wage.

*I didn’t have any money, no prior education, and the only thing out there that gave any good money was dancing...I had to pay my bills and put myself through school.* (Karen)

*My sister was in the industry and I couldn’t survive off eight dollars an hour...I couldn’t pay for rent and I couldn’t live, so I decided to try it.* (Taylor)

*Money. Definitely the money. I needed money...I was nineteen and I had a kid. My aunt was a dancer and so I kind of knew a little about the industry. I knew it was a job I could do and I knew someone who did it so I thought I’d try it.* (Jordyn)

From both the interview and survey responses it became clear that the financial rewards of stripping factored highly in the decision to become a dancer. Also factoring highly in this decision was some dancers’ love of dance and others’ desire to work in a “fun” environment.
4.2.2. **Most Positive Aspects of the Job**

While the knowledge that they could make good money motivated many of the dancers to start a dancing career, the financial rewards and the ability to afford to travel, purchase real estate and obtain an education were what seemed to keep many of them in the industry. In an open-ended survey question, dancers were asked “what is the most positive aspect of your work as a stage dancer”? Responses to this question were coded and categorized into emerging topic areas. Table 4 illustrates the frequency of the topic areas cited by participants.

**Table 4: Most Positive Aspect of the Job**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most positive aspect of the job</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial rewards</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible schedule</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting interesting people</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative self-expression</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved self-confidence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good exercise</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>99.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As many as 16 (43.2%) survey respondents named the financial rewards as the most positive aspect of the job; 7 dancers also appreciated the flexible schedule (18.9%).

*Being able to live a lavish lifestyle.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*Good money allows me to go to school full-time while working.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*It’s allowed for me to travel, buy a house, and invest in real estate, while paying for school.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*I have been dancing for seven years and constantly think about quitting for good and focusing on my small business. The only reason I haven’t is because dancing allows me to pay all my bills and live pretty comfortable as opposed to scraping by on the small income generated from my small business.* (Anonymous survey participant)
One interview participant who had recently retired from dancing summed up the positive aspects of her work this way:

So many things...the money...loved the money...loved the power...loved the camaraderie with the other girls...loved the DJ’s, hated the bad ones...met lots of great customers...made friends with a lot of people. I loved that I didn’t have to work a shitty $8 an hour job that I hated...the flexibility...taking a week off whenever I wanted...being able to travel...the creativity, the actual dancing...one of my favorite parts of it. I know some people say they got into dancing to dance... but some of us really do love dancing. You know there are lots of things I don’t like...but, I do like the actual performance and the money. (Miranda)

Miranda’s comments indicate that, despite being a job like any other that has both positive and negative aspects, exotic dancing offers women the opportunity to engage in work that is both financially rewarding and enjoyable on various levels.

4.2.3. Most Negative Aspects of the Job

In an effort to ascertain some of the negative aspects of the work, I posed an open-ended survey question asking respondents “what is the most negative aspect of your work as a stage dancer”? Responses to this question were coded and then categorized into the emerging topic areas. Table 5 reveals the frequency of each topic area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most negative aspect of the job</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stigma and stereotypes attached to the job</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative environment (i.e. drugs, alcohol, and negative people)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time to spend with family and friends</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative self-perception</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with agents</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-standard accommodations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disrespectful treatment from bar staff</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wear and tear on the body</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>99.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Almost one third of participants named the stigma and stereotypes attached to the job as its most negative aspect. In the following interview excerpts, four dancers explained how the stereotypes and stigma surrounding their work have negatively affected them:

*I guess people just kind of have a biased opinion towards dancers and we all kind of get shoved into the same category which is not usually the most appealing thing. People kind of assume that we are all drug addicts or have daddy issues, for lack of a better word, you know, things like that. You know, even at the doctor’s office you get a strange kind of response from people when you tell them what you do. Sometimes you get treated differently when you are buying a new vehicle or trying to get approved for renting an apartment or something. People always want to take us as different from what it really is. It’s almost like you aren’t even a person anymore...you’re a dancer. It’s hard to explain, but you get a really different vibe from people. (Zoe)*

*Other people’s perspective of dancers...if no one thought that dancing was taboo I could function normally in society with no problem. Men wouldn’t think twice about dating me or marrying me and I wouldn’t have to think twice about putting exotic dancer on my resume when I am ready to switch careers. (Anonymous survey participant)*

*When they find out you are a dancer, there is such a lack of respect from just about everyone you meet. (Anonymous survey participant)*

Another dancer described how, despite the drugs and alcohol that permeate the industry, most dancers do not do drugs and live productive lives. Stacy’s frustration with the stereotypes was clearly evident:

*There are people who you are not going to change their minds no matter what. But I am the typical stripper. In my experience there are flaky girls and some crazy girls who are drug addicted and some girls who are even maybe pimped out and doing sex work on the side...but the majority in my experience are like me...they are going to school or they have other straight jobs and have been in and out of the straight world and they prefer dancing or whatever. They’re smart, they’re intelligent, they’re driven, they’re entrepreneurs, and they’re self-motivated. These are the qualities you need to survive in the business world [...] and they are valued in another person. I have those qualities but they are not valued in me because I take my clothes off for a living.*
These statements reveal how damaging the stereotypes and stigma can be in the lives of dancers, and how several women worried about how the stereotypes could affect their future endeavours.

### 4.2.4. Encouraging Others to Become an Exotic Stage Dancer

Survey respondents were asked “would you encourage others to work as an exotic stage dancer”? Of the 37 participants who responded to this question, 23 (62.2%) said that they would encourage others to become a dancer; 14 (37.8%) said they would not. Of the 14 dancers who answered “no”, none responded to the open-ended question asking them to explain why they would not encourage others to enter this line of work. In contrast, all of the respondents who answered “yes” went on to explain why they would encourage another person to become a dancer:

*Because it’s a fun, creative job that allows you to travel and meet lots of people.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*I would if they have the support of someone who’s been there before. The rush from being onstage is amazing, and the travel option is great. Getting to travel and work with other women in that way is fun. It’s such a great learning experience, physically, socially, and psychologically. And it’s still decent money, although putting up with the agents might not be worth it.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*Because the money is so good, you can really get yourself ahead in life if you choose to use dancing as a tool to do that.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*It’s a good way for women to earn more than in a low paying job. Having this kind of an income allows you to afford things that would take years of saving for with a regular job; for example, university, a car, a condo or a house.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*Because it’s a very empowering job and the money is great if you work hard.* (Anonymous survey participant)

Despite the stigma associated with exotic dancing, it has numerous benefits, including financial rewards, a flexible work schedule, the opportunity to travel and meet new people, the opportunity for creative self-expression, the potential to have fun on the job, increased self-confidence, and, for many, a feeling of empowerment. Clearly, exotic dancing is a valuable option for some working-class women. Nevertheless, as we shall see in the next section, the dancers in this sample were expected to contend with poor
working conditions and inadequate support from strip club management and booking agents.

4.3. Working Conditions

Several questions in both the survey and interview guide asked participants about their working environment and the conditions of their work. Responses to these questions helped to understand the physical working environment, dancers’ thoughts regarding health and safety on the job, and dancers’ relationships with their agents, club management, and with other club staff.

In addition to classifying dancers as independent contractors, their contracts state that operators of a strip club must provide adequate security and health standards to protect the well-being of the artist for the duration of the contract (Strippers West: contract, 2012). When survey respondents were asked if this contractual obligation was being met, 29 (78.4%) said that it was not. Several interview participants bluntly stated their thoughts regarding working conditions:

*The working conditions are just ridiculous. There are obviously no guidelines or regulations whatsoever. Sometimes the change rooms are just disgusting and dirty and I would never want to put my bare feet on the floor. Some bars are pretty good though...if a customer ever said a derogatory comment I would tell the bouncer and he would be thrown out and at other places a guy could grab you and be rude and the bouncers would just be like, whatever, he’s spending money in here. Again, there is so much variability between bars. It’s so highly variable especially for the circuit girls. You never really know what the rules are or what’s expected of you or how protected you are, so it can be really challenging.* (Stacy)

*It just depends where you are. There are certain places where there’s no security and you know the dancers have no voice whatsoever. It’s kind of like, do your job and shut the hell up. And then there’s other places where, you know, you’re more respected and you feel safer.* (Zoe)

These responses reveal that some strip club owners and managers are better at supporting dancer’s health and safety than are others; however, as one interviewee stated, “working conditions ranged from bad to really bad to worse” (Karen). This is not surprising given that dancers are not protected by the Employment Standards Act in
each province. This means that there are no guidelines for strip club operators to follow when it comes to providing dancers with “adequate security and health standards” (Strippers West, exotic dancer contract, 2012) – it is left to the discretion of individual bar owners and managers.

4.3.1. **Poorly Maintained Workplaces**

Several of the interviewees asserted that working conditions in strip clubs had declined due to the poor economy in recent years. Two of the women suggested that bar owners cannot afford to keep up with maintenance and repairs; even though they felt working conditions were at their worst, they were somewhat forgiving for this reason. Nevertheless, most dancers were not as forgiving, and argued that there are some things that dancers need in order to do their jobs in a healthy and safe manner. Below, I discuss these women’s concerns regarding the physical space in which they are expected to perform.

4.3.1.1. **Dangerous Stages**

Survey participants were asked to respond to several statements regarding their working conditions. When respondents were asked to respond to the statement: “most stages are well (i.e., there are no holes in them and they are clean, etc.)”, 34 (91.9%) indicated that they were not. One interviewee stated emphatically:

*Not at all! I don’t think so at all; I think maybe ten percent of the strip clubs that I’ve been to have been clean. You never see anyone cleaning them and in between shows, you don’t really see them getting cleaned. You know, one girl comes off and the next girl goes on. I think that should be something that is up to par. I mean, we don’t get paid to be the janitor. If we make a mess we should clean it up but I think the general cleanliness of the clubs, including the stage, should be the responsibility of the bar.* (Karen)

While each dancer is expected to dry the stage after they perform a mandatory shower show, another interview participant reported that this does not always happen, and it often leads to injuries.

*No one cleans the stage after a shower show and you slip and fall and hurt yourself. I’ve had that happen lots. Most of the times when I have hurt myself it’s because either the pole is disgusting, sweaty and*
slippery and I slid down it or I slipped on water left on the stage from the shower.  (Ariel)

Some interview participants declared they do everything they can to not get hurt. For example, two of them mentioned being vigilant about keeping the soles of their shoes topped\(^\text{12}\) in an effort to prevent slipping on stage. Others maintained that they clean the pole before every show to make sure they do not slip off it while doing pole work. Despite these efforts, dancers often get hurt. Survey respondents were asked “have you ever been physically hurt while performing on stage”? Eighteen (50\%) of the respondents indicated that they had been injured while performing on stage. To follow-up, I posed an open-ended question asking the dancers “what happened”? Their responses reveal that poorly designed and poorly maintained stages often cause injuries:

*I hit my head on a speaker. Another time I slipped on stage and bruised my tailbone.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*I twisted an ankle falling due to lack of maintenance to the stage.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*Someone greased the pole [used oil on their body and made contact with the pole] and I fell off it and broke my arm.* (Anonymous survey participant)

*Slippery stage made me fall and hurt myself. Also, dirty stage/unkempt stage – I scraped myself from holes and the scrapes got infected from the dirt and bacteria.* (Anonymous survey participant)

One interview participant described a situation where she scraped her elbow while on stage; after a couple of days, it became severely infected.

*I didn’t have a bandage on it because it was just a small cut. You know when you crawl and your elbows touch the stage [during a floor show], well, within three days my arm was so swollen I couldn’t even lift it and it really hurt. I knew something was wrong so I went to the doctor and he told me I had an infection in my arm. I had to take antibiotics four times a day for ten days and put antibiotic cream on it.* (Taylor)

\(^{12}\) A rubber piece placed on the soles of shoes to prevent slipping.
One interviewee described a time when she sliced her finger open on some glass that had been left on the stage after the previous dancer accidently kicked an ultra violet light, causing it to shatter all over the stage. Karen suggested that this injury could have been prevented if the bar staff had cleaned the stage with a mop and water rather than just given it a quick sweep with a broom. Another performer complained about badly bruising her head and shoulder when the pole came out of the ground while she was doing a pole trick, the result of inadequate maintenance to the pole. Another interviewee described seeing a dancer get electrocuted while on stage.

*She was flipping upside down and she kicked into an open socket...she didn’t see it in the dark and it was right near the top of the pole. She kicked into it and her toe was just bleeding really badly and she was sitting on the stage kind of stunned and people just ignored her like nothing happened. I went up on stage and helped her back to her room. When it was my turn to go on stage the manager had patched the open socket up with some duct tape as if nothing had happened.*

(Karen)

All of the situations described above indicate that many of the stages where dancers perform are not properly cleaned or maintained, making it difficult for them to avoid injuries while carrying out their contractual duties.

### 4.3.1.2. Substandard Accommodations

Because exotic stage dancers work a circuit they are often required to travel to other cities to work. In these situations, accommodations are provided by the strip clubs where the dancers are contracted to work. For the use of these premises for the term of the contract –usually Monday to Saturday – dancers typically pay a fee ranging from $50 to $300. Several women complained about the lack of cleanliness and poor working order of the accommodations provided to them while working out of town. Taylor described the accommodations as “vile and unacceptable”. When I asked her why, she stated:

*They are so old and so dirty. I’ve gone to a hotel where beds had dirt in them. Like the beds were made but they hadn’t changed the sheets and there was dirt and mud in them. And, most of the time you get there late at night and you’re so tired and you just wanna go to bed so you just go to bed because you just don’t wanna deal with it. It’s so gross...so gross.*
Several dancers said they try to make the accommodations more bearable by bringing along their own bedding and cleaning supplies to sanitize the room upon their arrival.

Despite some dancers’ efforts to make the rooms more comfortable, several of the women described experiencing problems with the plumbing and heating. One dancer recalled a time when she was working a three day gig away from her home town.

I didn’t want to work the entire week so [the agent] offered me a back half in [...]. I trusted him...but I totally blame him for sending me there. I show up at this place and there is only one dancer for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday and you have your room in the hotel. As soon as I saw the place I was like ‘Oh, my god’. The bar was dingy and they had a stage that pulled out and it was the size of a card table. I go to my room and there is no shower, a bathtub but no shower head and the bathtub was just gross. So, I need to take a shower to get ready for work but when I turned on the water I was like ‘There is no way I am putting my body near that water’. The water was a disgusting brown and it smelled. For the entire three days I did not bathe. It was really disgusting and I was like how can my agent even think to send me here and not even warn me about it. (Stacy)

Another interviewee described a similar situation at a different out-of-town location.

