

On the Boundaries of the Global Margins

*Violence, Labor, and Surveillance
in a Rust Belt Topless Bar*

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“So if I can’t call the police, who’ll help me?” sobbed Chantelle backstage, her question muffled by the dull throbbing of music pounding outside the door. “This guy who thinks we’re destined to be together is sitting outside my house every night, maybe with a gun. He could follow me home tonight and kill me and my baby; he could do whatever he wants.” Eyeliner streaming down her face, Chantelle buried her head in her hands and wept as her colleagues, topless dancers at an upstate New York bar I call Vixens, continued to minimize her obvious distress by insisting that there was nothing she could do except wait for the man to lose interest in her. As the newest dancer at Vixens, Chantelle had already acquired a stalker in the form of a frequent visitor to the bar. This man was in his mid-forties and persistently requested her phone number, ignoring her insistence that management forbade dancers from seeing clients outside of working hours. Two months pregnant and without a socioeconomic network of support, nineteen-year-old Chantelle was terrified at the prospect of losing her only source of income and by the very real physical threat the man posed.

One of the Vixens dancers, who called herself Cinnamon, shrugged rather resignedly in the face of Chantelle’s highly emotional description and sighed, “Welcome to the business, honey. For every fifty normal guys, you get one complete freak.” This disturbing vignette raises a number of pressing questions. How could it be that someone like Chantelle was so completely exposed to the constant threat of intimidation and violence? How could her colleagues be so remarkably nonchalant when the danger was so obviously real? Most notably, what structural, institutional, and individual forms of regulation and surveillance combined to implicate Chantelle and her

coworkers in a system that not only consistently placed them under threat but also held them responsible for the consequences of their marginalization? This chapter attempts to answer these questions through an analysis of the complex means by which pervasive neoliberal labor practices, exclusionary zoning policies, and an environment of constant surveillance create a situation with a high potential for the kind of violence that so terrorized Chantelle.

Fear was a constant theme in the lives of Vixens dancers, many of whom had experiences with violence that marked their bodies, shaped their decision-making processes, and kept them in a constant state of anxiety. Such previous experiences often meant that Vixens dancers were keenly aware that the relative degree of autonomy their work provided them, particularly in terms of flexible hours, income, and at least some degree of adulation from male clients, came with powerful strings attached. As with Chantelle, these sometimes entailed life-threatening risks resulting from the elaborate set of exclusionary processes that frame sex workers' lives.

Neoliberal Labor Practices and the Feminization of Poverty

Feminized labor, broadly characterized by the low-paid, part-time, low-status, and often temporary jobs performed primarily by women, is often highly regulated despite the relative lack of benefits and income it provides to its workers. Sex workers, whose profession is perhaps the most feminized of all forms of work, inhabit a social category that positions them in need of (often nonconsensual) state control and assistance as both victims and criminals. Such state interventions have become increasingly common in recent decades as a result of broader social and policy shifts regarding the appropriate role of the state in legislating individual sexual behavior (Wagner 1997). Particularly significant for sex workers like Chantelle and her colleagues is the frequency with which such state interest in regulation has been accompanied by the rise of the neoliberal labor practices that frame their experiences in the workplace.

Geographer David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as an increasingly global politico-economic philosophy which “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (2). Despite its rhetoric of freedom and rights, these economic changes often feature an unprecedented prevalence of untethering the workplace from its workers so

that those workers in positions of power and privilege have increasingly less direct contact with or responsibility for those who work at the lowest levels of the same industry. This disconnection results in diminished accountability for the powerful and an increased burden for the least-advantaged members of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Notably, this hierarchical separation between individuals in the same workplace is frequently accompanied by a lack of unionization and the rise of part-time positions that require a degree of investment in work akin to that of a full-time employee without offering comparable benefits. A number of changing economic realities accompany these labor practices, and constantly remind workers of their expendability and lack of bargaining power (Newman 2008, 2000; Wilson 1997).

