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Listen to Their Stories: Foreign Exotic Dancers in Canada

by Tammy Johnston

“Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects,
by defining their reality, shaping their new identity,
naming their history, telling their story.”
bell hooks, Talking Back

Canada needs to take a more active role in negating the exploitation of foreign exotic dancers. The current immigration policy monitors the impact this particular group of women will have on the Canadian labour market, and sets out to ensure guidelines are followed by the employer and employee in order for a temporary visa to be granted. The policy does not prevent foreign exotic dancers from exploitation once they are part of our sex club industry, but instead makes Canada accountable only on paper. Canada must take responsibility for the experiences these women face while they are here.

On December 1, 2004, former Immigration Minister Judy Sgro’s “Exotic Dancer Program” was cancelled. This program granted special temporary visas to foreign exotic dancers to enter Canada in order to fill positions in the sex club industry known for “forced back-room prostitution work” (LifeSiteNews.com, 2004, p.1). The application process required little information to be obtained from the Canadian employer or the foreign worker, and no information was required as to medical or criminal history of the worker. Sgro argued that the Canadian sex club industry had “a right to have their labour market needs approved” (LifeSiteNews.com, 2004, p.1), while the opposition maintained that her Exotic Dancer Program exploited women. The former Minister also claimed that Canadian women did not want to occupy roles as lap dancers, therefore, international recruitment was necessary in order to fill these positions (Audet, 2004, p.1). This is the point at which the exploitation of foreign exotic dancers in Canada begins.

In response to the controversy created by Sgro’s “Exotic Dancer Program,” the Canadian Government implemented new immigration procedures designed to prevent the mistreatment of these women. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) is now involved with the recruitment of temporary foreign exotic dancers and provides Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) with their opinion as to the impact the foreign dancer applicant would have on the Canadian labour market. This new process requires a signed contract letter between the employer and the foreign exotic

dancer, and must include: the duration of the contract (maximum period of one year); the specific hours of work per day/week; wages per day/week; duties to be performed; health coverage; and, any other benefits and deductions. The contract letter must show that some type of relationship has been established between the two parties (i.e., that they have had prior communication). Employers must also provide evidence that they have first advertised the exotic dancers' positions to permanent residents of Canada, but were unsuccessful in attracting qualified Canadian personnel. In addition, employers must assume full responsibility for transportation costs to and from the foreign worker's country in advance of their temporary arrival to Canada (Government of Canada, 2005). These new changes lengthen the recruitment process for the employer, but do little to control the exploitation of foreign exotic dancers.

Foreign women leave their home country and arrive in Canada with the belief that they will have a "new and better life;" that they will acquire "freedom;" that there is "money to be made in Canada;" and, that Canada is the "golden land of opportunity" (Status of Women Canada, 2003, p.3). This belief is based on information received through advertising and, by word of mouth. Unfortunately, upon their arrival, foreign women who enter into the sex club industry soon discover that life in the "golden land of opportunity," is none other than a life of slavery.

The Migrant Sex Workers from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: The Canadian Case (2003, pp.4-5) reports that foreign exotic dancers are naive in regard to Canada's laws and the consequences of violations. These women are also unaware of the poor working conditions in the field and also of the expectations of clients and employers. In fact, some of these women are of the impression that an exotic dancer's life is quite glamorous, involving large sums of money. Therefore, foreign women are uneducated about the sex club industry and are deceived prior to their arrival in Canada. This lack of information makes them vulnerable in the industry, and allows them to believe that their exploitation is the norm in our Western culture.

In a recent interview with W-Five (2005), Anna, a former stripper, recounted her experiences as a foreign exotic dancer in Toronto, Ontario. Upon her arrival from Mexico all of her documentation was confiscated, including her airline ticket home. She was under the impression that she would earn \$1,000 a month to dance, but soon learned that sexual acts (for example, lap dancing and oral sex) were mandatory. In addition, Anna was required to pay the club and the agent a fee which left very little money for disposable income. The cost of a lap dance was \$10.00, but once Anna had paid the appropriate people, she was left with \$2.00. Therefore, in order for her to make the \$1,000 promised, she would have to perform 500 lap dances per month. Anna also pointed out that she worked "on her feet eleven to twelve hours per day, non stop," and believed that the agents who bring these women to Canada, exploit them and that work in the sex club industry is a form of slavery.