I’ve stayed at some nasty places but this one was the worst. I had just driven for five hours to get there and I am not at all impressed with how crappy the room is but all I want to do is take a shower and go to bed but, of course, the shower doesn’t work. All that comes out of it is a tiny little drizzle of cold water. On top of that, there was no shower curtain. Really, isn’t it their job to provide me with the things I need to do my job. Seriously, they expect us to have our hair and makeup done for every show and they can’t even provide us with a working shower. (Adriana)

Some of the women complained that, where there was a working shower, they often had to contend with insufficient hot water.

Other concerns included lack of heating, issues with bedbugs, mould, and insufficient lighting. Three dancers described their past experiences with accommodations thus:

The dancers always get stuck in the shitty rooms and the nicer rooms are for everyone else. We get the rooms where everything is totally worn out and things don’t work. The furniture is eight hundred years old and you have to worry about bed bugs. (Nikki)
The place in (a town in the interior of BC) is so disgusting. The carpets are so gross and worn out and there’s no lights in the place...it’s really dark and feels kind of creepy and unsafe. There’s a broken mirror leaning against the wall where you have to put on your makeup but there’s no light to even see your face. (Ariel)

They put me in this filthy room where the carpets were so mouldy and gross. That stuff is so harmful if you ingest it. You know...I heard that one girl’s lung collapsed because she had been exposed to too much black mould. I can believe it because I always get sick working at some of these places. They are so dusty and dingy and that stuff gets into your respiratory system. (Taylor)

The dressing rooms where dancers prepare to go on stage were also a source of concern for the women. When survey respondents were asked to respond to the statement: “the change rooms are clean”, 36 (97.3%) said “no”. Dancers complained about mice in the change rooms and one woman stated that a mouse had chewed through her suitcase where she kept her costumes. Ariel was sure she found mouse droppings in her hair brush. In addition to poorly maintained physical spaces, the dancers described feeling unsafe in the spaces where they worked and stayed while out of town. This was, in large part, due to a lack of security in the club or security personnel not doing their jobs properly.

4.3.2. Inadequate Security

Inadequate security in strip clubs was a significant source of concern for many of the performers, because it led to their feeling unprotected and unsafe while on stage, in and around a strip club, and while staying in out-of-town accommodations.

4.3.2.1. Bouncers

When survey respondents were asked to respond to the statement: “there is plenty of security in the clubs to make me feel safe”, 32 (86.5%) of the thirty seven respondents answered “no”. While not specifically asked about security in the strip clubs, interviewees made numerous complaints about the lack of bouncers in some clubs, the incompetence of security staff, the lack of support from bouncers when
dealing with problematic customers, and the inability of security staff to deal with gangsters\textsuperscript{13} inside the clubs.

Several dancers criticized the operators of some strip clubs because they hired bouncers only for the evening shifts, leaving dancers unprotected during the daytime hours. Some of the women were dumbfounded by the fact that these club owners did not think they needed to hire security during the day when they offer liquor and nudity in the same venue. Ariel described an incident one afternoon while she was on stage:

\begin{quote}
I was on stage and I got grabbed...some guy grabbed my ankle and there was no bouncer because it was an afternoon show. He kept tugging me and the DJ was outside smoking so nobody saw and I had to yell for someone to help me. A couple of the regulars came and they took the guy outside. So, it’s one thing if a guy grabs you and it’s taken care of but the other when you are scared shitless because there’s no one there to help you. (Ariel)
\end{quote}

Miranda described a similar situation where she encountered a problematic customer when there was a lack of security:

\begin{quote}
They had no bouncers on duty so when a customer kept trying to grab me I stopped dancing and wrapped myself in my blanket and waited for someone (bar staff) to notice me and kick him out. They finally did but it shouldn’t be like that...I had to wait a long time before they even noticed I was in distress. That doesn’t make me feel very safe. (Miranda)
\end{quote}

These statements indicate that dancers often have to fend for themselves in circumstances where there is an absence of security. In the two situations described above, the women had to yell or stand in the middle of the stage in order to get help, which left them feeling vulnerable and unsafe.

While most dancers complained about a lack of security in the clubs, several of them complained about the incompetence of some bouncers in specific clubs. For

\textsuperscript{13} A gangster is an individual who is formally or informally affiliated with a gang organization.
example, Anna and Taylor complained about how the bouncers at one Vancouver strip club never pay attention when the dancers are on stage.

Some are just, you know, they don’t care. They are always texting, eating, talking to customers, and my life could be in danger. Somebody could pull me off the fucking stage and I could break my neck or something. You know what...have your conversation, that’s fine, but could you at least face the stage. (Anna)

I don’t feel protected at all...like anything could happen to me. They don’t care what happens. They are always socializing and have no clue what is going on on the stage. Customers lie down on the stage with bills in their mouths, they put drinks on the stage, and they lean over the stage or they try to touch me or grab me. I feel so uncomfortable. I try to get their attention by waving my arms and yelling at them and they don’t see me or hear me and so I have to get the attention of the DJ who has to get on the mic and tell them to wake the fuck up. It’s just a shit show and it makes me so angry...just do your freakin’ job so that I can do mine...it’s not that hard. (Taylor)

Another dancer described a situation when while she was performing on stage, a customer grabbed her. Even though the bouncers were only a few feet away, they did nothing to help her. When she got off stage she proceeded directly to the DJ booth to complain about the bouncers not coming to her defence. Even though it is not the job of the DJ to police the actions of the bouncers, this DJ attempted to question the bouncers about the situation, only to have them deny the dancer’s story. When the dancer was adamant, the DJ examined the security tape and found that she was telling the truth; the bouncers were lying. This situation shows that, although it is their formal responsibility, some bouncers have little interest in protecting the dancers.

Some of the participants accused bouncers of not being aware of aggressive and potentially dangerous customers. One dancer explained how, although four bouncers were on duty, none of them noticed a fight escalating over the course of five minutes.

I was working at a bar a couple of weeks ago and there was four security guys on and I still managed to get hit with glass by some guy who broke a bottle. Thank god it didn’t break the skin. But I mean, the fight had been going on for four of five minutes before anything was actually thrown and broken. The bouncers didn’t even notice anything even though the guys were arguing really loudly. I don’t know how they couldn’t have noticed because it was right up near the bar. Finally, the guys did get kicked out and it was right near closing...
time so I had walk out to the street by myself and get into a cab while these guys just continued the fight in the parking lot. Like, seriously, as if that makes you feel safe. But, they just don’t care. (Zoe)

Zoe articulated her frustration with the incompetence of some bouncers and how unsafe this makes her feel. In this case, she left the bar alone to hail a cab while a brawl was taking place in the parking lot. According to other women, this is a common experience. When survey respondents were asked to respond to the statement: “I always get walked out to my car at the end of my shift”; of the 37 respondents 34 (91.9%) said “no”.

Another dancer described a situation where she was on stage when two customers were having a verbal confrontation that was about to escalate into a fight when one of them pulled out a gun.

He pulls a gun, he pulled a gun at the bar. He was facing away from the bar and facing the stage arguing with some guy. He pulled a gun on him and I was on stage. No one saw anything except for a few guys around that table and it scared the crap out of me because no one noticed. The only people who saw were the ones standing around him at the top by the bar. I saw that and I was so scared. I yelled to the DJ to cut my set short. Luckily he did. (Ariel)

Given that a bouncer’s responsibility is to watch out for and protect the dancers, in each of the situations described above, the women were left feeling scared and angry that the bouncers did not take their jobs more seriously.

Several of the dancers worried about the inability of security to deal with gangsters in strip clubs. Because there have been several gang-related shootings in strip clubs in British Columbia and Alberta in recent years their concerns are well founded. While a gangster’s aggression is not typically directed at the dancers, it obviously puts them in a dangerous situation when violence is brought into their work environment. Stacy described a very frightening situation where management told her that the bar staff could not protect her from an angry gangster.

One time I was working at (a Vancouver area strip club) and I went to go do a private dance in between my shows. I opened up the curtain and two customers were in the private room... and the girl was giving the guy a blowjob. I was really grossed out and I yelled at them. I was like what are you doing...this is where I work. So there was this crazy gang member who was friends with these two customers and he
started yelling at me and saying that he told them they could go in there ... but he had nothing to do with the bar; he doesn’t work there. The manager came and grabbed my arm and told me to go upstairs and get my stuff and leave. He said ‘you have no idea who that is and he is fucking crazy’. By this time, the gangster was downstairs in a rage throwing chairs and glasses. They told me to leave and not come back for a while because it was unsafe. I asked him if they were going to kick him out and they were like ‘no way, if we kick him out he will come back and kill people’. They weren’t mad at me, they were protecting me. So, they had to walk to the back door and watch me get into my car and they were like ‘we can’t deal with him and we can’t tell him not to come back so it’s probably better if you don’t come back for a while’. So, I was obviously super scared after that and I didn’t go back to work. (Stacy)

Even though this situation is not typical, it reveals the inability of some bouncers and managers to control gang members in the strip clubs. Even though this dancer felt that the manager was protecting her by telling her to leave, he allowed a dangerous gangster to enter the strip club despite his knowledge that his security staff could not contain the man when he became aggressive. However, as we shall see in the following section, dancers felt unsafe both in the strip club as well as the supposedly private accommodations provided at out-of-town locations.

4.3.2.2. Insecure Accommodations

Several dancers feared for their safety when it came to security in the accommodations provided for them while they worked out of town. Usually dancers stay in the hotels connected to particular clubs and often customers know where in the building their rooms are located. The women complained about customers following them to their rooms and banging on their doors in the middle of the night. Some customers came to the dancer’s rooms assuming they could come in and spend time with them. Performers reported that some of the locks on their hotel room doors did not work, making it impossible to lock their doors from the inside or the outside. All ten interview participants complained about having to be on guard at all times when out of town:

They follow you when you leave the bar and they see where your room is. I’ve had guys knocking on my door all the time asking me to come hang out with them and ... it’s very nerve wracking and every time you hear a knock on the door you’re jumping out of your skin. (Adriana)
Remember (a club on Vancouver Island) where you have to walk across the alley to the hotel in the dark. People in those small towns always know who you are so they try to follow you...and the bar staff don’t have an issue with you walking out the door alone at midnight to go back to your hotel room. (Nikki)

I never feel completely safe when I’m on the road. Maybe when I’m in my room, but even then sometimes I wonder if someone is going to crawl into my window in the middle of the night. (Karen)

I really hated being on the road and not having a place to really feel safe to get a good night’s sleep. The places I felt most safe to sleep were in between places...you know sleeping in transit. (Jordyn)

One dancer described a situation where she accidently discovered that her hotel room key opened up her neighbour’s hotel room door; she feared that his key would also open her door.

I worked up in (a town in Northern BC) and it was just me and another girl. Halfway through the week we realized that the keys we had opened up the other people’s hotel room doors and the whole hotel was full. We had been brought in because there was a mill shutdown so there was like five hundred extra guys in town and that hotel was completely full with the guys from the mill. So, it was us and all those guys. I accidently went to my neighbour’s room thinking it was my room and my key opened his door so his key probably opened my door too. I was like, holy shit, maybe these keys are all the same. I told the girl I was working with to put something up against her door when she went to sleep and to not say a word, not even to the owners because this town is so small ...if they say anything without fixing the problem all of a sudden everyone is going to know. That week was absolutely horrible knowing that we were the only women in the hotel with five hundred guys and that their keys could probably open our doors. (Jordyn)

Even though Jordyn felt it was best not to tell management about the problem, several dancers did complain to management about locks not working. Typically, they were ignored.

4.3.3. Inadequate Support from Owners and Managers

Sometimes you work in a club and the staff and managers are like so supportive and so good to you, but then you work in places like (a club in Alberta) and they treat you like garbage, like you are here to make us money. That’s it, bottom line. I don’t like working there. (Anna)

I mean if I needed something and I asked for something reasonable they were supportive. But there are things they don’t want to do
especially if they have to put out some kind of money and they are often lazy too and don’t want to go out of their way but, mostly I would say I felt supported. (Ariel)

Most bars are completely unfriendly to you; when people are feeling shitty about themselves that is not a supportive work environment. Overall, especially in BC it’s not a supportive work environment. There are some support staff that are great but your entire experience is not at all supportive. (Stacy)

The degree of support that strip-club owners and managers offered to the dancers varies from club to club. Survey respondents were asked “in general, do you feel supported by club owners and managers in carrying out your contractual obligations as an entertainer”? Of the 36 respondents who answered this question, 23 (63.9%) said yes while 13 (36.1%) said no. Five of the ten interviewees said that they do not feel supported; the other five said they sometimes feel supported. Survey participants who said they did not feel supported were then asked “what could club managers/owners do to better support you in carrying out your contractual obligations as an entertainer”? The open-ended responses to this question included the following:

Ensure bouncers are watching the stage during shows and kick out bad customers. Change locks on doors frequently and ensure there’s heat and hot water in the change rooms and accommodations. (Anonymous survey participant)

Clean the poles between every show; have a bouncer close at hand in every bar and have them escort us to our rooms especially when out of town as some places make us go outside in costume to get to and from clubs. They could also have bouncers walk us to our cars at night. (Anonymous survey participant)

Treat the girls with the respect they deserve. (Anonymous survey participant)

Be more caring and listen to what dancers have to say more often. (Anonymous survey participant)

In light of these responses, it seems that some club owners and managers could do more to help the women carry out their contractual obligations. Other respondents indicated that some performers feel owners and managers are only interested in making a profit. Dancers who do not contribute to this goal are treated as expendable objects.