Undoubtedly these destabilizing economic processes have an equally debilitating effect upon individual women's lives, particularly in a region where the legacy of deindustrialization has been so powerfully enduring. Vixens is located in an upstate New York town I call Sparksburgh, which is part of the geographic region often called the "Rust Belt," a disparaging but exceptionally picturesque phrase that captures the landscape of decay so characteristic of a region that has seen almost all its industries close in past decades as well as an exodus of its young people in search of work. This enduring term entered popular discourse in the 1970s as shorthand for the socioeconomic decline in the U.S. Northeast and Great Lakes regions, once vibrant industrial centers that lost their primary economic force when manufacturers relocated farther south in search of cheaper labor and production costs. In Sparksburgh and many other towns and cities like it, one round of destabilization followed another and prompted a generalized shift to the less secure and less well-paid service industry jobs that emerged in the wake of deindustrialization.

Vixens dancers, like many other poor and blue-collar U.S. workers, demonstrated a cultural understanding of wage employment as an inherently negative (and even abusive) part of life's many monotonous and inescapable realities. Dancers called the low-wage labor market available to them outside the sex industry "the straight world," an environment they characterized as exploitative, exclusionary, and without hope for social mobility or financial stability. Far from being a completely separate sphere, however, "the straight world" both set the conditions of their work and informed the way dancers think about their lives. All but one of the women at Vixens had previously worked outside the sex industry, and many had left intermittently for low-wage, service-sector work elsewhere before returning with the recognition that they preferred the topless bar with its possibility of periodic windfalls from customers. This follows similar patterns documented by sex workers

in Nevada's legal brothels, wherein sociologists Barbara Brents, Crystal Jackson, and Kathryn Hausbeck clearly note the strong connections between the growth of feminized low-wage service jobs and the number of U.S. women willing to engage in legal prostitution as they "seek alternative ways to make ends meet" (Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck 2009, 155).

Such overt connections between the feminization of poverty and the institutionalization of neoliberal labor practices are almost eerily obvious in establishments like Vixens. Topless and nude dancing venues present the perfect neoliberal model, featuring nonexistent labor costs, cash income (much of it untaxed), no unions, and a constant supply of workers preconditioned to follow the rules without complaint. In practice, of course, the reality is much more complex, and few dancers would argue that theirs is an ideal form of work for these very reasons. Income is unreliable, social stigma pervasive, clients sometimes dangerous or threatening, and dancing offers absolutely no illusions of long-term support. Fundamentally, this system functions to the benefit of those in positions of ownership and to the detriment of their workers: a familiar (and by now quite clichéd) characterization of the anti-capitalist argument.

The advent of post-deindustrialization neoliberal labor practices coincided in particularly telling ways in the growth of establishments like Vixens throughout the Rust Belt in the mid-1980s (Dewey 2011). This expansion occurred just as strip club owners sought to make their businesses competitive with the expansion of in-home video technology by offering increasingly sexually explicit acts onstage and more physical contact between dancers and clients (Shteir 2005, 317–325). Yet these increased expectations for dancers were not accompanied by an improvement in their earnings or working conditions and, in fact, resulted in their being expected to undergo more risks to their health and safety for less money.

New York State labor law further reinforces dancers' subject position by considering dancers as "independent contractors" who are not formally employed by the bars where they perform. The New York State Department of Labor (2009) defines independent contractors as workers who "are free from supervision, direction and control in the performance of their duties. They are in business for themselves, offering their services to the general public." In practice, this legislation means that the owners of such establishments are not required to pay them a salary or provide health insurance or any form of benefits. Some bars even charge women a "stage fee" ranging from fifty to one hundred dollars to perform as part of a curious labor practice in which the workers pay to use the means of production.

Dancers fall into the “independent contractor” category of state labor law, because they are considered to meet the following specific criteria of this definition: they pay their own expenses, assume risk for profit or loss in providing services to clients, and are (ostensibly) free to refuse work offers (New York State Department of Labor 2009). The first is certainly true, as dancers must incur significant, non-reimbursable expenses in costumes, cosmetics, high-heeled shoes that are attractive and yet allow the wearer to dance for hours, and other paraphernalia. Dancers also have the right to refuse to dance privately for clients, although in practice women are unlikely to assume the risk of not earning any money by refusing work offers.

This rather laissez-faire approach on the part of legislators reveals the ambiguous position of women workers at Vixens and other establishments like it, as in many ways we see assumptions about their lack of entitlement to state protection in their classification as “independent contractors.” Such discourse closely replicates divisions between “good” and “bad” women that frame everyday gendered experience in positioning women who fall into the latter category as deserving of any bad treatment meted out to them. This slippery dichotomy, in which the boundaries between respectable and lascivious behavior are not at all clear in practice, results in myriad forms of dancer regulation at both the state and individual levels.