A personal interview, conducted on my own, with a Canadian "dancer" at a local London establishment, further confirmed Anna's story. This dancer maintained that almost all foreign exotic dancers are "on-schedule." This means a dancer is paid approximately

\$35.00 - \$45.00 per 8 hour shift -- not even Ontario's minimum wage -- and must rely on additional income by performing lap dances and other sexual activities. In Anna's case, this would mean that her additional income is \$2.00 per lap dance. Therefore, her goal would be to provide as many lap dances as possible in any given shift. The London interview also revealed that most Canadian dancers are "free-lance." This means that instead of being paid an hourly rate, they pay a set amount of money to the bar (\$10.00 - \$20.00); perform on stage (1 song set 3 times); and retain all money they make from lap dances and other sexual activities. Unlike on-schedule dancers, free-lance dancers set their own hours and choose when and where they work. However, the managers of strip clubs control who works in their establishment. Therefore, free-lance dancers may feel a sense of control over the income they make and the hours they work compared to on-schedule dancers, but they too are controlled by a male-dominated patriarchal industry. As an aside, in order to speak with this dancer, a fee of \$20.00 was required for 15 minutes of conversation (the cost of a lap dance and she was required to sit on my lap!). Bruckert (2002, p. 63) notes that "on-schedule" dancers can lose an entire week's earnings for calling in sick or for other reasons considered normal and legitimate for people in different occupations.

These labour conditions underscore the oppression of foreign exotic dancers in Canada, and can be linked to Enloe's *The Globetrotting Sneaker*, (1995, p. 228). Enloe describes manufacturing companies, such as Nike and Reebok, exploiting Asian women working in the manufacturing plants by paying them little money to produce a product which in turn is sold for a large profit. This form of oppression keeps women in a life of poverty and controls the amount of money women make. Similarly, foreign exotic dancers are financially controlled by managers and owners who make money from their cheap labour. There is no need for us to look abroad for examples of Western society exploiting foreign workers as we can find it in our own backyard.

The report issued by the Status of Women Canada (2000, pp. 7-8), *Migrant Sex Workers from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: The Canadian Case*, indicates that foreign dancers in the strip club industry are sex slaves whose lives are controlled by their employers. Although these women believed that their lives in Canada would allow them financial independence and personal agency, their lived realities are determined by their employers' authority and control. Men normally hold the positions of managers and owners of strip clubs; this illustrates the "gender imbalance between men and women in the sex trade industry" (p.2). In the local London interview, the dancer felt she did have control of her life because she had a choice of where and when she worked, and the amount of money she made. Her freelance status gave her the temporary means to subsidize her university tuition for her degree in Engineering. On-schedule dancers however, have no choice -- their lives are controlled not only by individual(s) but by our government, since their temporary visas will only permit them to work in the strip club industry. This difference in status promotes a division among women in sex clubs, and allows one group better pay and a sense of control over the choices they make.

The backlash against the 2nd wave of the feminist movement is the beauty myth. Wolfe (*The Beauty Myth*) argues that "modern beauty ideology is based on a mythical

perception of 'beauty' – a socially constructed set of ideas about how female bodies should appear and behave" (p. 27). Beauty (tall, blond, well-endowed) is a major factor in hiring exotic dancers (Bruckert, 2002, p.34). A woman who exemplifies our Western society's ideal of "beauty" is more apt to be sought after by male clients in sex clubs than those women who represent their own culture's norm of beauty. These women, as well as Canadian dancers in our Western society, are conditioned to aspire to a form of beauty which in reality is unattainable. Women in the sex club industry lose their true sense of self; however, foreign exotic dancers also lose their real cultural identity. Given that social and institutional conventions dictate that youth is a necessary correlate of beauty, age discrimination is another factor in the sex club industry. Aging women in the sex club industry have even greater restrictions placed upon them in terms of where they can work and how much money they can make. In sum, "beauty" is a "currency system" (Wolfe, p. 30) which keeps male dominance intact and is a form of patriarchal power.