No clubs care about the dancers. The more money they make from you, the more you’ll get work there. (Anonymous survey participant)
Managers and owners only care about one thing and that is if you are keeping customers in the bar. (Anonymous survey participant)

We are replaceable and everyone knows it. No matter how good you are or how loyal you are, you can always be replaced. (Anonymous survey participant)

It appears that some dancers feel as though their relationship with the club managers and owners is completely “one-sided” (Jordyn) in that dancers are expected to perform to the best of their ability regardless of whether owners and managers provide a safe and healthy working environment:

The bar has complete control because the stage can be a complete disaster with holes in it and the pole can be really dangerous (not firmly bolted down) and you’re just expected to do your job and you can’t complain whatsoever, you can’t fine the bar. But the bar has this magical ability to fine you for being two minutes late for your show. (Stacy)

I think that clubs are so selfish; they just don’t care, bottom line. They just want to squeeze as much money out of you as they can and that’s not really fair. There needs to be a more give and take situation; not all one sided, whatever the bar wants. (Jordyn)

I don’t think anyone has ever checked in with me other than maybe a waitress or maybe a bouncer being like ‘Hey, is everything okay?’ or ‘How’s your week going here?’ I don’t ever talk to the managers and owners ‘cause they don’t talk to me. (Nikki)

These responses reveal the lack of interest most club owners and managers have in the concerns of the dancers. Similarly, when survey respondents were asked to respond to the statement: “the club owners/managers care about my concerns and take them seriously”, 34 (91.9%) responded no. Nevertheless, as Stacy indicated, strip club managers are quick to fine women to keep them in line.

In spite of this, when survey respondents were asked “would you ever consider making a complaint to a club manager/owner about poor working conditions”? Twenty-six (72.2%) said that they would complain while 10 (27.8%) said they would not. Dancers who were not willing to complain worried they would not get future work at that particular club if they complained. Others suggested that club managers and owners do not care what they have to say, and therefore, there is no point in complaining. However, of the 28 dancers who said that club owners and managers were not meeting their contractual obligation requiring them to provide dancers with adequate security and
health standards, 25 (89.3%) also reported that they have made complaints about working conditions. Of the 8 dancers who claimed that club owners and managers do provide dancers with adequate security and health standards, 7 (87.5%) also reported complaining about working conditions. Therefore, it seems that many dancers attempt to resist workplace conditions by making complaints about their working conditions.

Owners and managers’ lack of respect for the concerns of dancers would appear to be connected to their classification of dancers as independent contractors and not employees. Even though exotic dancer contracts state that “operators of strip clubs must supply adequate security and health standards to protect the well-being of the artist for the duration of the contract” (Strippers West: contract, 2011), dancers are not protected by the Employment Standards Act in each province. Therefore, there are no guidelines for bar owners to follow. Health and safety standards are left to the discretion of individual bar owners and managers. Indeed, my respondents complained that they could not even count on their booking agents for support in trying to improve their working conditions.

4.3.4. **Lack of Support from the Booking Agents**

Twenty-three survey respondents (63.8%) and seven interview participants felt that their booking agents did not support them in carrying out their contractual obligations even though dancers pay the agents fifteen percent of their weekly salary to represent their interests. Several of the women described situations where they complained to their booking agent about the substandard accommodations provided by particular clubs only for the agent to ignore them, or tell them that, “nothing can be done about it”, or “if you don’t like it you can work somewhere else”. One dancer complained about the dirty stage at a specific strip club only for her agent to tell her to clean it herself. Ariel and Stacy explained how agents do very little to support dancers beyond booking their performances.

*It’s their job as our agents to tell the bar owners and managers that they need to improve working conditions, but they never do.*  (Ariel)

*This is what I always say to them, ‘I pay you out of my pay; it shows right on my contract that a percentage of my pay is paying you, so why do you act like you work for the bar when you should be working for me?’* (Stacy)
Several women asserted that the agents almost always side with bar owners and very rarely represent the dancers’ viewpoint, because the agents have an exclusive contract with the bars. Dancers appear to be less valuable to the agents because, as several dancers pointed out, there is an abundance of dancers; they can easily be replaced. It is easier for agents to replace a dancer who complains too much rather than risk their exclusive contract with one of the few remaining strip clubs by standing up for the dancers’ interests.

Two interviewees argued that agents prefer new dancers to more seasoned performers because they are able to exploit their lack of knowledge about the industry and play on their insecurities. For example, one dancer claimed agents send novice dancers to the worst bookings because they are unlikely to complain about poor working conditions; they are still green and do not yet understand how the industry works. Karen described her own progression through the industry and how agents treated her differently once she began to demand better working conditions.

A lot of us start becoming wise to the way things are being run and we start to wonder why we are being treated that way and then we start to figure it out. At first, we are just happy to be there but then we start to figure out that we’re being taken advantage of and that we deserve better than that. As soon as you start getting that mentality it gets worse. You know, I started being comfortable in my skin and feeling like I have the right to ask for certain things. The things I complained about were never seen as a problem by the agents but I was seen as having an attitude because I was trying to stand up for myself. The agents started to be less and less helpful when getting me bookings and I felt totally dismissed. They started to treat me like I had been around too long, as if they didn’t care about booking me anymore. And that’s when I started thinking it was time for me to retire.

It became clear from the interviews that the dancers who complain too much are not prioritized when it comes to securing bookings; others are ignored.

Agents don’t stick up for girls they just replace them. There’s plenty of girls who I have seen in that situation. People are always treated unfairly...they just get replaced. (Adriana)

Agents don’t have to book you so they won’t. They would just stop booking you and they would stop answering your calls and that’s it, you’re done. It’s so unfair...it’s bullying...it’s flat out bullying but it has always been that way. (Miranda)
They don’t want girls who are going to complain, they don’t want girls who are going to question the way they do things. You’ll be singled out if you are the one complaining because the other girls probably aren’t. They get away with it because it is what it is…it’s stripping. (Taylor)

These comments indicate that dancers cannot count on their agents to stand up for them when it comes to poor strip club working conditions.

Some dancers maintained that booking agents do not support the dancers regardless of whether they are outspoken or not. Two dancers described how agents tried to destroy their self-esteem by trying to make them feel lucky that were getting any bookings at all – a ploy to encourage dancers to take whatever work the agents give them:

The agents are like pimps in a way. They play on your insecurities, they lie to you, they try to make you feel totally dependent on them. The agents totally try to fuck with your self-esteem and then they can give you a lower show price which helps them because they can fit you into a smaller budget (strip clubs have weekly entertainment budgets). And sometimes to get you to do a gig they tell you that you will get a certain show price and then when it comes to the end of the week you get a lower show price than you were told. (Karen)

The agents often use manipulative tactics to gain control over the dancers such as threats, rude comments regarding your appearance and giving the general impression that we have little job security and should take what we can get. (Anna)

According to the dancers, booking agents rarely help them carry out their contractual obligations. If the women complain about working conditions they are most often ignored. Agents sometimes attempt to destroy the dancers’ self-esteem in an effort to control them, a tactic that benefits agents and club owners alike. Club owners, managers and agents work together to extract as much value from a dancer’s labour power as possible while neglecting their health and safety.

4.3.5. Geographic Differences

In an effort to determine if there were any geographic differences in working conditions, survey respondents were provided with a list of six cities – three in Alberta and three in British Columbia – and asked to indicate “in which city do you most like
“Why do you most like working as a stage performer in that city?”? As Table 6 shows, Vancouver was the most popular working destination and Kelowna the least.

Table 6: Favorite Working Destination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Favorite working destination</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grande Prairie</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelowna</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7 shows the reasons participants cited for their preference in working destination.

**Table 7: Reasons for Preferences in Working Destinations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Reasons for preferences in working destinations</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vancouver</td>
<td>It is my home town</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I make a lot of money</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff support me and care about my well-being</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton</td>
<td>I make a lot of money</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There are many strip clubs there</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Accommodations are comfortable and clean</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I make a lot of money</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff support me and care about my well-being</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liquor laws are strictly enforced ensuring no contact with customers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customers are appreciative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calgary</td>
<td>I make a lot of money</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customers are appreciative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liquor laws are strictly enforced ensuring no contact with customers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grande Prairie</td>
<td>I make a lot of money</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Customers are appreciative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Excluding Vancouver and Victoria, money was cited as the number one reason for preferring a particular working destination. These results indicate that most dancers are more concerned with their earning potential in each city and working in their home town than they are about working conditions or enforcement of liquor laws prohibiting contact between dancers and customers. These results do not bode well for change given that dancers care more about money than the conditions in which they earn it. If dancers’ do not demand improvements to their working environments, strip club
owners/managers and booking agents are unlikely to take it upon themselves to improve working conditions.

It is important to explain here how each working destination could be chosen for the financial rewards. There are several reasons for this: 1) When dancers work out of town they typically earn a higher show price than when they work in their home towns; 2) particular cities offer dancers a higher show count which means they are paid for a larger number of shows than in other cities; 3) dancers often develop profitable relationships with regular customers. If a dancer works regularly in the same city, she will most likely develop these relationships, and therefore, return often to that city because it is profitable for her; 4) dancers who prefer not to interact with customers aside from when they are on stage are likely to prefer the cities where customers are known to tip well; and 5) some strip clubs provide a space for dancers to also perform private dances as a way to earn extra income. When responding to survey questions, dancers were asked to only consider their work as stage dancers; in this question they may not have adhered to these instructions. In spite of how dancers earn their money, they clearly choose their working destinations based on their earning potential rather than working conditions in those cities.

4.4. Independent Contractor Status

Several of the interview and survey questions were designed to ascertain the dancers’ understanding of the legal regulations that govern their labour, particularly their thoughts regarding their status as independent contractors (i.e. as self-employed), because their classification as such denies them a whole series of rights, protections, and benefits that are associated with a standard employment contract that would make their relationship that of an employee with an employer under BC and Alberta employment standards legislation. As independent contractors, dancers are not protected by the employment standards legislation in each province, which is responsible for creating standards for working conditions, Employment Insurance (EI), Canada Pension Plan (CPP), workers compensation, sick leave and medical benefits.
Survey respondents were asked “As an exotic stage dancer, your contracts state that you are an independent contractor. Do you agree with this classification”? Of the 37 respondents, 20 (54.1%) agreed that their independent contractor status was the correct classification for their work. However, in listening to the interviewees it soon became clear that many study participants did not know exactly what it means to be an independent contractor. Nevertheless, this did not stop some dancers from questioning the actions of the club owners and managers in light of their self-employed status.

I don’t really know a lot about exactly what that means. But, if the dancer is an independent contractor it seems ridiculous to me that a bar has the ability to fine her. Okay, if you are not doing your job then you don’t get paid but to be fined on top of that is ridiculous. I don’t know...I highly doubt that’s legal but it happens far too often. (Stacy)

We are self-employed... so why do they fine us? They try to punish us like a child. It’s like saying go sit in the corner; I’m taking your toy away because you’ve been bad. I think that’s just another way to rip us off. (Ariel)

I don’t really know about that but I don’t think they should be able to fine us...that must be illegal. I recently got a smiling fine...like really! I got a $200 smiling fine because I didn’t smile on stage. As if that makes you wanna smile. (Anna)

You know, you walk in (to work) and you are given a list of rules and regulations, you know...my set has to be 18 minutes or you’re fined...it’s like how the fuck do they think they should get away with that when we are not their employees. It’s fucking crazy! (Jordyn)

If we hold the reins, then why do we get treated like shit...if we are on the same footing as the manager of the bar? (Adriana)

According to the B.C. Ministry of Labour (2009), if a person is hired, advised how to do the job, supervised, controlled or subject to discipline they are not an independent contractor; they should be classified as an employee. These interview responses indicate that some bar owners assert more control over the dancers than is legally permitted given their status as independent contractors. Typically, the more control an employer has over the worker, the more likely it should be deemed an employer/employee relationship. This overzealous control by bar owners and managers also revealed itself in the survey responses. When respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement “I generally control the conditions of my work
– i.e. when, where, and how the work is performed”– almost half of them disagreed (n=18; 48.6%).

One survey question asked respondents “are there any specific negative consequences you have felt as a result of being and independent contractor as a stage dancer”? Of the 37 responses, 23 (62.2%) said yes while 14 (37.8%) said no. Respondents who said yes were then asked “what are these negative consequences you feel you have experienced as a result of being an independent contractor stage dancer”? The results are shown in decreasing order of frequency in Table 8.

**Table 8: Negative Consequences Resulting from Independent Contractor Status**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative consequences of independent contractor status</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No social safety net (i.e. benefits, EI, Workers Compensation)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No rights as a worker and no recourse to deal with work problems</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to prove income to third parties (i.e. financing company, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fines issued by club owners/managers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack knowledge about what it means to be an independent contractor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not have guaranteed work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>99.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While talking about their independent contractor status, several of the interviewees complained about the difficulties involved in trying to provide information about the amount of their income to third parties. For example, Zoe explained:

> *You know, for example, another problem I ran into before when I went to go buy my vehicle or to get approved for my new place...you know it’s very difficult to prove what you make and being independent contractors it’s very, very hard to get some of these things. It creates a lot of complications. It’s almost like people don’t believe you have a real job or something.*

Other respondents felt that there were significant benefits associated with being defined as an independent contractor. For example, one survey question asked respondents if they benefitted from “the ability to write off expenses associated with my
work (i.e. costumes, makeup, etc.)?” All 37 respondents (100%) agreed they received this benefit from being self-employed. Respondents were then asked “are there any additional benefits you feel you receive from being considered an independent contractor”? Nine (25.7%) of the 35 respondents felt that there were additional benefits beyond the tax write offs. These respondents were then asked “what are these benefits you feel you receive from being an independent contractor”? Five (55.5%) referred to the flexibility of the work, 2 (22.2%) said that weekly paycheques as opposed to bi-weekly paycheques are a benefit, and 1 (11.1%) said that not having a boss to answer to was beneficial.

Interviews with the women revealed that some dancers are more much more knowledgeable than are others when it comes to their employment status. Two well-informed dancers explained what they viewed as the advantages and disadvantages of independent contractor status.

Well, it’s really 50/50 for me. The way things are with the contract it allows us to write stuff off on our taxes. We can work when we want to and don’t have to if we don’t want to. It’s so flexible. We can work and then disappear for a year and come back and work again and there’s no questions asked. I really like the flexibility of that. But, if we were employees we would have things like workers compensation. When I had my first epileptic seizure while I was on stage I tried to claim workers compensation and I was told that I don’t qualify because I’m not an employee. So, like I said, there’s good and there’s bad. So, in my situation I really felt the bad part of that and it really sucked. But, I love the flexibility. I don’t know which one I would choose. It’s really a hard call but that was a really hard three months when I couldn’t get that help. (Anna)

I’m divided on that whole issue. It bothers me that we don’t get workers compensation; it bothers me that we don’t get EI. [...] But, the things that I really like about being an independent contractor are things like the write offs for taxes and being able to take time off whenever I want, being able to try and work around the schedule of having kids. [...] The other thing I like about being an independent contractor is being able to have control over my work experience...being able to create my own shows and pick my own music, what I’m going to wear, being able to sit between my shows with customers or play pool or go to the gym or go get groceries...you know...the things that you can’t normally do in a normal work day. Yeah, working in different spaces all the time, I like that. I like the variety of working in different places regularly. (Miranda)
Survey respondents were asked: “Did you know that as an independent contractor you are not protected by the Employment Standards Act in each province that provides workers with a minimum standard of working conditions”? Almost half of the respondents (n=16; 43.2%) indicated that they were unaware of this. Moreover, while 13 (35%) of the 37 survey respondents suggested that they have not felt any negative consequences as a result of being an independent contractor, 11 (84.6%) participants also said that they have complained about working conditions at some point in their careers. This seems to indicate that some dancers are not recognizing the connection between their poor working conditions and their status as independent contractors; many dancers have limited knowledge regarding the legal repercussions that result of not being classified as employees.

