

She hung out at Israeli strip clubs for 7 years. This is what she saw

'The manager told me if she had to hug and console every girl who endured rape or violence, they wouldn't be able to work.' After years of visiting strip clubs and interviewing young women and girls working there, a criminologist dares to reveal the reality of this dark world

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"For four and a half years, I sat in the dressing rooms of almost every strip club in Tel Aviv. I didn't hear a single girl say it was her dream to be there, that she enjoys it, or even that any of the clients seemed nice to her. On the contrary, all the veteran girls, the ones who now claim that the client criminalization law is hurting business, I've seen them with my own eyes, heard them with my own ears, saying how they're 'dying to quit this stinking job,' and 'waiting for the day they can have a normal profession, a home, a family, and a little less shame to carry.'"

(From "Exposing Themselves")

For 15 years Shani Nardimon, a rehabilitative criminologist and psychotherapist, worked for ELEM Youth in Distress, an organization that helps troubled Israeli teens. She is a co-founder and former director of Halev 24/7, which treats teens and young adults on the sexual exploitation continuum. In her work at ELEM she met a 16 year-old girl, M., who worked as a stripper at bachelor parties. "Every night she had two or three parties and a driver to take her from one to the other," Nardimon says. "All her friends were from the world of stripping. Some worked at private parties and some at strip clubs." M. introduced Nardimon to the scene. "At first, she presented it as a wonderful world and hid what she was really going through. She made a lot of money, and that gave her a sense of control. She bought a lot of clothes and rented an apartment on her own."

As the two grew closer, M. began to share what was happening behind the scenes in the industry. "She asked me to look into what was happening at strip clubs, and said that it was worse than any other area. She clarified for me that this is a unique group in the sex work industry."

Nardimon began going out to the strip clubs, connecting with the women and workers there and studying what happened there. Her study has now been published as a book. The Hebrew title, "Hosfot et Atsman" translates to "Exposing Themselves: A glimpse into the strip-club subculture in Israel"

(Resling Publishing). Nardimon wrote the book together with Dr. Tomer Einat, a professor of criminology at Bar-Ilan University.

“The term ‘stripping’ has been given many definitions in the professional literature, describing an exotic dance for adult entertainment purposes,” says Einat. “Stripping takes place in many settings – clubs, parties, private homes, and cyberspace. Studies in this field, which began in the 1960s, have primarily focused on the factors that led strippers to enter the profession, how they cope with stigma, and their relationships with their customers. We focused on social and cultural aspects – behaviors, modes of dress and status symbolize that characterize the subculture, the power struggles between strippers and club-owners – which range from care and paternal relationships to pimping – and their relationships with one another.”

The study presented in “Exposing Themselves” includes interviews held over a period of six months with 11 active strippers working in various Tel Aviv nightclubs. The women, whose ages ranged from 18 to 28, had been in the business for periods of six months to five years. Eight of the women were single, one was married and two were divorced. Two of the women had children. Five were Russian-born Jews, five were Israeli-born Jews and one was a Muslim Arab.

Nardimon, 43, is married with two children. Her study also draws on seven years of visits to Tel Aviv strip clubs as part of her work as the director of Halev 24/7. Einat, 57, a divorced father of three, says with a smile that Nardimon “dragged me along with her.”

How was that experience?

“It’s not that sexual; it repulsed me and I almost fell asleep sometimes. It’s an entire industry based on deceit,” he says.

“The first time I went I found it shocking. I felt I was entering a disconnected world, a bubble,” Nardimon adds.

When I visited such clubs as a journalist, the atmosphere always reminded me of a gambling den.

“Exactly,” Nardimon says. “The atmosphere is designed to make people lose all sense of whether it’s day or night. These places have their own rules, and the women who work there seem very glamorous. Strip clubs operate in two shifts: Afternoon and evening. Strippers have to mill around in minimal clothing, dance erotically on the laps of customers in just their underwear – with customers allowed to touch them everywhere except their genitals – and then get up and perform on the central stage. In practice, the work includes having sex with customers in private rooms. As a rule, strippers say they’re

not allowed to rest or eat on their shift. Those who ask for a break are harshly criticized by the shift manager, to the point of having their shifts canceled.”

A precedent-setting ruling

“I came to interview at the club, I was 16 and had no family. I must have looked very lonely. They asked me two questions about myself and understood that I was alone in the world. And just like that, in minutes, the interview turned into a recruitment speech. They said everything I wanted to hear: ‘We’ll be your family. We’ll find you a place to live. Don’t worry, you’re not alone anymore.’”