Zoning and Surveillance

The close association that topless dancing has with the exchange of sexual favors for money underlies many of the policies and laws that define what behaviors can take place inside establishments like Vixens. Such regulations shape dancers’ work environment in complex ways, from the use of security cameras to its location on the Sparksburgh outskirts because of zoning laws that forbid it from being too close to a residential area. Dancers’ subject positions are reinforced by a number of state and local laws concerning prostitution and obscenity, but many of these are tellingly ambiguous in ways that reflect moral and social ambivalence toward sex work in general. Article 230 of the New York State Penal Code, for example, classifies prostitution as a misdemeanor defined as the exchange of “sexual conduct with another person in return for a fee” without elaborating on what such behavior actually entails. Article 235 on obscenity is similarly opaque, holding that:

Any material or performance is “obscene” if (a) the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that considered as

a whole, its predominant appeal is to the prurient interest in sex and (b) it depicts or describes in a patently offensive manner, actual or simulated sexual intercourse . . . (c) considered as a whole, it lacks serious literary, artistic, political, and scientific value. Predominant appeal shall be judged with reference to ordinary adults. (New York State Penal Code 1965)

But what exactly is “sexual conduct” and who makes up this population of “ordinary adults”? This obliqueness is particularly problematic for Vixens dancers given that the New York State General Business Law defines an “adult establishment” as a commercial establishment where a substantial portion is given to “sexually-oriented activities that do not cross the line into prostitution or obscenity” (New York State Office of General Counsel 2003).

Laws and regulations on obscenity are unclear at best, as they call upon courts to use what they term the “contemporary community standard” (New York State Penal Code 1965) of appropriate sexual practices when evaluating whether a behavior, document, or film is obscene. In his research on the lack of clarity involved in this standard, sociologist Joseph Scott observes that obscenity is the only crime punishable by U.S. law in which the defendant does not know whether he or she actually committed the offense prior to the jury’s decision (Scott 1991, 29). Scott’s administration of more than seven thousand telephone interviews on the subject clearly revealed that individuals are generally unable to assess what a contemporary community standard is in regard to sexuality (*ibid.*, 44).

Yet this confusion about the boundaries of acceptable sexual behavior rarely tempers the high degree of public and policy concern about the existence of adult establishments like Vixens. Anthropologist Jacqueline Lewis (2000, 203), for instance, has described the effective removal of women’s agency in the construction of lap dancing as a “social problem” that constituted an explicit threat to public morality. Lewis argues that the court-mandated ban on lap dancing in Canada positioned sex workers as vulnerable and “in need of protection” (*ibid.*, 215), thereby reinforcing broader sexist stereotypes of women as defenseless creatures who were helpless in the absence of male safeguards. A great deal of both moral and legal ambiguity thus surrounds such businesses, whose appeal lies at least in part in their fringe location.

In her classic text on cultural notions of taboo, purity, and pollution, anthropologist Mary Douglas famously argues that in the Western European cultural template, dirt is “matter out of place” (Douglas 2000 [1966], 36). Douglas believes that one of the primary functions of culture is to cre-

ate order out of disorder, requiring social systems to rely on a number of strategies to regulate behaviors, ambiguous actions, and beliefs that fall in the substantial grey area between these extreme opposites. These include branding those who engage in such activities as dangerous and to be avoided or assigning them to a particular category so that they become immediately classifiable. The powerful questions and moral debates raised by topless dancing indicate the uneasiness that surrounds the boundaries between the theoretical concepts of licit and illicit sexual exchange.

Nor are these lines obvious in practice, and dancers themselves complain that they are often unable to resist customers who, during a private dance, want to touch their breasts and hips for extra money, which Vixens management does not consider to constitute “sexual conduct” as defined by the state prostitution law. A manager always sits in the main office to monitor activities in the curtained room reserved for private dances on a television screen via security cameras mounted there, because violations of these rules could result in forced closure of their business if a plainclothes police officer witnessed them or, less likely, a male patron complained to the police. For dancers, the lines between “sexual conduct” and dancing very close to a seated man while semi-nude are difficult to discern, and are considerably complicated by clients who offer more money for sexually explicit services that involve increased physical contact.