Survey respondents were asked “would you be willing to give up your tax benefits associated with being an independent contractor to become an employee who is eligible for medical benefits and employment insurance”? The question was prefaced with a note saying “this would mean that your employer would take money off your cheque every time you get paid and in return you would receive medical benefits, Canada Pension, Employment Insurance and Workers Compensation”. Of the 37 responses to this question, 28 (75.7%) said they would be willing to give up their independent contractor status to become an employee, while 9 (24.3%) said they would not. Respondents who said they would not give up their independent contractor status were then asked “why would you not be willing to give up your current independent contractor status in order to obtain other benefits”? Five (55.6%) said that the benefits of being self-employed, such as tax write-offs and autonomy, are too valuable to give up, 2 (22.2%) said they would need more information to make a decision, and 1 (11.1%) said she should be afforded the same rights and benefits as employees.

While 28 (75%) survey respondents indicated their willingness to give up their tax write offs to become an employee, one interviewee was adamant that she knew of many dancers who would never want to give up their independent contractor status because of the autonomy and flexibility it affords. This leads me to wonder if the women who indicated their willingness to give up their self-employed status are aware they would also have to give up the flexibility associated with their status. Perhaps, if this survey question was prefaced with more information regarding the legal ramifications of being
an independent contractor rather than an employee, fewer dancers would have indicated their willingness to give up their self-employed status.

4.4.1. Absence of a Social Safety Net

Most of the dancers in the study were unaware that they are not eligible for CPP, EI and the like until they found themselves unable to work due to an injury or pregnancy.

4.4.1.1. Lack of Workers Compensation

When survey respondents were asked “do you ever worry about getting physically hurt while performing on stage?” 20 (55.6%) said that they do. When asked “why do you worry about getting physically hurt while performing on stage?” 9 (45%) said that if they got hurt and could not work they would have no way of paying their bills, 7 (35%) said they cannot get Workers Compensation, and 4 (20%) said they have people who are financially dependent on them and if they cannot work they would not be able to support their dependents.

Even though many of the participants went to great lengths to avoid getting hurt, half (n=18) of them reported being physically hurt during a performance. When these respondents were asked “what happened?” 5 (27.7%) said that they sustained bruises or cuts, 11 (61.1%) sustained muscle or ligament injuries, and 3 (16.6%) sustained broken bones. When asked “how much time did you have to take off work?” 7 (18.9%) dancers said one to two weeks. Two dancers reported having to take more than two weeks, but less than twelve weeks off. Some of the dancers who reported being injured but not taking any time off claimed that they would have like to, but could not afford to do so.

These figures indicate that although getting hurt while at work is a very real possibility for exotic dancers, they cannot claim Workers Compensation if they are injured on the job. Two of the interviewees described their circumstances after being injured while performing on stage.

*We are in a very physical job and I think that the fact that we don’t receive benefits like everyone else is a huge problem. Especially when I paid into those things for seven years before I was a dancer and I never used them but, now that I am a dancer, I don’t qualify. I broke*
my arm while I was on stage and so I couldn't do my job for over a month but I didn't receive workers compensation. I tried to get it but was told that I don't qualify. I don't think many girls know that before they end up in a situation where they need it. Nobody tells you that you don't qualify for benefits and workers compensation when you become a dancer until it's too late. Especially the workers compensation, not many dancers know about that. (Zoe)

After experiencing the first symptoms of a debilitating disease while on stage one dancer described how she struggled to make ends meet during the months that followed:

Like when I found out I had epilepsy, I had to take three months off. I was supposed to take longer off but I didn’t have the money to take more time off. So, I took the three months off and I tried to get workers compensation but they said it doesn't work for me because I am not technically an employee. Maybe there would have been a smart way to do it if you knew the system or something but it didn't work for me. When you tell them you are a dancer they say shitty for you, that’s your problem. (Anna)

Although dancers cannot claim workers compensation because they do not pay into it, as independent contractors they can apply for Personal Optional Protection under the Workers Compensation Act. This means that a dancer could purchase between $1500 and $6100 of monthly coverage and receive up to 90% of her net income in the event of an injury, temporary or permanent disability, or death (WorkSafe BC, 2012).

Nevertheless, it has yet to be determined whether a dancer would actually qualify given that proof of income is necessary for protection over $2500; one of the problems associated with their status as independent contractors is that it is often difficult to prove the amount of their income to government agencies because dancers do not receive regular or consistent paycheques from a single employer but instead work week long contracts for different clubs. Most clubs pay the dancers cash and do not give dancers a copy of their contracts. In order to make a claim under the Personal Optional Protection policy, the claimant would have had to pay premiums for an entire year prior to making a claim. In this way the legislation aimed at providing recourse for independent contractors may not readily extend to dancers.

4.4.1.2. Lack of Employment Insurance

Similarly, because exotic dancers do not pay into the Employment Insurance (EI) plan they do not qualify for this benefit either, although many are not aware that they do
not qualify until it is too late. One of the interviewees described how she tried to get EI when she had to take time off to have a baby.

Well, I know for me personally I never thought much of it at all until it was time to take time off work to have a baby and then it was like, wow, I never paid into EI and so I wasn’t eligible for EI. So, I just had to live off my savings and it was like ‘Oh, this sucks!’ I never really thought about it when I was dancing...never. (Jordyn)

Another dancer complained that pregnant dancers should have a social safety net to fall back on:

Having some kind of ability to support yourself after your baby is born would be nice or even during the pregnancy because you can’t work while pregnant. (Miranda)

One woman ended her dance career to pursue an education, but soon after she stopped working she was unable to claim EI:

I didn’t tell the lady in the government what my work was but I explained how I work with an agency who gets me work in different locations. She was going to file an EI claim for me but then she phoned the agents and they told her we are independent contractors and that we can’t get it. But, this women thought from the way I was explaining the job that we are employees. (Karen)

As independent contractors, dancers are denied access to EI unless they pay into it; however, none of my respondents were aware that the Fairness for the Self-Employed Act (Department of Justice Canada, 2012) provides economic security for independent contractors. Under this new legislation, which came into effect in 2009, dancers could pay premiums – $1.83 for every $100 they earn – in order to receive extended EI benefits, including maternity, parental, sickness/injury and compassionate care. However, in Karen’s case, when she quit her job as a dancer to attend school, she would not be able to claim EI even if she had paid into it for a year before making a claim.

These results suggest that dancers working in British Columbia and Alberta are not aware of the Personal Optional Protection under the Workers Compensation Act and the Fairness for the Self-Employed Act. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether
dancers would actually qualify for either protection given their marginalized work and the need to provide proof of income.

4.4.2. **Lack of Recourse**

My participants believe that the majority of bar owners/managers and agents do not have dancers’ best interests in mind. Given the way club owners/managers and agents treat them, some dancers are unwilling to complain about their working conditions because they fear they may not get dance contracts again. However, even when dancers do complain they are usually ignored. Because dancers are not protected by the employment standards legislation in BC and Alberta, there are no guidelines or regulations requiring club owners to maintain a certain standard when it comes to dancers’ health and safety. As Jordyn explained:

*We’re there to do our jobs and we have a contract and it should be honored but it’s not. It never is and no one defends us. The bar owners and the agents side with each other…what about us?*

This statement reveals the dancer’s marginalization. Although the club owners/managers and agents attempt to extract maximum value from the dancers’ labour power, dancers are left with no recourse to demand improved working conditions. When I asked if they would ever consider making a formal complaint to the Employment Standards Tribunal, none said they would. One dancer said that she would be afraid the tribunal would tell her that her job was not “real” work.

4.4.2.1. **An Industry in Flux**

The unwillingness of some dancers to complain about working conditions was exacerbated by the way the industry is changing, particularly the large number of strip club closures in recent years, mostly in British Columbia. According to Patrick Miller, owner and operator of a local exotic dancing booking agency, in the late 1980’s there was about thirty-five strip clubs in the downtown core alone and today there are only nine in the entire Lower Mainland (personal communication, April 7, 2010). While there has been considerable speculation regarding the reasons for the closures, he equates this trend with too many clubs being concentrated in one area, the mismanagement of certain clubs, too much competition, the rising costs of operating a club, shrinking profit
margins due to economic recessions, escalating rents due to the gentrification of
downtown neighbourhoods, and improvements in gender equality in the workplace.
Some of the dancers I interviewed attributed the closures to the increased use of the
Internet by men to download pornography in the comfort of their own homes, and
several suggested that, because the number of female audience members has
increased in recent years, the strip club is no longer a male sphere where men can
come and relax in the company of other men. Still others argued that we live in a society
that is becoming very cognizant of the way it treats women, and therefore, it is no longer
acceptable to unapologetically objectify women.

Despite popular perceptions that strip clubs lead to an increase in gang activity
and drug dealing in the local community, legislators responsible for by-laws and zoning
do not treat exotic dance clubs any differently than another type of bar that provides live
entertainment. For example, exotic dancing establishments are required to hold a
business licence that classifies them as a “cabaret”. A cabaret is defined as a “premises
for dancing by customers and where entertainment may be provided” (City of
Vancouver: Land Use and Development Policies and Guidelines, 2000). However,
these guidelines require that applicants for new developments classed as a cabaret poll
residents within a 2,000 foot radius to ascertain whether they object to a new cabaret
opening in that location. At least 60 percent of those polled must approve of the
development for Council to even consider whether to award a license. It may well be
more difficult than twenty years ago for exotic dancing establishments to get this level of
approval. Nevertheless, this does not affect the existing strip clubs, and therefore, the
reasons for the club closures remain speculative.

4.4.2.1.1. Increased Competition When Asking for Bookings

In spite of the reasons behind the club closures, several dancers argued that the
club closures combined with the lack of well-paying straight jobs14 created an abundant
labour pool for the agents to draw upon. One dancer who has been in the industry for

14 A colloquial phrase used by dancers to refer to jobs outside the exotic dancing industry.
eighteen years articulated how this situation benefits the club owners to the detriment of dancers.

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Stripping has become normalized...more and more women are deciding to become strippers. When I started it wasn’t like that...it was horrible to say that you were a stripper. Now many more college girls are strippers. With all the clubs that have closed down there is less work for everyone and more people to share it with. That really sets up in the bar owners minds that because there are always new girls coming into the industry they don’t have to treat anyone with respect. (Stacy)

My interviewees indicated that the club closures had a significant impact on their working lives. All of them complained about the effect of there being fewer clubs on the circuit, which meant that dancers had to leave town more often if they wanted constant work. While some dancers enjoyed the travelling, others found it difficult to work out of town because they were also mothers or students. One mother of two claimed that she had to leave the industry because she could no longer travel to out-of-town bookings, which made her less valuable to the agents.

Two dancers complained that club owners and managers take advantage of the shortage of in-town bookings:

Because there are less places to work, club owners are putting a cap on the show prices they are willing to pay. There used to be more variation in show prices but now dancers, regardless, of dancing ability, costumes, or beauty, are pretty much making the same price unless you work out of town. (Karen)

The agents are in such a position of control and it’s almost worse now because there are so few places to work and you are really at their mercy just to get jobs. (Adriana)

Several women complained about the way that some club managers require stage dancers also to perform private dances for individual customers between their stage shows. Women who did not want to perform the more intimate dances had difficulty getting bookings in clubs where this was a requirement. One woman stated that these clubs made $15 off every private dance and that “the hustlers” were always welcome back while the more “conservative dancers” found it harder to get bookings (Jordyn).
Despite the deterioration of dancer’s working conditions, and despite the club closures, two performers were fearful of publicity about dancers’ plight. One dancer explained why publicity could adversely affect strip-club business:

_in terms of enforcement and ratting out the clubs...I’m not in favor of that because we have already lost so many work spaces that if we were getting them shut down we would lose more. The mainstream community just looks for ways to fuck over sex related work so if you give them a reason on a platter for them to close down a club then they probably will. So, it’s hard...I might be willing to freeze my ass off and wear my winter coat to bed for a week so that I can get a pay cheque rather than not have the option to work at all._ (Miranda)

Another dancer described her fears regarding further regulation of the exotic dancing industry.

_I’m reluctant to have the City of Vancouver or the province or the federal government, or whoever it is, be like here’s a new set of standards. I don’t think that would go very well. I’m really worried about the industry disappearing. That would be awful because the industry provides a valuable option for women even though it’s not as profitable as it used to be._ (Nikki)

These comments reveal that exotic dancers face a situation that is extremely difficult to navigate given the potential for further demise of an already shrinking industry. Nevertheless, most dancers agree that unsatisfactory working conditions should not be swept under the rug, as they have very real consequences for dancers.

4.5. Unionization

One section of the survey examined the potential for creating an exotic stage dancers’ union in Alberta and British Columbia. Dancers were asked “would you ever join a union for exotic stage dancers”? Of the 36 responses, 30 (83.3%) said that they would be willing to join a union. Respondents who said that they would not join a union were then asked “why wouldn’t you join a stage dancers union?” One said that she did
not see the point, another that she did not plan on dancing for very long, another that she did not think dancers could agree on what is best for them as a group when it comes to working conditions, another was worried about being blacklisted\(^\text{15}\) by agents and club owners, and one dancer said that she would not join a union for all of the aforementioned reasons.

Interviewees were asked “what are your thoughts on a union for dancers? Would you ever become involved in one”?