(Miri, 26, six years stripping)

“I was a witness at the Bourse Nightclub on a night where one of the girls was raped. When the manager was called for help, she took the girl to the VIP room and let me in too. She sent a girl to get a bottle of Jack Daniels. She poured glass after glass and told the girl how she had to behave. When we left the room I told the manager: ‘You’re a woman, and if you work here, you’ve gone through this too at least once in your life, so how could you do that?’ She told me if she had to hug and console every girl who endured something awful (rape or violence), they wouldn’t be able to work. “You chose to be here, live with the consequences. If you don’t want to get raped, go work in high-tech.”

(Mor, 24, six years stripping)

According to a survey conducted in 2016 by the Ministry of Social Services and the Public Security Ministry, there were 10 strip clubs operating in Israel. However, the industry was turned upside-down by a precedent-setting ruling by Tel Aviv District Court Judge Michal Agmon-Gonen in August 2017, which took the first step toward eradicating strip clubs in Israel. The ruling, which refused to award a license to an illegal strip club, forced the legal system, enforcement agencies and Israeli public to take a square look at the prostitution industry that had been operating with the 1990s under the guise of “sex entertainment” around the stock exchange area of Ramat Gan.

Another milestone was reached in September 2018, when then-State Prosecutor Shai Nitzan ruled that lap dancing was tantamount to prostitution; the step led to the closure of many clubs through administrative order. The Task Force on Human Trafficking and Prostitution waged a successful campaign in 2016 that led to the closing of the Pussycat Club in Tel Aviv. Finally, in September 2020, the Tel Aviv municipality changed its long standing policy of issuing permits to strip clubs, limiting their operations.

“As far as I know, there are only two such clubs currently in operation,” says Nardimon, “the Shendu in Tel Aviv and the Saxo in Haifa. There’s one other club in the stock exchange area, operating more as a peep-show.”

Nardimon has never gone to a club on her own. “I always went with a colleague from our organization. A woman alone doesn’t have the same sense of security as a man, it’s not really meant for women. I was always one of very few women there, other than in Pussycat, where more women were among the spectators.”

How did you feel?

“It’s a terrible experience, it took a lot out of me. It’s a place men go with the explicit goal of getting turned on and having sex. Every woman there immediately becomes an object. I was an object too. There were a couple of occasions where men tried to pick me up, including this one time I’ll never forget, when an older man at the Bursa club paid a stripper to give me a lapdance, because that idea got him going. He wanted to turn me into part of the strip show. I adamantly refused.”

On one visit, the club-owner offered Nardimon a job as a stripper, which gave her a glimpse at the recruitment process. “Sometimes owners personally find someone and make them an offer. The main method is to get another stripper to try and convince the potential recruit, using a ‘friend-brings-friend’ method. The workers tell her they make lots of money, but they don’t mention prostitution and what really takes place there.”

What is the profile of a stripper?

“I tried not to ask them about their childhood or about sexual abuse they’d been subjected to, but they brought it up on their own, organically. According to the research, there is a strong correlation between childhood sexual abuse and secondary trauma and working as a stripper. All of the survey participants described dissociation mechanisms, their ability to adopt strategies to emotionally and mentally disconnect during sexual encounters with clients.”

How do you view strippers?

“I relate to them as survivors, and to stripping as the exploitation and objectification of women. Some of them may not see it as exploitation or identify with that, but it is exploitation. I don’t believe for a moment that any one of them ever fantasized about being in this situation. Strippers manage to distance themselves from being branded or stigmatized as prostitutes, since they’ve created their own subculture. If you ask them, they’re exclusive,

they're better, they're not like those women working in brothels. They don't see themselves as part of the sex industry.”

Einat: “Strip clubs employ a sophisticated mechanism of camouflage, to preserve that lie. The women dissociate and consume alcohol, with club owners and clients enabling the lie. Strippers distinguish themselves from the rest of the sex industry, teaching each other to believe the lie that they are not engaging in prostitution. It's insane, because night after night, when you come home from the club and take a shower, you know exactly what you've been doing.”

In your view, is stripping at a club prostitution?

Nardimon: “Unequivocally. A lap dance, which costs 25 shekels (\$7.70) is prostitution. Its whole purpose is to serve as an intermediate stage meant to lure customers to private rooms for the purpose of engaging in sex acts that cost more. At the end of the process, which is quite common, the strippers become women engaged in prostitution. Moreover, the existence of private rooms in these clubs reflects the deception. The law forbids the renting rooms for the purpose of engaging in sex for money. This is why club owners hide it, but every club has these rooms. A room costs 400 shekels, which owners share with strippers, with the average time spent in these rooms being 15 minutes.”

