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Naked truth of a new glass ceiling

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Women are excluded if corporate entertainment is focused on lap dancing clubs, where their presence might spoil the fun.

Advertisement

IT'S the festive season and on their websites, strip clubs are spruiking for business. Xplicit Gentlemen's Club caters for corporate functions and "Christmas break-ups". The Men's Gallery advertises corporate poker events (with optional topless dealer), alongside a picture of a naked woman covered in betting chips.

Showgirls Bar20 has a function room called "the boardroom," and another called "the schoolroom", where "lots of naughty girls in uniform" are waiting to be taught "a thing or two". Hustler Gentlemen's Club offers a "saucy Santa", unforgettable corporate events and "sexy caddies" for corporate golf days.

"It's not hard to see that - whatever your moral take on strip joints and lap-dancing clubs - using them as corporate entertainment serves to exclude women," observes Melbourne psychologist Cordelia Fine in her book *Delusions of Gender*.

Unsurprisingly, she writes, researchers have found that male employees are reluctant to bring female colleagues along to strip clubs. They might spoil their fun "by reminding them that women are more than simply bodies to be looked at".

Yet if women avoid these outings, they're missing a networking opportunity. It's a bind that Sheila Jeffreys, a professor of politics at Melbourne University, calls "the new glass ceiling". The Hustler Club even advertises an "end-of-financial-year" boat cruise and lunch. But entertaining clients or co-workers at these clubs, says Jeffreys, creates a masculine, misogynist business culture.

The use of "gentlemen's clubs" for corporate entertaining is part of a broader normalisation of lap-dancing and strip venues, which market themselves as "nightclubs" or "entertainment". But if they're part of the sex industry, should they be taken more seriously?

This week, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia is releasing a report on Victorian strip clubs. It says these clubs are proliferating and by describing themselves as "entertainment", are not subject to the same restrictions as brothels.

But the coalition argues strip clubs and prostitution are interconnected.

"The activities that take place in the clubs ... often involve a good deal of physical interaction between male buyers and the women who strip.

"Strip clubs often provide links to other 'sex industry services' and in some clubs, the full range of prostitution services is available, even though they are technically illegal," its report says.

There is not much local detail in the report to back up the latter assertion, though clubs overseas (including an English Spearment Rhino) have been sprung offering prostitutes to police. Professor Jeffreys, a coalition member, says part of the problem is that little research has been done on Melbourne strip clubs.

But she points out that under Victorian law, sexual services defined as "prostitution" include masturbating another person, watching someone insert an object into her vagina, and watching two people engage in an act of sexual penetration.

She argues that private lap dances that bring a man to orgasm fall under this definition. Then there are the deals offering "two girls who go all the way" or a raunchy fruit and vegetable act or 10 guys the chance "to party" with two girls in a stretch Hummer. Indeed, in 2008, then Consumer Affairs Minister Tony Robinson observed that tabletop dancing clubs provide, "perhaps not the full suite of sexually explicit services but a fair component of them".

King Street's first strip club opened in 1992. Since then, the industry has burgeoned in Victoria "with 20 licensed venues and many other stripping related businesses". Strip culture has become more mainstream and many venues also offer male strippers for hens' nights.

The coalition is calling for strip clubs to be regulated in the same way as brothels. "This means that they would be licensed, subject to planning restrictions, unable to obtain liquor licenses and (their) owners would need criminal record checks."

It says lap dances place women at risk of sexual assault (strippers in one American study described being bitten, groped and spat on). And it notes that Victoria Police argued earlier this year that Showgirls Bar 20 did not deserve to serve alcohol as it had failed to stop violence in and around the club.

I find the coalition's report problematic as it seems to regard stripping, in general, as a form of prostitution - an equation I, and many others, would reject. But I think it's time we had a debate about the normalisation of gentlemen's clubs and I bristle when I hear them called "nightclubs". At a nightclub, men and women are on an equal footing.

Last year, British women's rights group the Fawcett Society released a report on the sex industry's infiltration of the workplace. It found the use of lap-dancing clubs and pornography was "a major new threat to women's equality at work".

The British experience is different to our own. But as we agonise about the lack of women in senior management, what message is sent to female police or accountants or salespeople if their workmates head off to socialise at a gentlemen's club?

Suzy Freeman-Greene is a staff writer.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/naked-truth-of-a-new-glass-ceiling-20101205-1818d.html>