_I love it! I love anything that is supportive, you know, supportive to health and safety and rights. I would love it if there was some way to push those mother fuckin’ agents right out or at least put them in a position where they are working for us like they are supposed to be and I think a union could help. And, I even think that a lot of people never wanted to start a union because they thought that the bikers would be against it or they would be scared. But, I don’t think they would care that much...I don’t think it would be that much of an issue. The possibility of a union, especially if we were able to convince them that it’s not because we want to shut clubs down or screw over business owners, it’s because we want to be recognized and a union might legitimize things so that people go to strip clubs more and they won’t worry that they are supporting the exploitation of women._

(Miranda)

This dancer wondered if the biker gang known to be closely involved in the business of exotic dancing might resist the creation of a union. Although they do not often talk about it, dancers are well aware their work is closely connected to organized crime. However, this dancer suggested that this particular organization might not take issue with a union, because it might help to increase the number of customers coming into the clubs, thereby boosting business. Another dancer had a different opinion about the potential outcome.

_Yeah, I would join a union because I’d rather make a little less and pay union dues and because the union would enforce all of these things for us. A union, I think, would fix all our problems, everything – our_

\(^{15}\) Blacklisting happens when club owners and agents think that a dancer is a troublemaker. Club owners and agents are reluctant to book troublemakers.
safety issues, our concerns, anything...the union would take care of it so it would be stupid not to. But, I would be too scared to start a union because of the rumors that two girls who tried to start one got blackballed. (Ariel)

Two more interviewees suggest that, while a union could be beneficial, it might be difficult to get all of the members to agree on what is best for the group given the diversity of dancers. Three respondents suggested that joining a union could hinder their earning potential.

I would definitely join a union. I think that, in general, the idea seems like almost an impossible one because there are so many different types of people working in that industry. I think there are a lot of girls who feel that would be a good idea but I don’t know if there would be enough. But then, just like any job, when you try and bring in a union and it doesn’t go through then you are pretty much out of work after so I think a lot of people wouldn’t want to out of fear for their own livelihood. I think behind closed doors everyone would agree that something needs to be done but, as far as people standing up all together, I would be absolutely shocked to see that happen. (Jordyn)

It depends on the education of the people running the union; it depends on what their goals are; it depends on whether they want to be publicly acknowledged in the industry. Some girls want to party and other girls want to make a career out of it. When there are so many different people in the industry we will not all agree on the same thing. For example, when club owners started expecting private dancing in between shows, some dancers were willing to do it and others weren’t. So, you can’t take one sphere and apply it to everyone, it won’t work. It’s a nice idea but... dancers would probably like to have someone back them up but, the idea of risking profit...I think most people want to make a profit. There is always someone willing to do the work. If you have bills to pay you are not going to risk getting involved in a union. If you need the money and it’ll affect your job you won’t risk it. (Adriana)

Most of these comments indicate that, in general, dancers feel that a union would be beneficial because it would help to improve working conditions. Of the 28 survey respondents who suggested that the contractual obligation whereby club owners and managers are required to provide adequate security and health standards is not being met, 24 (85.7%) also said they would join a union for dancers. Further, of the 30 respondents who find their lack of protection under the Employment Standards Act problematic, 25 (83.3%) said they would join a union. Of the 32 dancers who
complained about their working conditions at some point in their career, 27 (84.4%) said they would join a union.

Despite their enthusiasm for a union, many women doubted its feasibility. Future research could examine how a union for exotic dancers could be structured. A group of peep show performers in the United States successfully unionized. Stage dancers in Canada may have something to learn from their experience.

4.6. Participants’ Recommendations for Improving Working Conditions

One of the primary objectives of this study was to provide a means for exotic stage dancers to voice any recommendations they might have regarding their working conditions. Participants had separate and specific recommendations for strip club management, booking agents and policy makers. Recommendations were made throughout the interviews and in various open-ended survey questions. Table 9 shows the frequency with which particular recommendations were made by study participants. Some survey and interview participants made more than one recommendation.

Table 9: Dancers’ Recommendations for Strip Club Owners and Managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dancers’ recommendations for strip club owners and managers</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of entire study sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintain and clean the stages and change rooms</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve out of town accommodations (heating, plumbing, locks, etc.)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect dancers and listen to their concerns</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hire professional bouncers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abide by the contract which guarantees dancers a certain number of shows</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get rid of fines</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay dancers for floor time</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview and survey participants made several recommendations for club owners and managers to help promote health and safety in their work spaces. The most frequently cited recommendation was to provide a properly maintained and clean change room and stage. In particular, dancers suggested that strip club management clean the poles and the stage surface several times throughout the day and promptly repair any holes in the stage floor. Participants also recommended that out of town accommodations have properly functioning plumbing and heating and working locks on all the doors and windows.

When it came to their booking agents, participants were adamant that their relationships with their agents needed to be improved. Table 10 shows the frequency of their recommendations for doing this. Some survey and interview participants made more than one recommendation.

**Table 10: Dancers’ Recommendations for Booking Agents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dancers’ recommendations for booking agents</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of entire study sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Represent and support the dancers working in their clubs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a consistent set of rules to be followed by management and the dancers (these should be written into the contract)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a set of occupational health and safety standards and ensure that management abides by these</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As we can see in table 10, several dancers felt that the agents should be supporting the well-being of the women on their rosters. It was suggested that booking agents must work for the dancers by listening to their concerns about their working conditions and representing their interests in their negotiations with the strip clubs. If particular strip clubs do not improve dancer’s working conditions, then agents should not book dancers in those bars until improvements are made. A final recommendation was that the agents create a standard set of contractual rules regarding what club managers expect of entertainers. This way, dancers would be fined less often, as they would know exactly what is expected of them in all strip clubs in which they work.
Dancer’s recommendations for policy makers were less consistent than those for strip club management and booking agents (Table 11). Again, some survey and interview participants made more than one recommendation.

**Table 11: Dancers’ Recommendations for Policy Makers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dancers’ recommendations for policy makers</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>% of entire study sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give dancers access to protections under labour legislation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a set of occupational health and safety standards</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforce at least a minimum standard of health and safety by carrying out inspections</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate a discussion among dancers, booking agents, and strip club owners on how to improve working conditions for dancers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several participants recommended that they be permitted access to labour protections including workers compensation and employment insurance.

* I think we should be able to receive the same benefits as any employee at any company. (Zoe)*

Another dancer suggested that policy makers, rather than club managers and agents, develop a standardized set of occupational health and safety standards to which strip club owners and managers must abide. She suggested that, if these guidelines are not met, the strip club management should be penalized:

* I think they should create a standard set of regulations that are really adhered to. If there are better regulations and a penalty for not abiding by them that would be good. It seems that a heavy penalty is the only thing bars respond to. (Stacy)*

Two dancers commented that policy makers should enforce a minimum standard of health and safety for erotic entertainers. However, two participants were adamant that additional government regulation would result in more strip club closures, thereby, reducing the number of employment opportunities. Two other dancers suggested that policy makers could facilitate discussion among dancers, booking agents and strip club owners/managers regarding the best way to improve working conditions.
The dancers' recommendations indicate that they have clear ideas about the best ways to improve their working lives.
Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Chapter 5 summarizes the study’s key findings and compares them to existing empirical research on exotic dancing. I make several recommendations for improving the working experiences of exotic stage dancers in Alberta and British Columbia. I conclude by describing the study’s limitations, and suggest ideas for future research.

This study examines the experiences of exotic stage dancers working the circuit in Alberta and British Columbia. Building on research on exotic dance that uses a labour framework informed by a feminist analysis, this study focuses on the positive and negative aspects of working as an exotic stage dancer, their working conditions, their status as independent contractors, their lack of a social safety net, their lack of recourse to deal with problems in the workplace, and the potential for dancer unionization.

5.1. Most Positive Aspects of the Job

Similar to Barton (2002 and 2006), Forsythe and Deshotels (1998), Holsopple (1998), Maticka-Tyndale et al. (2000), and Wesely (2003a and 2003b), the current study found that knowledge of the potential income that could be earned by exotic dancing was the primary motivating factor for a dancer’s initiation into and continued participation in this marginalized industry. Just over eighty percent of respondents stated that the money is better than what they could earn in other jobs.

Nevertheless, despite the financial rewards, Holsopple (1998) and Maticka-Tyndale (2000) found that the money earned through exotic dancing tends to trap women in the business, as they are unable to see themselves earning as much money in other jobs. While several of my participants made comments to this effect, some of the retired dancers claimed that it was the money they earned through stripping that allowed them to move on and do the things they really wanted to do, such as go to school or open a business.
My participants described other benefits of exotic dancing, including the flexible work schedule, meeting interesting people, the camaraderie between dancers, creative self-expression, improved self-confidence, and the good exercise they got while doing their job. As one participant put it:

*So many things...the money...loved the money...loved the power...loved the camaraderie with the other girls...loved the DJ’s, hated the bad ones...met lot’s of great customers...made friends with a lot of people. I loved that I didn’t have to work a shitty $8 an hour job that I hated...the flexibility...taking a week off whenever I wanted...being able to travel...the creativity, the actual dancing...one of my favorite parts of it. I know some people say they got into dancing to dance... but some of us really do love dancing.* (Miranda)

Other studies echo these findings; for example, Colossi (2010) stated that dancers “stressed the intense pleasure they gained from both dancing and from social interaction with the other dancers” (p. 186), Maticka-Tyndale et al., (2000) found that the flexibility of the work was an important benefit to exotic dancer’s health and well-being, and Scott (1996) found that dancers deemed creative self-expression to be one of the most positive aspects of the work.

Because exotic dancing is a financially rewarding and fun job, it is not surprising that so many dancers tolerate poor working conditions. Other jobs may provide a better working environment but they may not be as enjoyable or as financially rewarding as exotic dancing. For these reasons, it may be difficult for dancers to complain about working conditions as it may limit their time and/or success in the industry. The result is that club owners and managers have a great deal of leverage in the dancer-owner dynamic.

### 5.2. Most Negative Aspects of the Job

In spite of these benefits, my participants also reported negative experiences while working as exotic dancers. Twelve (32%) claimed that the stigma associated with the work was its worst aspect. Like Bruckert (2002), Bruckert et al. (2003), and Maticka-Tyndale et al. (2000), the current study found that the stigma of being a nude dancer affects every area of the dancer’s life. Dancers complained that the stigma follows them
outside the strip club, and does not end once they retire from dancing. Maticka-Tyndale et al., (2000) asserted that “the ubiquity of the stigma of being an exotic dancer worked against the women’s attempts to establish credibility in their communities or when they applied for other jobs” (p. 103). This was also the case in the current study, as performers complained about not being able to put their dancing experience on their resumes. Many participants complained that men worried about dating or marrying an exotic dancer because of the stigmatization of exotic dancers.

5.3. Working Conditions

Considering the amount of research into the exotic dancing industry, it is somewhat surprising that very little has focussed on dancers’ working conditions. The research that has looked at such conditions tends to focus on threats to health and safety produced by the social organization of the strip club and the hierarchical interpersonal relationships that arise, including the interactions between dancers and their customers, and between dancers and other strip club staff, such as owners, managers, bouncers, waitresses, and disc jockeys (Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009; Bruckert, 2002; Bruckert et al., 2003; Egan, 2006; Holsopple, 1998; Lewis, 2006; Lewis et al., 2005; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1999; Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000, Price, 2008). The dominant health concerns identified include risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assault risk, and substance abuse (Lilleston et al, 2012). These studies focus almost exclusively on the work of lap dancers as opposed to stage dancers. In mentioning stage dancers, Maticka-Tyndale et al. (2000) suggest that, as a result of their limited interaction with customers, these performers do not face the same degree of “threat from assault or STI’s” (p. 97) as lap dancers.

Similar to Lilleston et al., (2012), the current study aspired to expand these relatively narrow analyses by examining the working conditions of exotic dancers through a broader lens; in particular, the research aimed to explore the interplay between the moral, legal, social organizational, and physical contexts of strip clubs, and the hierarchical interpersonal relationships that develop therein. The current study examines the conditions that stage dancers’ face, as opposed to lap dancers, acknowledging that there is overlap between the two.
Participants in the current study provided a wealth of information about their working conditions. Several of the interviewees asserted that working conditions in strip clubs in Alberta and British Columbia have declined due to the poor economy in recent years. Two of the women suggested that bar owners cannot afford to keep up with the maintenance and repairs and, even though they felt working conditions were at their worst, they were somewhat forgiving for this reason. Nevertheless, most of my participants were not so forgiving, and argued that dancers need certain conditions to be able to do their jobs in a healthy and safe manner.

5.3.1. Dangerous Stages

Exotic dancer contracts state that operators of a strip club must “provide adequate security and health standards to protect the well-being of the artist” for the duration of the contract (Strippers West, 2012). However, when respondents were asked if this contractual obligation was being met, 78.4% (n=29) said that it was not. A specific area of contention was the stage, the physical space where dancers perform. The majority of respondents (91.9%; n=34) indicated that the stage was not well-maintained; many of them described having to deal with dirty poles and stage surfaces, and holes in the surface of the stage. While dancers made efforts to avoid getting hurt by keeping the soles of their shoes toped and wiping down the poles before every show, 50% (n=18) reported getting physically hurt while performing on stage. Injuries included bruises, cuts that often became infected, muscle and ligament injuries, and broken bones. Many of these injuries were the result of badly designed and poorly maintained stages. While previous research does not reveal much about the condition of the stages where dancers perform, Maticka-Tyndale et al., (2000) noted that some of their respondents were concerned about dirty stages, and Holsopple (1998) noted that stages are “often cheaply constructed” (p. 8).

5.3.2. Substandard Accommodations

Because stage dancers work a circuit they are often required to travel to other cities to perform. When working out of town, dancers stay in the accommodations that the strip club provides. Many of my participants were concerned about their health and safety in these accommodations. Described as “vile and unacceptable” (Taylor),
dancers talked about bringing their own bedding and cleaning products to “sanitize” (Stacy) the rooms upon their arrival. But there were some things in these physical spaces over which the women had less control. For example, participants dealt with plumbing problems, inadequate heat and light, mould, and bedbugs. While dancers are required to look their best and perform to the best of their abilities, it seems to be counterproductive for club owners and managers not to provide functional accommodation for dancers to stay when working out of town. In order to look and smell their best dancers must have access to working showers, hot water, and sufficient light in which to apply their makeup. Their rooms should be clean and free of mould and bedbugs. Indeed, the poor accommodations provided for dancers suggests that owners and managers attempt to extract maximum value from the dancer’s labour without considering some of her most basic needs.

Dancers were also concerned about the condition of the change rooms located in strip clubs. Thirty-six (97%) survey respondents claimed that most of the dressing rooms were dirty. Participants complained about the rooms being cold and not being able to walk on the floors with bare feet. Some dancers had experienced mice chewing through the suitcases housing their costumes and finding mouse droppings on their belongings. In her discussion of strip club dressing rooms, Holsopple (1998) also described dirty and cold dressing rooms.