Foreign exotic dancers, like all women, are subject to this beauty objectification. Kathleen Barry notes in her book *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979) that a major "cause of sex slavery is the social-sexual objectification of women that permeates every patriarchal society in the world" (p.103). She also adds that "male domination reduces women to a lower status, holding them in low regard, and at the same time it makes women the object of men's personal need for love, romance, and sex" (p. 117). Bruckert (2002) notes that women in the sex club industry have "whore status" which renders them "objects of the male gaze" (p. 39). This demonstrates the oppression of women in a patriarchal society whereby women are codified as submissive and as objects for men's pleasure. Bartky's article, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" (p. 26), illustrates the Panopticon[1] to which our Western culture subjects women in their efforts to meet men's approval.

Women like Anna live in fear of club owners, the agents who helped get them to Canada, and other strip club staff. The Status of Women Canada research team learned that foreign exotic dancers are "controlled and brainwashed...told that the only people they can trust...talk to is the bar, the people in the bar, the managers, the owners, the other girls" (p. 8). This would explain the cautiousness expressed by a foreign exotic dancer in the London interview, and the "muscle" that moved in to guard against conversation. To avoid deviation from or defiance against this regulatory behaviour, owners and managers threaten the lives of these dancers, as well as the lives of their families. As a result these women conform because they are afraid of being deported back to their home country – the country they left for a better life in Canada. The effect this control has on foreign exotic dancers is evident in their very low self-esteem, their feelings of inadequacy, and their inability to make their own decisions (Status of Women Canada, 2003). These women are subjected to mental, emotional and physical abuse. The violence against women in the sex club industry is part of an environment which convinces them they are inferior, and which keeps them subordinate and under the control of the sex club industry. The threat of violence allows the owners and managers to treat these women as their personal property with little or no regard for them as actual human beings with the right to be treated in the same way as any other Canadian citizen.

Foreign exotic dancers, unfortunately, do not use Ontario's health and social services to their advantage. In fact Status of Women Canada reported (2003, pp. 9-10), that very few foreign women knew that such services were available for their use. Many of those who did know, chose not to use these services because of language barriers and different cultural values. This is another indication of the ways in which lack of information can be used to control foreign women once they arrive in Canada. Limiting foreign exotic dancers' knowledge of services which should be available to them aids in keeping them captive in a patriarchal culture which controls their access to all resources.

In the report issued by the Status of Women Canada (2003, p. 34), an unexpected theme emerged which related to the relationships among the dancers in the sex club industry. There appeared to be competition between ethnic groups which was fostered by the managers and owners of clubs based on the different fees charged to clients for various sexual acts. As a result of language barriers, as well as the women's lack of knowledge about the sex club industry, foreign exotic dancers charged less for lap dances and other sexual activities than Canadian women. This caused competition among women of different ethnic backgrounds. From the managers' and owners' perspective, this division (between otherwise potential allies) keeps foreign workers from learning their legal rights, and prevents their adoption of the English language which could lead to forming alliances with permanent residents of Canada. If alliances form, foreign workers might realize the depth of their exploitation and begin to form coalitions for equal opportunity, equal rights, and financial gain. This is another example of exploitation of foreign exotic dancers and ensures that they are kept oppressed in a patriarchal society.

In the Toronto Star (December, 2004), Audrey Macklin, University of Toronto Law Professor, said that these women "are foreign-born with marginal status, with no sure road to citizenship, and they are thought of as worthless" (p. E01). She also claims that foreign exotic dancers are prepared to do anything for money, even if it is unsafe or demeaning where Canadian women won't. This is one reason that clubs prefer foreign workers (Guardian, 2004). In his response to Sgro's Exotic Dancer Program, Jack Layton, NDP leader, notes that, "There's no doubt there was a real element of exploitation...no action on it because... 'oh, they are just strippers.'" Layton believes that these strippers should receive the same rights and protections as any other immigrant looking for work (Toronto Star, December, 2004). Judy Rebick, a feminist and Professor at Ryerson University, claims that Canada has created another "class of worker with no rights," and that these women are contract labourers – slaves (Toronto Star, 2004). This illustration of classism in Western society reinforces the lower status of foreign exotic dancers within our Western society.