This ambivalence about female sexuality is also evident in sociologist Amy Adler’s analysis of two Supreme Court decisions on whether nude dancing should be protected by the First Amendment. Adler posits that these cases were marked by “an unacknowledged apprehension of female sexuality as entertaining, trivial, threatening and sick” (2007, 309). More specifically, Adler finds the Supreme Court decision that nude dancing fell on the “out perimeters of the First Amendment” in itself reveals that a “stripper’s speech occupies a liminal space. Condemned to the border between protected expression and unprotected conduct, her body symbolizes the very margins of constitutional ‘speech’” (ibid., 311). Such marginality at the legislative level also carries the implicit message that sex workers are somehow unworthy of state protection or, at the very least, unworthy of serious attention.

Even more unclear are the ordinances imposed upon such businesses by zoning laws, which in Sparksburgh do not permit sexually oriented businesses to open within five hundred feet of any area classified as “residential” by the city’s Zoning Office. Sparksburgh is divided into thirty zoning districts, each with its own classification into categories of residential, office, local, business, commercial, or industrial, and topless-dancing bars are per-

mitted to operate in all but the first category of these. As the New York State Office of General Counsel has noted, however, municipal zoning regulations raise serious constitutional issues when the regulation regards free expression protected by the federal and state constitutions. Zoning regulations on adult entertainment are thus required to demonstrate prior to implementation that such businesses have harmful secondary effects, such as “urban blight, decreased retail shopping activity and reduced property values” (New York State Office of General Council 2003).

Municipalities in New York State typically choose between two zoning techniques when dealing with adult-oriented businesses: the first concentrates such establishments in a single area, and the second disperses them by using distance requirements. Sparksburgh has chosen the latter, which in theory avoids what has been termed a “skid-row effect” but in practice means that topless-dancing bars are located either on the industrial outskirts of the city or in dangerous or dilapidated downtown areas abandoned by homeowners and thus outside the residential classification.

Outright and de facto bans enacted via zoning regulations are nearly as old as topless bars themselves and have been vociferously encouraged by neighborhood activists, government officials, and small-business owners. New York State first passed a law in 1977 banning topless dancing in bars licensed by the New York State Liquor Authority, but in the absence of a definitive state court ruling following a challenge by a group of upstate New York bar owners, the law was never enforced. The New York State Supreme Court declared the ban unconstitutional on June 10, 1980, when it ruled that the law “amounted to censorship of a constitutionally protected means of expression that the state had failed to justify” (Greenhouse 1981, A-2).

New York State then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in 1981 that individual states did in fact have the right to ban topless dancing in bars under the Twenty-first Amendment to the Constitution, which repealed Prohibition and declared the right of states to control the sale and consumption of alcohol within their borders. A compromise decision that recognized topless dancing as a form of free expression protected under the First Amendment then forbade nudity in bars regulated by the New York State Liquor Authority unless dancers remain out of customers’ reach (Goldman 1981, C-4). Once dancers cover their breasts, they may touch clients.

The New York State Liquor Authority mandates that women must stay at least six feet away from clients and wear panties or lower-body coverings because, as spokesperson Richard Chernela noted, “once you remove your pants, you create an inherent disorder” (Harting 1990, 3). As a result, inspec-

tions by the local and New York State Liquor Authority resulted in the arrest of dancers who allowed clients to place dollar bills in their thong underwear while dancing topless in many New York State strip clubs. The dancers' clients, quite notably, were not charged with any criminal offense (Duffy 1995, C1). Social ambivalence toward both topless dancing and its regulation are evident in newspaper coverage of such arrests, with numerous upstate New York letter writers and commentators contributing tongue-in-cheek statements for publications such as "I'm sure the city is much safer tonight because of this [police action]" (O'Hara 1995, B3).

The choice of language employed in such popular discourse indicates the depth of contradictory sentiments toward sex workers and, more generally, women. Chernela's association between the nude lower body, specifically in reference to women, and "inherent disorder," conjures Mary Douglas's (1966) discussion of how cultures function to order the world through classification. City topless-dancing establishments responded angrily to this increased regulation on their operations, particularly in the form of a 1993 Sparksburgh Common Council ordinance banning new strip clubs from opening within one thousand feet of a school, church, park, or residence. In a similar case in Syracuse, New York, an alcohol-free nude-dancing establishment successfully asserted in court that the city had conspired to keep his club closed by delaying his planned opening date as well as permit and license applications until after the ordinance was passed (Wright 1993, B2). Indeed, most arrangements to deal with such establishments are *de facto*, with consideration beginning solely when community members complain about them.