5.3.3. **Inadequate Support from Owners and Managers**

Similar to Bradley-Engen and Ulmer (2009), Holsopple (1998), Lewis (2006), Maticka-Tyndale et al. (1999), Maticka-Tyndale et al. (2000), and Price, (2008), I found that the social organization of the strip club and the interpersonal power relations that develop have an important effect on the experiences of exotic dancers. Maticka-Tyndale et al. (1999) asserted that “the social structure of strip clubs can either contribute to the well-being of dancers or increase their vulnerability” (p. 21). In the current study, 13 (36.1%) survey respondents and half of the ten interviewees reported not feeling supported by club owners and managers. Dancers complained that management did not respect them and did not care about their concerns regarding their working conditions. This finding differs significantly from Lilleston et al’s (2012) participants who
affectionately referred to their manager as “daddy”, a man who could always be counted on to protect and support them (p. 563).

Like Bruckert (2002) and Holsopple’s (1998) participants, many dancers in my sample suggested that management treated them like a commodity that could easily be replaced if they were not keeping customers buying alcohol and interested in what was being offered in the strip club. Of my respondents, 34 (91.9%) indicated that club managers and owners did not care about the dancer’s concerns or take them seriously. Dancers consistently complained about the “one-sided” (Jordyn) relationship between dancers and club management. In order to maintain this one-sided relationship, strip club managers imposed economic sanctions if dancers failed to comply with informal rules in a particular club. Bruckert (2002), Holsopple (1998) and Price (2008) also found that management used fines to discipline dancers.

5.3.4. Inadequate Security

My participants complained about the interpersonal relationships between dancers and strip club security staff. Of particular concern to 32 (86.5%) of my participants was that there was not enough security in strip clubs. Several performers complained that many strip clubs did not hire bouncers for day-time shifts, thereby leaving dancers vulnerable to assault. Other concerns included the incompetence of existing security personnel, the lack of support in dealing with problematic customers, and the inability of bouncers to deal with gangsters who frequent strip clubs. Participants reported that bouncers tended to socialize with customers, text, or eat while on duty, thereby not paying sufficient attention to the dancers performing on stage. Dancers described numerous situations where bouncers did not assist them in dealing with customers who put their drinks on the stage, grabbed their ankles or legs while they were dancing, or tried to touch their genitals during their floor show. This lack of support from the bouncers was a major source of contention for the women, as it left them feeling vulnerable and unable to do their jobs without being physically assaulted by customers. Like Holsopple’s (1998) respondents, my participants complained that bouncers did not walk them to their cars or hotel rooms at the end of their shifts. As a result, dancers were vulnerable to verbal, physical and sexual assault from customers.
Indeed, this vulnerability left dancers feeling as though they had to be on guard at all times – even while relaxing in their rooms, as customers often followed them there.

These findings are strikingly different from those of Lewis (2006), who found that dancers and bouncers often worked cooperatively in an effort to increase their earnings. However, the dancers in Lewis’ study tipped the bouncers in order to get them to be responsive when they needed them; dancers in Alberta and British Columbia do not often tip the bouncers, which could explain this difference in findings.

Dancers in the current study accused bouncers of not being aware of aggressive and potentially dangerous strip club customers, many of whom were gangsters. This lack of control of audience members left dancers feeling unsafe, unlike the dancers in Lilleston et al. (2012) who asserted that clothing restrictions were imposed to prevent “thugs” and “gang members” from entering the premises (p. 563). Lilleston et al.’s (2012) dancers described the “strip club as a controlled environment where bouncers and bartenders had the power to prevent and manage customer violence” (p. 564). In contrast, dancers in my sample do not have much confidence in the ability of security personnel to keep them safe, inside or outside the club.

5.3.5. **Lack of Support from the Booking Agents**

Unable to rely on strip club management and staff for support, many of my participants complained to their booking agents in an effort to have their working conditions improved. Nevertheless, despite paying their agents 15% of their weekly salary, booking agents do not listen to dancers’ concerns. Because the booking agents have an ongoing exclusive contract with the strip clubs as opposed to the weekly contracts they hold with dancers, they tend to side with strip club management. Similarly, Bruckert (2002) found that while agents are,

> ostensibly providing a service for the workers who pays him or her, alliances are enigmatic and inevitably determined by economic relations and the search for profit. That is to say, since the club is the more valuable commodity for the agent, it is rare for agents to side with the dancers in a dispute. Observation suggests that their primary task is to ensure that strippers comply with the expectations of the club. (p. 36)
Findings from the current study reveal that agents play on the insecurities of dancers in an effort to get them to accept contracts that pay less than what they are used to making. Booking agents and club owners blacklist and phase out dancers who complain too much.

5.3.6. Geographic Differences

While I was expecting to find that dancer’s preferences for working in specific cities would be dependent upon the differing levels of support they received from strip club management and bouncers, this was not the case. Vancouver was the most popular city in which to work because dancers made good money working there and because many of the dancers lived there. When deciding where to work, dancers care more about their earning potential and sleeping in their own beds than they do about working conditions in particular cities. In retrospect, this finding makes sense given that dancers are motivated to engage in and remain in the industry because of the financial rewards. This indicates that dancers are willing to tolerate poor working conditions in return for above-average earnings.

5.4. Independent Contractor Status

Given that dancers are hired as independent contractors, it is hardly surprising that they must contend with poor working conditions. As independent contractors, dancers are considered to be self-employed. Consequently, they are denied a whole series of rights, protections, and benefits that are associated with a standard employment contract. These benefits include protection under the employment standards legislation in Alberta and BC that provide workers with a minimum standard of working conditions, Employment Insurance, Canada Pension Plan, workers compensation, sick leave and employer-provided medical benefits. The result of this lack of labour protections means that there are no guidelines or regulations requiring club owners to maintain a minimum standard when it comes to health and safety of dancers. These findings are consistent with all of the related research (Bouclin, 2004a; Bruckert, 2002; Bruckert et al., 2003; Chun, 1999; Fischer, 1996; Holsopple, 1998; Lewis

My study indicates that 16 (43.2%) survey respondents were not aware of their lack of labour protections. In spite of this, their lack of a social safety net had very real consequences for these women. For example, several participants reported getting hurt while on stage and not being able to claim workers compensation. A handful of dancers sustained injuries that required them to take between one and three months off work, a significant amount of time to be without income. Getting injured on stage was a significant source of worry, especially for those who had dependents. None of the women in this sample were aware that, because they were hired as independent contractors, they could apply for Personal Optional Protection under the Workers Compensation Act.

Because they are hired as independent contractors, dancers do not pay EI, and therefore, do not qualify for this benefit either. Several dancers did not become aware of this exclusion until they found themselves in a situation where they needed EI. Several dancers talked about becoming pregnant and not being able to claim EI for a maternity leave. Indeed, none of the performers in this study were aware of the Fairness for the Self-Employed Act, introduced in 2009, to provide extended EI benefits – maternity, parental, sickness/injury and compassionate care – to self-employed workers.

5.4.1. Lack of Recourse to Complain About Workplace Problems

While dancers must contend with poor working conditions they have limited recourse to demand improved workplace conditions. Because most bar owners and managers do not care about the dancers concerns, some dancers are reluctant to complain for fear they will not get future work at that particular club. Similarly, because agents typically side with strip club management in disputes between dancers and strip clubs, dancers cannot rely on them to help improve their conditions. When women did complain to either management or the booking agents about work conditions, they were told that they could work somewhere else if they did not like those conditions, or they were ignored. The large number of strip club closures in British Columbia over the past two decades has made it even more difficult for dancers to demand changes. Because
there are fewer places to work, club management and booking agents have a large labour pool to draw on. Consequently, dancers who complain are easily replaced by others who, in order to make a living, are willing to tolerate poor working conditions. For these reasons, when a dancer does complain about work conditions, she has little or no success.

5.4.2. Dancers’ Views on Employee Status

When it comes to the classification of dancers as independent contractors, it is the actual work relationship that determines if a person is an employee or an independent contractor. Using the Employment Standards Tribunal test to determine the status of a worker as an employee or an independent contractor, I suggest that, although dancers are hired as self-employed workers, strip club employers treat them more like employees. Generally, the more control an employer has over the worker, the more likely it is deemed an employee/employer relationship. Indeed, 48.6% (n=18) of survey respondents claimed that they do not control where, when and how their work is performed. The current study confirms the findings of previous research that the work of an exotic dancer is that of an employee (Althorp, 2010a; Bouclin 2004a; Bruckert, 2002; Cerilli, 2005; Chun, 1999; Fischer, 1996; Wilmet, 1998). Even though dancers are managed as employees and subject to oppressive informal regulations imposed by strip club management, the argument that they should be treated as employees does not resonate with all dancers. For some dancers, the suggestion that they ought to be classed as employees challenges their carefully maintained image of themselves as self-employed entrepreneurs. Some dancers use “linguistic strategies” (Bruckert, 2002, p. 106) to highlight their independence – each sees herself as her own boss who determines if and when she will work. Some of my participants similarly used linguistic strategies to signify their autonomy. For example,

*I loved that I didn’t have to work a shitty $8 an hour job that I hated…the flexibility…taking a week off whenever I wanted…being able to travel.* (Miranda)

*We can work when we want to and don’t have to if we don’t want to. It’s so flexible. We can work and then disappear for a year and come back and work again and there’s no questions asked.* (Anna)
Indeed, 20 (54.1%) survey respondents agreed that they were correctly classified as independent contractors. When asked about the benefits of their independent contractor status, these women identified the flexibility of the work, the enjoyment of working in different places each week, and the tax write-offs. Many dancers have no interest in complying with the constraints that would be placed on them doing straight work, particularly the mandatory work-day hours that it usually entails.

While many dancers view their independent contractor status as the foundation of their independence, Fudge et al. (2002) warn that the notion of their being a self-employed entrepreneur is more ideological than realistic. Cerilli (2005) asserts that the line between paid employment and self-employment is becoming blurred. Stage dancers’ work is what the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) would call disguised employment, which occurs when an employer treats a worker as an independent contractor in order to avoid the responsibilities and costs of being an employer. When club owners treat dancers as independent contractors they avoid these expenses and the administrative costs associated with payroll and deduction remittances (B.C. Government, Ministry of Labour, 2012). In this way, club owners reap the benefits of the dancer’s services without having to shoulder some of the associated costs. This enables strip club owners/managers to tailor their hiring practices to meet their own interests at the expense of the people who work for them, who are left in a precarious situation. For this reason it is important to examine the practical repercussions of being denied employment status.

While the majority of dancers in my sample used the individualist language of entrepreneurs, the employer/employee model nevertheless resonated with many of them. Twenty-eight (75%) survey respondents indicated their willingness to give up their tax write-offs to become an employee who is eligible for medical benefits and employment insurance. This contradiction indicates that many of my participants did not have a comprehensive understanding of the legal ramifications of being an employee and of being an independent contractor. It is unclear whether they are aware that they would likely have to give up a great deal of their autonomy if they were to become employees. More research is needed before any conclusions can be drawn in this regard.
5.5. Dancers’ Interest in Unionization

Recognizing that dancers would have to become employees to be eligible to unionize and engage in collective bargaining, I asked whether my participants would be interested in joining a union: 30 (83.3%) survey respondents said “yes”. Most of the interviewees also approved of a union; however, they questioned the feasibility of starting a union and being able to agree on what was best for the group.

My participants repeated some of the same barriers to unionization that Chun (1999), Bruckert (2002) and Ross (2009) identified. First, dancers who view themselves as entrepreneurial business women do not want to be classified as employees. Second, some of my participants thought that a union could turn out to be as controlling as club management. Dancers would be obliged to pay union dues and abide by majority decisions regardless of their feelings about a particular issue. Third, some dancers did not see the point of unionization in what they regard as a temporary occupation. Without a long-term commitment to the industry, some dancers said it was easier to deal with poor working conditions and exploitative informal management practices rather than risk having their dance career cut short by oppositional club owners and managers. Fourth, dancers feared that, due to their limited legal recourse, efforts to organize their co-workers could get them blacklisted and unable to find work on the circuit. Fifth, due to their mobility, some dancers suggested it would be difficult to bring enough dancers together in the same room to organize and effect positive change.

In spite of these barriers to unionization, many participants were enthusiastic about the prospect for a dancer’s union. While this enthusiasm suggests that unionization of dancers in Alberta and British Columbia is a possibility in the future, for now, the website created by a Vancouver based dancer to support the interests and activism of exotic dancers will have to suffice (http://www.nakedtruth.ca).

5.6. Policy Recommendations

The increased knowledge and understanding of the concerns of exotic stage dancers working in Alberta and British Columbia gained from this research leads me to
make two main recommendations. The first focuses on educating dancers about their status as independent contractors. The second concerns changes in labour policy.

Because dancers are classified as independent contractors they are denied a whole series of rights, protections, and benefits that are associated with a standard employee/employer contract under the Employment Standards Act in BC and the Employment Standards Code in Alberta. Given the legal ramifications of classifying stage dancers as independent contractors, they should have access to information about the means available to them to protect their health and safety as independent contractors. They need educating about the Personal Optional Protection under the Workers Compensation Act and for extended employment insurance under the Fairness for the Self-Employed Act. Booking agents should hold seminars for dancers to provide information about these mechanisms for protecting themselves against work-related injuries and job loss.

As a long term strategy, policy makers should review the criteria for eligibility to the protections that existing labour codes, employment insurance and workers compensation provide for employees. Exotic dancers should not be excluded from these provisions, but should be afforded the same access as employees. Club owners and managers should refrain from imposing illegal economic sanctions on the women working in their strip clubs.

5.7. Limitations of the Study and Ideas for Future Research

While my focus in this study was on the working experiences of exotic stage dancers rather than lap dancers or table dancers, these are not mutually exclusive categories; many of the women in this sample also perform these other more intimate dances. Consequently, my request to describe only their experiences as stage dancers may have been forgotten or ignored in some cases, as may have been the case, for example, when they reported their income. As with all self-report and self-administered data, the potential exists for participants memory recall to be inaccurate. Given management’s increasing pressure on dancers to perform lap dances, it is difficult to distinguish the work of each type of dancer, as the majority of dancers engage in both
stage and lap dancing to earn a living. However, it is unlikely that this would lead to a distorted picture of dancers' working lives.