According to Nardimon, strippers create their own status symbols. “It starts with their fake names, and then songs they choose, clothes, shoes and where they buy them. A steady customer offers a stripper very high status. Since these customers spend a lot of money on her, she doesn't have to be with many men in one shift. A celebrity customer can also contribute to one's status. Low-status women are subjected to ostracism and violence. They even fight over space in the dressing rooms.”

What did you learn about their attitudes toward the club owners?

“It's a very ambivalent relationship. Some interviewees said that club owners sometimes asked them to leave the club and go to apartments where there were people looking for prostitutes. In other words, they were acting as pimps. With that, many of them saw the club owner as a father figure. One stripper said that the owners' expertise was discerning what each one of them wanted to hear while recruiting them. To some they'd say they would become their family, they would tell other girls they would make lots of money or become stars. They know how to identify what women coming there lack.”

Anxiety attacks at home

“During one shift I started shivering and fell to the floor. When I woke up I saw 10 girls standing over me. I told them that one of them had to take me away. I couldn’t do it anymore. They cried with me, and their tears told me that they understood what I was going through.”

(Rita, 25, five years stripping)

“When I’d sit on a customer’s lap I’d think: Ugh! You’re so pathetic! I’d look straight into his face and think about how I could tear him apart. That calmed me down. I didn’t think about what I was doing but about what I’d like to do: Break his face.”

(Shir, 22, four years stripping)

“Exposing Themselves” sheds light on the exploitation and economic subjugation these women endure. “Upon being recruited by the club, strippers have to sign a contract with the club owners,” explains Nardimon. “They can pay 150-200 shekels per work day, or a semiannual sum of 4,000-9,000 shekels, which serves as a deposit. For the first days, alcoholic drinks are free, but later they pay full price. They purchase what they wear in their performances, as well as fines for everything, even when a customer is late or doesn’t arrive, for broken glasses or for being interviewed by another club.”

How much violence is there on the part of customers?

“There was not a single woman who did not report a violent incident with a customer.”

Even with guards on site and surveillance cameras everywhere?

“Someone said there was an emergency buzzer in the private rooms, but it was disconnected. In extreme cases, when there is serious violence, they intervene out of fear that things might escalate and that the police might be called in. In other words, when it serves the club’s interests, the guards intervene, but otherwise they don’t.”

Some strippers disagree, denying any connection to prostitution.

“That’s their way of dealing with the stigma, to distance themselves from it. In order to survive stripping, they dissociate, and claim that not everyone is like that. But everything I encountered was always associated with prostitution. If there are women working as strippers who have avoided prostitution, hats off – I’ve never met any. One can’t ignore the testimonies of women at these clubs, talking about severe exploitation and prostitution, and dismiss everything I’ve seen over the years.”

But those opinions influence public discourse on the issue.

“The prevailing discourse blurs what really takes place in these clubs, and there is no mention of addiction. From the start of the night, with the opening act where they introduce the dancers, they get up on stage and then travel to the bar as a pack and have a drink together. It, of course, starts with drinks and moves on to drugs.”

Do they drink and do drugs throughout the shift?

“Yes. Not all of them, a few of them don’t need to since they know how to dissociate, just like we see with women in prostitution. But they are definitely pushed in that direction, starting with the free alcoholic drinks.”

What kind of damage does stripping cause?

“This comes up in numerous interviews. It involves the great difficulties in developing a relationship with a partner, including sexual relations. One interviewee said she had difficulty having her breasts touched during sex because of her trauma from lap dancing. The book describes a 19-year-old who came to Halev 24/7 before dawn one morning, straight from a club. She was shivering, crying and screaming from the depths of her soul, saying she couldn’t bear one more man touching her. They often have an obsessive need to shower. One interviewee said she fell apart in the dressing room. They mention it in many interviews: anxiety attacks, depression, suicide attempts, cutting themselves.”

You included an interview with a female pimp. What insights came up there?

“She was something different, a woman who was a stripper in the past and was now managing a strip club. She had a true desire for stripping to become something else. In her fantasy it would only include dancing, with people viewing her as a dancer, with the whole matter regarded as art. There’s a huge gap between that vision and what happens on the ground. There’s something heartbreaking there, since in reality she was managing a brothel with choreography.”

Are you in favor of shutting down strip clubs?

“I understand strippers who complain about the law prohibiting lap dances and attempts to close the clubs where they make their living. I understand the claim that you can’t close everything all at once and expect them to find a way forward. But we, as a society, cannot allow it to continue. In my view, the state should compensate them and open appropriate rehabilitation channels.”