Some of the recommendations in the Status of Women Canada's Report (2003, pp. 44-45) to combat the exploitation of exotic dancers include the following:

1. Distribution of materials in the countries of origin reporting more realistic facts about the life of exotic dancing in Canada and the realities of trafficking.

2. Distribute, to all temporary workers, visitors and students at port of entry, materials regarding Canadian laws. This information should be made available in foreign languages.
3. Offer courses in English/French as a Second Language to all women, even if they are in Canada illegally.
4. Public health inspections should be conducted of the entire premises of strip clubs and massage parlours (not just the kitchen) on a regular basis.
5. Create a neutral, regulated, governing body to oversee strip clubs and massage parlours during hours of operation to ensure that the rules remain stable.
6. Make it mandatory to have information written in various languages about health-related issues (i.e., sexually transmitted diseases, safe sex practices, etc.) and health and social service options (i.e., substance abuse treatment, shelters, medical services) centrally posted for the workers in strip clubs, massage parlours and any other establishments involved in the sex trade.
7. Promote further development and provide funding for existing social service agencies solely devoted to the sex trade. These agencies must become an integral component of the sex industry, engaging in very active outreach in the clubs and the massage studios. Their access to clubs and studios should be mandated by law.
8. Develop and fund interdisciplinary, joint service operations which work to combat organized prostitution.

Joe Bissett, former Executive Director of Immigration Canada, noted in his interview with W-Five that, “the Canadian Government has aided the sexual exploitation of foreign women. In most countries, these girls from Eastern Europe and elsewhere are smuggled into the country illicitly by false visas or cross border.” Bissett claims that because Sgro’s program provides visas legally to facilitate the exploitation of foreign women, it is not necessary to resort to illegal tactics. Audet (2004) states that “while Canada portrays itself as a morally superior nation which respects women, showboating abortion on demand as evidence of its superiority, those fighting trafficking of women on the front lines know better” (p. 3). In the same article, Gregory Carlin, Irish Anti-Trafficking Coalition said, “We get more complaints about Canada than any other western country” (page 2). This is clear evidence that Canada is contributing to the exploitation of foreign exotic dancers.

Gillian Long, Director of Research for Campaign Life Coalition said, “There are women who come to this country (Canada) and are forced to work in strip clubs, and even brothels. Why aren’t officials concerned with finding these women and helping

them” (LifeSiteNews.com, 2004, p.1). The Government should provide funding to organizations such as Streetlight, a non-profit organization, which provides assistance, both community and legal support, to help anyone who wants to leave the sex trade industry. In addition, funding should be provided to support and aid foreign exotic dancers who are being exploited while in Canada. We should also consider a mandatory monitoring system of each individual foreign exotic dancer to ensure that we are providing her with a safe and equitable environment.

We need to ask ourselves, “is Canada actually aiding in the exploitation of foreign exotic dancers?” To some it may appear that we are, to others, we are not. Based on my findings, I argue that Canada should be held accountable for the exploitation of these women. Foreign exotic dancers become lost once they are in Canada’s sex trade industry. The new immigration policies will not put an end to the exploitation of foreign exotic dancers in the sex club industry. These women are required to go through a necessary system of paperwork, but are forgotten once they are here.

In conclusion, Canada needs to take a more active role in negating the exploitation of foreign exotic dancers. We cannot be a proud country – the “golden land of opportunity,” if women are being exploited and no one is advocating on their behalf. We must listen to their stories, hear their voices and champion for their equal rights and fair treatment as individuals, and as human beings.

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Endnotes

[1] Self surveillance of one's body in attempt to regulate behaviour.