The self-selected sample included 37 survey respondents and ten interview participants, many of whom feel strongly about their lack of mechanisms to improve their working conditions. As a result, there may be a degree of volunteer bias in the sample in spite of my efforts to recruit a diverse sample of participants.

Because exotic dancing is not an occupational category reported in national labour force statistics, it is impossible to know exactly how many women work as exotic stage dancers in Alberta and British Columbia. For this reason, a non-probability sampling method was used making it difficult to assess how representative the experiences of my sample are among the larger population of stage dancers in the two provinces. Having said this, my findings are consistent with other research that has been done on exotic dancing. Like Bruckert (2002), Bruckert et al. (2003), and Maticka-Tyndale et al. (2000), the current study found that the stigma of being a nude dancer affects every area of the dancer's life and may continue well beyond retirement. In spite of this, exotic dancing is a job that many women find lucrative and enjoyable on many levels (Barton 2002 and 2006; Colossi, 2010; Forsythe and Deshotels (1998), Holsopple (1998), Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000; Scott, 1996; Wesely 2003a and 2003b). Similar to the current study, exotic dance literature from other areas found that dancers are treated as independent contractors and that this classification has a detrimental effect on dancers' occupational health and safety (Bouclin, 2004a; Bruckert, 2002; Bruckert et al., 2003; Chun, 1999; Fischer, 1996; Holsopple, 1998; Lewis et al., 2005; Maticka-Tyndale et al.; 1999, Maticka-Tyndale et al, 2000; Ross, 2009; Wilmet, 1998).

Given that my findings are similar to those in other exotic dance literature focussed on dancer’s working conditions, it would be interesting to ascertain whether dancers in other Canadian provinces have applied for ‘Personal Optional Protection’ under the Workers Compensation Act. If yes, were their claims successful? Has a stage dancer ever applied for extended Employment Insurance under the Fairness for the Self-Employed Act and, if yes, were they successful? In light of the enthusiasm voiced in this sample for a dancer’s union, future research could examine how such a union might be organized.
5.8. Conclusions

In this research I sought to understand the experiences of women involved in the exotic dancing industry as stage performers. I have examined the working conditions that these marginalized workers face and the problems created by their classification as independent contractors. My findings suggest that stage dancers contend with numerous obstacles that affect their occupational health and safety.

I have shown how moral, legal, social-organizational and physical contexts interact to create stage dancers’ working conditions. Because dancers have stepped outside the social norms and rules governing their prescribed gender role, and because their work is not seen to be legitimate, they are penalized. As “bad girls” they are not afforded the same rights as “good girls”. This social disenfranchisement leads to their exclusion from formal labour protections and a disregard for the stage dancer’s occupational health and safety. Strip club owners take advantage of the dancer’s marginalized status by tightly managing their working environment in an effort to extract maximum value from their labour without providing them with the safeguards that protect employees working in straight occupations. Consequently, stage dancers labour in an environment that is often harmful to their health and safety. In spite of this, many dancers choose to engage in this type of work because it is financially rewarding, flexible, and enjoyable on many levels.
References


Appendices
Appendix A.

Exotic Dancer Contract

ARTIST ENGAGEMENT CONTRACT

THIS CONTRACT made this ___ day of ________ is for services requested by 

"OPERATOR" and fulfilled by ___________ hereinafter called the "ARTIST"

S.I.N. _____________________________ Other ___________________________ Artist G.S.T. ___________________________

THE UNDERSIGNED OPERATOR ENGAGES THE ARTIST NAMED HEREIN FOR THE ENGAGEMENT DESCRIBED BELOW AND THE ARTIST AGREES TO PERFORM UNDER THE DIRECT SUPERVISION AND CONTROL OF THE OPERATOR.

The OPERATOR agrees to act as trustee for the ARTIST, and deduct 15.00% commission from the ARTIST and pay commission to STRIPPER ENTERTAINMENT, within seven(7) days of the completion of the contracted engagement. An interest charge of 2% per month or 24% per annum will be added to all outstanding amounts over 30 days.

The OPERATOR shall supply a suitable performance area, appropriate sound equipment and dressing room facilities without charge.

The OPERATOR agrees to provide adequate security and health standards to protect the well-being of the ARTIST(S) during the engagement.

The OPERATOR assumes the right to impose a reasonable fine or penalty for late, short, incomplete or missed performances.

The OPERATOR assumes the right to terminate the ARTIST’S contract if he determines the cost per show to be unreasonable, based on fair market value.

If the OPERATOR requests or demands the ARTIST to perform in a way that may violate regulations, the OPERATOR assumes responsibility and also agrees to pay court costs, bail and attorney fees, with no loss of pay for shows missed.

The OPERATOR agrees that no performance, in whole or in part, shall be allowed to be reproduced by picture or tape without written consent of the AGENT and ARTIST.

The ARTIST shall be responsible to supply their own music in Compact Disc format, unless otherwise specified. Each performance shall be to the best of their skills and ability and a minimum of 15 minutes.

The ARTIST agrees to give adequate notice to the OPERATOR or AGENCY in the event of illness or inability to perform. The ARTIST also agrees to abide by the House Rules of the OPERATOR and shall conduct themselves in a professional manner.

The ARTIST understands is an independent contractor and assumes all responsibility for Provincial and Federal taxes, Social Security, Workers Compensation, Canada Pension Plan and Public Liability.

The ARTIST authorizes the OPERATOR to deduct the commission from its compensation on completion of this agreement.

The ARTIST AGREES TO PAY FULL COMMISSION ON ENGAGEMENT, REGARDLESS OF ANY LOSS OF SALARY DUE TO FINE OR PENALTY FOR LATE, SHORT, INCOMPLETE OR MISSED PERFORMANCES.

The PARTIES agree if the ARTIST(S) is re-booked into this or any other establishment represented by, or owned by, the OPERATOR within 365 days from the completion of this engagement, it shall be done through the AGENT. The OPERATOR and the ARTIST(S) agree they shall pay to the Agency additional commission at the rates set out in this Agreement and that the ARTIST and OPERATOR shall be jointly and severally liable for payment of said commissions.

The AGENCY is not responsible for food or beverage tabs, destruction of property, telephone bills or extra expenses incurred by the ARTIST(S). The AGENCY is held from any liability or damages by the OPERATOR and ARTIST(S) sustained by the OPERATOR or ARTIST(S) in the event that OPERATOR or ARTIST(S), breaches any of this contract, if this contract is executed by the ARTIST(S) Agent.

CONTRACTS will be handled and signed in part for the ARTIST(S) by the AGENT.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Act(s)</th>
<th>No. of Days</th>
<th>No. of Shows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance Date</td>
<td>Shift</td>
<td>Gross Compensation (per Show)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement Location Called</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gross Compensation (per Week)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement Address</td>
<td></td>
<td>Commission Payable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone Number</td>
<td>Check In Time</td>
<td>Add Agency G.S.T.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Instructions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Subtotal (Remit to Agency)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms and Options</td>
<td></td>
<td>SOCA Deduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In witness whereof, we have signed this agreement on the day and year first above written.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Misc. Deduction 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operator</td>
<td></td>
<td>Misc. Deduction 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent</td>
<td></td>
<td>Not Payable to ARTIST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td></td>
<td>Add Dancer G.S.T.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total Payable to ARTIST</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CLIENT COPY
Appendix B.

Dancer’s Workplace Survey

A Survey Exploring the Working Lives of Exotic Stage Dancers in British Columbia and Alberta

This research is designed to explore exotic stage dancer’s experiences working in Vancouver, Victoria, Kelowna, Calgary, Edmonton, and Grand Prairie. The project consists of two components: 1) an online survey and 2) semi-structured in-depth interviews. The survey focuses on demographic characteristics, dancer’s understandings of the legal regulation surrounding the exotic dancing industry, their status as independent contractors, and occupational health and safety in their workplaces. We also ask a series of questions about reporting unsafe working conditions.

We are asking female exotic stage dancers who are working or who have worked in any of the cities mentioned in the above paragraph to share information about their working lives. Specifically, we are interested in your work as a stage dancer and not as a VIP, lap, or private dancer. This distinction has been made for analytic purposes. Anonymity is guaranteed; all information submitted through the online survey will be encrypted and maintained on a secure server housed in Canada. You are free to withdraw your participation at any point up to the submission of the thesis to the university. Please feel free to skip any questions that you feel uncomfortable answering.

The information that you share in this research will be used to complete the thesis component of my Master’s degree in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University. I will also try to publish it in books, journals, and other media in order to contribute to the existing literature about the exotic dancing industry in Canada.

The final result will be a detailed examination of the working lives of women involved in the exotic dancing industry in British Columbia and Alberta. Ultimately, it is hoped that this research will be considered by policy-makers in their regulation of the exotic dancing industry and expose experiential voices to the academic and legal communities. To obtain a copy of the research results, please contact me, Janine Althorp, at [contact information].

In the event of any kind of complaint about the project, please contact Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director, Office of Research Ethics at [contact information] or 778-782-6593.

This research has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

By clicking “Begin Survey” at the bottom of this page you are indicating voluntary consent for your participation in the online survey portion of the study.

Begin Survey
EXTOIC STAGE DANCERS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA AND ALBERTA: AN EXPLORATION OF THEIR WORKING LIVES

PART ONE: INVOLVEMENT IN THE EXOTIC DANCING INDUSTRY

I would like to begin by getting to know a little about your involvement in the exotic dancing industry. Please keep in mind, I am interested in your work as a stage dancer and not as a VIP, lap, or private dancer. This distinction has been made for analytic purposes.

Q1. In what year did you start dancing professionally in exotic dance clubs? (rollover for professionally)

Q2. How old were you when you began work as a stage dancer?

Q3. Please identify the reasons you became involved in the exotic dancing industry as a stage performer (why did you start dancing?) [Please check all that apply]
Q3_1 I needed a job to pay my bills
Q3_2 It sounded like a fun job
Q3_3 A dancer friend suggested I try it
Q3_4 The money is better than other jobs
Q3_5 I needed a way to pay for school
Q3_6 I needed a job with flexible hours
Q3_7 I liked the travelling component (working the circuit)
Q3_8 I love to dance
Q3_9 I didn’t know what else to do
Q3_77 None of the above, the reason I started working as a stage performer is [please explain]
Q3_77o

Q4. What is the most positive aspect of your work as a stage dancer?

Q5. What is the most negative aspect of your work as a stage dancer?

Q6. Would you encourage others to work as an exotic stage dancer?
Q6_1 Yes
Q6_2 No

[IF YES]

Q6a. Why would you encourage others to work as a stage dancer?

[IF NO]

Q6b. Why would you not encourage others to work as a stage dancer?
PART TWO: GEOGRAPHIC SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES

In this section, I would like to learn about why you like and why you dislike working in specific cities. Please remember that I am interested in your work as a stage dancer and not as a VIP, lap, or private dancer. This distinction has been made for analytic purposes.

Q7. From the list below, please indicate the cities where you have worked as a stage performer.
   Q7_1 Vancouver, BC
   Q7_2 Victoria, BC
   Q7_3 Kelowna, BC
   Q7_4 Edmonton, AB
   Q7_5 Calgary, AB
   Q7_6 Grande Prairie, AB

Q8. In which city do you most like working as a stage performer? [Please check the answer that best represents why you MOST like working in that city.]
   Q8_1 Vancouver, BC
   Q8_2 Victoria, BC
   Q8_3 Kelowna, BC
   Q8_4 Edmonton, AB
   Q8_5 Calgary, AB
   Q8_6 Grande Prairie, AB

Q9. Why do you most like working as a stage performer in that city? [Please check the answer that best represents why you MOST like working in that city.]
   Q9_1 I make a lot of money working there
   Q9_2 The customers are very appreciative
   Q9_3 Liquor Laws are not strictly enforced by management [i.e. I can have more contact with customers while on stage which helps me make more money; the manager is not strict about the type of cover-up I wear off the stage, etc.]
   Q9_4 Liquor Laws are strictly enforced so there is zero contact with customers while I am on stage
   Q9_5 Bouncers watch closely to ensure my safety
   Q9_6 I feel that the staff support me and care about my well-being while working in their club
   Q9_7 The stage is well-maintained and I don't have to worry about it being dirty or having holes in it
   Q9_8 The accommodations are comfortable and clean
   Q9_77 None of the above, the reason I most like working in XXX is [please specify] Q9_77o

Q10. In which city do you least like working as a stage performer?
   Q10_1 Vancouver, BC
   Q10_2 Victoria, BC
   Q10_3 Kelowna, BC
   Q10_4 Edmonton, AB
   Q10_5 Calgary, AB
   Q10_6 Grande Prairie, AB
Q11. Why do you not like working in that city? [Please check the answer that best represents what you dislike MOST about working in XXX]
Q11_1 I never make much money working there
Q11_2 The customers are not appreciative
Q11_3 I have to have a license to work there
Q11_4 I have to do private dancing in between my shows
Q11_5 Liquor laws are not strictly enforced by management [i.e. the other girls make contact with customers while on stage and the customers expect the same from me and I don’t feel comfortable with this]
Q11_6 Liquor laws are strictly enforced which limits my ability to make money
Q11_7 Bonnies do not watch closely to ensure my safety
Q11_8 I feel that the staff do not support me and do not care about my well-being while working in their club
Q11_9 The stage is not well-maintained and I worry about it being dirty or having holes in it
Q11_10 The accommodations are not comfortable or clean
Q11_77 None of the above, the reason I do not like working in XXX is [please explain] Q11_770

PART THREE: WORKING CONDITIONS

In this next section of the survey, I would like to ask you about your thoughts on your working environment and the conditions of your work. Specifically, I am interested in the physical working environment, your feelings about health and safety, the provision of security, and your relationships with agents and club managers/owners.

Q12. Do you ever worry about getting physically hurt while performing on stage?
Q12_1 Yes
Q12_2 No

[IF YES]

Q12a. Why do you worry about getting physically hurt while performing on stage?
Q12a_1 If I get hurt on the job I cannot get Workers Compensation
Q12a_2 Because I have people who are financially dependent on me and if I can’t work then I cannot support them
Q12a_3 If I can’t work I would have no way of paying my bills
Q12a_77 None of the above, I worry because [please specify] Q12a_770

[IF NO]

Q12b. Why don’t you worry about getting physically hurt while performing on stage?
Q12b_1 It is not something I think about
Q12b_2 I have never been hurt while performing
Q12b_3 It has happened before and is just part of the job
Q12b_4 There is plenty of security in the clubs
Q12b_5 The stages are well-maintained and clean
Q12b_77 None of the above, I don't worry because [please specify] Q12b_77o

[IF NO]

Q13 Have you ever been physically hurt while performing on stage?
Q13_1 Yes
Q13_2 No

[IF YES]

Q13a What happened?