Regional provisions in upstate New York that sought to force erotic-dancing establishments to move to industrial areas or close began initiation by Syracuse Common Council member Rick Guy in 1995 following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's closure of Times Square adult businesses was constitutional. Yet many upstate New York officials were skeptical about the utility of this plan, including Syracuse Common Council President (and later two-term mayor) Matt Driscoll, who noted, "The city is crumbling down around us, our finances are a disaster, the roads have potholes and this is how the administration is going to spend its resources?" (Pierce and McAndrew 1999, A1, A14).

Yet some community members and small-business owners remained adamant that adult establishments warranted relocation to a specially designated portion of the city because of the lowered property values and increased crime that they believed accompanied such businesses. One convenience store owner in a central New York town complained, at a public hearing on

the subject, that, “the kind of people that go to these places [to] feed their lusts on naked women and drink for hours” posed a threat to his wife and children at night (Wiley 1996, B4). Community officials who believed that it would simply shift the problem to neighboring communities or further concentrate it in a single location dismissed the relocation proposal (Pierce 2000, B3).

Vixens is located in an industrial section of Sparksburgh immune to such zoning legislation because it is extremely far from any residential area. Yet “industrial area” is something of a tenuous misnomer in a region characterized by the consistency of its factory closures as corporations continue their search for cheaper labor in the Global South. My drive home from Vixens each night was fraught with anxiety after listening to the stories dancers had told me about infatuated clients who followed them home on the empty highway during the predawn hours. I found myself constantly checking my rearview mirror, relieved when the reflection revealed only the shadowy outlines of abandoned furniture factories in the former industrial zone of the city.

Zoning is just one aspect of the multiple means by which pervasive social inequalities influence individual women and the elaborate ways social and institutional regulations and structures intersect with their everyday lives. Multiple forms of structural, institutional, and individual forms of regulation function to shape these processes of marginalization, including moral competition among dancers. As such, dancers find themselves in a paradoxical situation in which they place themselves, and one another, under surveillance in ways that consistently reinforce their own oppression.

Dancers’ Regulation of Themselves and Others

Dancers are fully cognizant of their membership in a highly stigmatized group, and they work with constant awareness of the need to preserve what they perceive as the critical boundaries between emotional and physical intimacy. Women frequently complain about clients who wrongly presume they are prostitutes, and often insist on distinguishing themselves from other types of sex workers who have greater degrees of physical contact with clients. Vixens dancers were disturbingly consistent in their stigmatization of prostitutes and nude dancers as part of what they view as a completely separate subculture of drug addicts and vectors of disease. This stereotyping notably mirrors assumptions often made about topless dancers by those outside the profession.

One slow Tuesday night, Vixens dancer Star and I were sitting at the bar when she turned to me with a serious expression on her face and said, “You know, I really am a good person. I’m not a whore. You believe me, right?” Such negative associations with selling sex rather than its simulation onstage were part of a pattern of dancers’ broader insistence that they were different and infinitely superior because of the boundaries they set with clients. This was one of the otherwise limited forms of self-esteem and pride they were able to salvage in a society that often views them as little more than immoral objects in need of regulation. Dancers had an enormous amount of pride and self-esteem invested in what they were not, rather than what they were, and this frequently led to arguments between women at Vixens regarding appropriate behavior with clients.

Such moral hierarchies are omnipresent in all areas of the sex industry, wherein sociologist Wendy Chapkis observes that women are not equally victimized by this stigma, because “those whose work most closely resembles non-commercial sexuality generally occupy a place of higher status . . . [and] a similar status distinction may exist between those who turn quick tricks involving less in the way of emotional labor” (Chapkis 1997, 104). Anthropologist Patty Kelly similarly observes that this sort of competition for “good” status is “linked to conceptions of morality, deviance, sexual norms and even the sense of fair play among competing co-workers” (Kelly 2008, 157). Similarly, when sociologists Holly Bell, Lacey Sloan, and Chris Strickling (1998, 360) asked topless dancers about whether they felt they faced social stigma in their work, many interviewees noted that “dancing isn’t really a dirty job—prostitution is a dirty job.”