Q14 Have you ever had to take time off because you were physically hurt while performing?
Q14_1 Yes
Q14_2 No

[IF YES]

Q14a How much time did you have to take off work?

Q15 Exotic dancer contracts state that operators of strip clubs must provide adequate security and health standards to protect the well-being of the artist for the duration of the contract. In your experience, is this contractual obligation being met?
Q15_1 Yes
Q15_2 No

[IF YES]

Q15a In what ways do you feel this contractual is being met? [Please check all that apply]
Q15a_1 Most stages are well maintained (i.e. there are no holes in them and they are clean, etc.)
Q15a_2 There is plenty of security in the clubs to make me feel safe
Q15a_3 The club owners/managers care about my concerns and take them seriously
Q15a_4 The change rooms are clean
Q15a_5 I always get walked out to my car at the end of my shift
Q15a_77 Other [please specify] Q15a_77o

[IF NO]

Q15ab In what way(s) do you feel this contractual obligation is not being met? [Please check all that apply]
Q15b_1 Most stages are not well maintained (i.e. there are holes in them and they are dirty, etc.)
Q15b_2 Many stages are slippery and not suitable for dancing
Q15b_3 There is not enough security in the clubs to make me feel safe
Q15b_4 The club owners/managers only care about making money for themselves and do not care about the concerns of the dancers
Q15b_5 The change rooms are old and dirty
Q15b.6  I never get walked out to my car at the end of my shift
Q15b.77 Other [please specify] Q15b.77o

Q16. Have you ever been fired from a job as a stage dancer?
Q16.1 Yes
Q16.2 No

[IF YES]

Q16a. Why were you fired? [Please check the reason that most describes why you were fired]
Q16a.1 I got into a fight with a customer or staff member
Q16a.2 I got into a fight with another dancer
Q16a.3 I broke the club rules
Q16a.4 I did not obey the liquor laws (i.e. I made contact with a customer while on stage, etc.)
Q16a.5 I was late for too many shows
Q16a.6 I missed too many shows
Q16a.7 I got too drunk or high to perform on stage
Q16a.8 I was caught with drugs or alcohol in the change room
Q16a.9 I was told that I was too fat, skinny, tall, short, etc.
Q16a.77 Other [please specify] Q16a.77o

Q17. In general, do you feel supported by club owners and managers in carrying out your contractual obligations as an entertainer?
Q17.1 Yes
Q17.2 No

[IF NO]

Q17a. What could club managers/owners do to better support you in carrying out your contractual obligations as an entertainer?

PART FOUR: LEGAL REGULATIONS

In this section, I ask questions pertaining to the federal, provincial, municipal, and contractual regulations governing the labour of exotic stage dancers.

Q18. As an exotic stage dancer, your contracts state that you are an independent contractor. Do you agree with this classification?
Q18.1 Yes
Q18.2 No

[IF YES]

Q18a. Why do you agree with being classified as an independent contractor?
Q18b. Why don’t you agree with being classified as an independent contractor?

Q19. Below is a list of benefits that all independent contractors should receive in their working environments. Please indicate that you either AGREE with the statement if you generally receive this benefit or DISAGREE with the statement if you generally do not receive this benefit in your work as an exotic stage dancer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BENEFIT</th>
<th>AGREE (I receive this benefit in my work)</th>
<th>DISAGREE (I do not receive this benefit in my work as a stage dancer)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q19_1 The ability to write off expenses associated with my work (i.e. costumes, makeup, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q19_2 Control over the conditions of the work (i.e. when, where, and how the work is performed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q19_3 Cannot be disciplined through fines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q19_4 Ownership of all of the tools and equipment required to perform your work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q19a. Are there any other benefits you feel you receive from being considered an independent contractor?
Q19a_1 Yes
Q19a_2 No
[IF YES]

Q19a1. What are these benefits you feel you receive from being an independent contractor?

Q20. Are there any specific negative consequences you have felt as a result of being considered an independent contractor as a stage dancer?
Q20_1 Yes
Q20_2 No

[IF YES]

Q20a. What are these negative consequences you feel you have experienced as a result of being an independent contractor stage dancer?

Q21. Did you know that as an independent contractor you are not protected by the Employment Standards Act in each province that provides workers with a minimum standard of working conditions?

The Employment Standards Act of BC
http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/00_96113_01
The Employment Standards Act of AB
Q21_1 Yes
Q21_2 No

Q22. Do you see this lack of protection as a problem?
Q22_1 Yes
Q22_2 No

[IF NO]

Q22a. Why don’t you see this lack of protection as a problem?

Q23. Would you be willing to give up your tax benefits associated with being an independent contractor to become an employee who is eligible for medical benefits and employment insurance? This would mean that your employer would take money off your cheque every time you get paid and in return you would receive medical benefits, Canada Pension, Employment Insurance and Workers Compensation.
Q23_1 Yes
Q23_2 No

[IF NO]
Q23a. Why would you not be willing to give up your current independent contractor status in order to obtain other benefits?

Q24. Have you ever read the Liquor Control and Licensing Act (http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/lclb/docs-forms/guide-liquor-primary.pdf pg. 31) that is intended to regulate a dancer’s actions while working in a strip club?
Q24_1 Yes
Q24_2 No

[IF YES]

Q24a. If yes, what were your reasons for reading the Liquor Control and Licensing Act?
Q24a_1 I was curious
Q24a_2 I don’t want to be fined by the club for breaking these laws
Q24a_3 I want to know about the provincial laws that regulate the work of exotic stage dancers
Q24a_77 Other [please specify] Q24a_77

[IF NO]

Q24b. Why haven’t you read the Liquor Control and Licensing Act?
Q24b_1 These laws don’t affect me as a dancer
Q24b_2 I don’t care about these laws
Q24b_3 I don’t know where to find a copy of them
Q24b_77 Other [please specify] Q24b_77

Q25. Have you ever been caught by a liquor inspector for violating the rules set out in the Liquor Control and Licensing Act?
Q25_1 Yes
Q25_2 No

[IF YES]

Q25a. What was the outcome?
Q25a_1 I was fined or fired by the club for breaking the laws
Q25a_2 The club was fined by the liquor inspector
Q25a_3 The club had their license suspended for the infraction
Q25a_4 The club had their license revoked indefinitely
Q25a_5 Nothing happened
Q25a_77 Other [please specify] Q25a_77

Q26. Do you feel that most clubs have a standard set of rules to be followed during the term of your contract? (rollover for standard)
Q26_1 Yes
Q26_2 No
[IF NO]

Q26a. Would you say that the rules vary depending on the city/town and club you are working In?
Q26a_1 Yes
Q26a_2 No

Q27. Have you ever been affected by the Indecency laws as set out in sections 173-175 of the Criminal Code of Canada?
Q27_1 Yes
Q27_2 No

[IF YES]

Q27a. What were the circumstances?

PART FIVE: REPORTING PRACTICES

The purpose of this section is to understand if and how dancers report complaints about their working conditions, to whom they report these issues, and the outcome of these complaints.

Q28. Have you ever complained about poor working conditions? (i.e. a dirty stage, holes in the stage, poles that are not secure, dirty change room, etc.)
Q28_1 Yes
Q28_2 No

[IF YES]

Q28a. To whom did you complain?
Q28a_1 To the club manager or club owner
Q28a_2 To another staff member
Q28a_3 To the booking agent
Q28a_4 To the Employment Standards Tribunal
Q28a_77 Other [please specify] Q28a_77

Q28b. What was the outcome?
Q28b_1 I was told that nothing could be done about it
Q28b_2 I was told that if I didn’t like it I could work somewhere else
Q28b_3 I was ignored
Q28b_4 I was fired
Q28b_5 I was blacklisted
Q28b_77 Other [please specify] Q28b_77o

Q29. Have you ever had a disagreement with a club manager/owner regarding payment for shows you performed?
Q29_1 Yes
Q29_2 No

[IF YES]

Q29a. What was the outcome of your disagreement?
Q29a_1 I was paid what the club owner/manager thought I should be paid
Q29a_2 I was paid what the agent told me I would be paid
Q29a_3 I was fired without pay
Q29a_77 Other [please specify] Q29a_77o

Q30. Would you ever consider making a complaint to a club manager/owner about poor working conditions?
Q30_1 Yes
Q30_2 No

[IF NO]

Q30a. Why wouldn’t you complain to a club manager/owner about working conditions?
Q30a_1 I might get fired
Q30a_2 I might not get work at that club again
Q30a_3 I know they won’t do anything about my complaints because they don’t care what I have to say
Q30a_77 Other [please specify] Q30a_77o

Q31. Have you ever made a formal complaint about working conditions to the Employment Standards Tribunal?
Q31_1 Yes
Q31_2 No

[IF YES]

Q31a. What was the outcome of this complaint?

[IF NO]

Q31b. Why haven’t you made a formal complaint about working conditions to the Employment Standards Tribunal?
Q31b_1 My working conditions are good
Q31b_2 I might get fired
Q31b_3 I might not get work at that club again
PART SIX: UNIONIZATION

In this section, I am interested in the potential for unionization among exotic stage dancers working in British Columbia and Alberta.

Q32. Would you ever join a union for exotic stage dancers?
Q32_1 Yes
Q32_2 No

[IF NO]

Q32a. Why wouldn’t you join a stage dancers union?
Q32a_1 I don’t see the point
Q32a_2 I don’t plan on doing this for very long
Q32a_3 I don’t want to pay union dues
Q32a_4 I don’t think that dancers could agree on what is best for us when it comes to working conditions
Q32a_5 I may not get work again
Q32a_6 I might get blacklisted
Q32a_7 I would fear for my safety
Q32a_77 Other [please specify] Q32a_77o

PART SEVEN: PERSONAL INFORMATION

Information collected in this section is not for identification purposes. I am collecting this information to examine similarities and differences in the experiences of exotic stage dancers. The information that you share will not be used to identify you.

Q33. In what year were you born? ____________________

Q34. How would you define your sexual identity?
Q34_1 Heterosexual
Q34_2 Homosexual
Q34_3 Bisexual
Q34_4 Queer
Q34_77 I prefer the term _______________ (fill in blank). Q34_77o
Q35. Are you currently a student?
Q35_1 Yes
Q35_2 No

[IF YES]

Q35a. In what type of educational program are you enrolled?
Q35a_1 High school or equivalency
Q35a_2 College/ university
Q35a_3 Trade/ technical/ vocational school
Q35a_4 Graduate degree
Q35a_77 Other [please specify] Q35a_77o

Q36. What is your highest level of education completed?
Q36_1 Some high school
Q36_2 High school
Q36_3 Some college/ university
Q36_4 Some trade/ technical/ vocational school
Q36_5 Diploma or certificate
Q36_6 University Degree
Q36_7 Masters (inc. LLB or JD)
Q36_8 Ph.D.
Q36_77 Other [please specify] Q36_77o

Q37. Do you currently have another occupation besides exotic dancing?
Q37_1 Yes
Q37_2 No

[IF YES]

Q37a. What is your other occupation?

Q38. Over the past year, what was your average monthly take home income from your work as an exotic stage dancer? Please include only the income generated from stage dancing and not private dancing.
Q38_1 Less than $1000
Q38_2 $1000 - $2000
Q38_3 $2000 - $3000
Q38_4 $4000 - $5000
Q38_5 $5000 - $10,000
Q38_6 More than $10,000

Q39. What is your marital status?
Q39_1 Married/ common-law
Q39_2 Single
Q39_3 Widowed
Q39_4 Separated/divorced
Q39_77 Other [please specify] Q39_77a

Q40. Do you have any children?
Q40_1 Yes
Q40_2 No

[IF YES]

Q40a. How many children do you have?

Q40b. Are any of your children currently living with you?
Q40b_1 Yes
Q40b_2 No

[IF NO]

Q40b1r. Why not?

Q41. In what country were you born? _______________________

Q42. In addition to being Canadian (or other country of citizenship) people often feel that they belong to a particular ethnic or cultural group (for example, people might think of themselves as Irish, French, Indigenous, Italian, Chinese, Sri Lankan or East Indian). To which ethnic or cultural group do you see yourself belonging to?

Q43. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your work?

Q44. Could you please tell me briefly why you decided to participate in this research?

Q45. How did you find out about this research?
Q45_1 Online industry related discussion board/site
Q45_2 Social Network site (Facebook or mySpace)
Q45_3 Referred by friend
Q45_4 Referred by co-worker
Q45_5 Contacted by researcher directly
Q45_6 Flyer Advertisement
Q45_7 Poster Ad
Q45_8 Radio Advertisement
Q45_9 Georgia Straight
Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this survey. Your perspective is very important to me. If you are interested in participating in an interview about your work, please email me, Janine Althorp, at [email protected] or call me at [phone number].
Appendix C.

Interview Schedule

How long have you worked as an exotic stage dancer?
How did you become involved in the industry? What motivated you to start dancing?
What is the best part of your job?
What is the worst part of your job?
What would you say to a woman who came to you to ask if she should become an exotic stage dancer?
What are your thoughts regarding the conditions of your work?
How could agents and club managers or owners improve your working conditions?
Do you agree with dancers being classified as independent contractors rather than employees? Please explain.
Do you feel supported by club owners and managers in carrying out your contractual obligations as an entertainer?
Can you tell me a little bit about the worst experience you have ever had with a club owner?
Have you ever felt unsafe while working as an exotic stage dancer?
If yes, what would have made you feel safer?
Have you ever made a formal complaint to the Employment Standards Tribunal regarding your working conditions?
Have you ever been hurt on the job and had to take time off? Please explain the circumstances.
Have you ever attempted to claim Workers Compensation after being injured while performing? Why or why not?
What could policy makers do to improve the health and safety of exotic stage dancers? If anything?
What are your thoughts on a union for dancers? Would you ever become involved in a union?
Do you feel the industry is changing in recent years? If yes, is it changing for better or worse? Please explain.
Why do you think that so many strip clubs have closed over the past two decades?
Do the club closures affect your work in the industry?
If you are a former exotic dancer, what were your reasons for leaving the industry? Would you ever re-enter the industry? Why or why not?
What do you think of when you hear the term “sex industry”? Do you consider your work to be part of the sex industry? Could you tell me why you feel that way?
Why did you choose to take part in this research?