Thus what may initially appear as competing discourses of state surveillance and state marginalization are not at all discordant and, in fact, work in tandem with one another. Topless dancing occupies a unique position among different forms of sex work in the United States because it is both legally sanctioned and morally condemned. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the many forms of state regulation that dancers experience are also accompanied by clear forms of marginalization that render women responsible for their own safety. For instance, Vixens did not have bouncers or any other form of security, and, on most nights, it fell to the dancers to defend their boundaries when clients became particularly aggressive. The manager on duty would generally intervene when a dancer’s physical safety was at risk or a law was clearly being violated, but such intervention rarely took place.

The reality that Vixens dancers could only rely on themselves was painfully underscored for Chantelle one night when she unknowingly violated the law against exposing her breasts in close proximity to a client and was nearly terminated by Paul, the manager on duty that night. Chantelle had not been at fault for the exposure. Paul even acknowledged later that the problem lay with the New York State Alcoholic Beverage Control Law, which forbids businesses with a liquor license from featuring nude performers. The only topless dancers exempt from this law are those who expose their breasts below the areola while performing on a platform stage elevated at least eighteen inches above floor level and at least six feet from the nearest patron. In practice, this law means that New York State dancers may bare their breasts while dancing onstage but must cover their breasts with a cloth or another item in order to accept tips from clients. Tips comprise Vixens dancers' entire income, and dancers often complained that new clients, especially those who had not visited a topless bar before and were thus unaware of this rule, would withdraw their money as soon as a dancer covered her breasts.

Chantelle's transgression took place on a busy Friday night when Vixens was particularly crowded. A group of some two dozen young men who had arrived half-drunk from a bachelor party stood near the stage shouting loudly at Chantelle, who had removed the top half of her negligee to reveal her naked breasts. She left the bottom half on, convinced that her third month of pregnancy was beginning to show.

One of the young men beckoned Chantelle, waving a dollar bill in the air. She walked toward him, carefully pulling the straps of her negligee over her shoulders to cover her chest so as not to violate the law. This was difficult to do on her six-inch heels, and she struggled to move forward toward the waving dollar bill as quickly as she could. Chantelle leaned forward toward the man's hand, when he rapidly shook his head and retracted the bill from her reach, much to his friends' amusement. He then refused to pay until he could see Chantelle's breasts up close, and so she bent forward and allowed him to caress her.

Within the hour Chantelle was in Paul's office, in tears. "What am I supposed to do," she cried angrily, "when you don't explain the rules to the guys who come in, how am I supposed to, when I am the one standing there naked?" Paul softened his tone and explained that she needed to be firm. "Just don't do it, then," he replied rather weakly. Chantelle began to sob, effectively ending Paul's gentle rebuke but by no means clarifying how dancers with little power and great economic need are supposed to enforce rules that most male clients are unaware even exist.

Everyday Forms of Structural Violence

“All women are whores,” Cinnamon often said, pausing dramatically, until another dancer backstage would inevitably ask what she meant. “We have to be” she usually replied, “and it doesn’t matter how rich you are or how good a job you got. That’s the way the world is.” It took some time before I understood what she meant. At first I thought she was simply employing the moral typologies that allow dancers to distinguish themselves from prostitutes as part of a broader system of self-empowerment that helps to diffuse some of the stigma surrounding their profession. What Cinnamon actually meant was that, in her opinion, sexism’s oppressive weight suffuses even forms of privilege that remained far beyond her reach, including economic stability.

Women at Vixens clearly understand that sex work is just one aspect of an infinitely larger process by which all women learn (and even teach others) that their labor is less valuable. As Cinnamon concisely pointed out, this phenomenon transcends class and occupational status and can be used to describe the life situation of many women. Women throughout the world are socialized to provide the vast majority of unpaid labor, including child care, food preparation, and other caregiving work. Such responsibilities are often incompatible with higher-paid and more secure jobs, so that women are much more likely than men to find themselves doing unpaid work in the home rather than earning a salary through formal employment.

The operations of power take myriad forms in the lives of poor women. These everyday forms of structural violence are compounded for sex workers, whose lives evince the stark inequalities inherent in these practices ever more sharply because of the heavy weight of institutionally imposed social stigma. The lives of these women, although situated at the social and legal margins of life in the United States, consistently speak to the exclusionary forces that impact all women, albeit in different ways. Thus, despite Vixens dancers’ best efforts to obtain some autonomy for themselves through increased earning power and flexible working hours, a vast array of institutional and interpersonal obstacles consistently place them in a permanent state of fear.