

How we get from topless bars to abuse



By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 35px; color: #8cc7d0;"] A [dropcap]fter I [published this piece](#), a reader wrote to me, asking how I “joined the dots” between a strip show and domestic violence.

I was really glad she emailed me, because not only did it mean that she was thinking and talking about this critical issue – along with her work colleagues who, she said, had talked about it in the tearoom – but it also made me write down, for the first time really, what has been swirling around my head.

This was my (slightly edited) response:

“The bottom line to my thinking is that it comes from the perspective of tackling domestic violence well before the

first punch, rape or other act of violence occurs.

Lots has been written about this, by much greater feminist writers (and researchers) than myself.

But in this sense, it is all about how women/girls are perceived and how they come from an entirely different position (ie. far less powerful) than men/boys, simply by being born girls in the first place.

This is why so much emphasis in the battle to end domestic violence is on empowering women/girls and, at the same time, educating boys/men to respect women.

So, to the strippers.

I have no problem with women choosing to strip for whatever reasons they may decide to strip, which I would argue are mainly economic reasons and there is another whole discussion around that. (Indeed the woman who wrote this piece that I just published said she applied to work in a men's club in Melbourne, purely for the money when she was a struggling student, but in retrospect she was so glad that she never got the job.)

I certainly didn't judge the women at Last Break for what they were doing, but was angry at the fact that there remains a market for that kind of "entertainment" which I thought had been left behind in the 80s.

The issue is that stripping, topless work, private dancing all reinforce the entrenched power imbalance between genders and, in so doing, reinforce women as something to be objectified, oggled, highly sexualised and valued for their ability to appeal to men.

This is why male strippers are not on the same scale.

They don't start from the same place as women in terms of power and, even when taking their clothes off in a strip show,

they retain that power as part of the dominant gender.

(To use a really simple analogy about how they retain this power in the real world, would a male stripper ever feel afraid if he was confronted, alone, by a group of women? Would a female stripper ever feel afraid if she was confronted, alone, by a group of men?)

I don't think that every man who goes to a strip show is going to beat his partner – of course not – but these shows do not empower women and girls and negates the message that we hope to educate the next generation with: that women/girls are not simply sexualised objects.

It is this devaluing of women that is the hardest thing to turn around in our culture and I am really dismayed that at a time when we are working to turn this thinking around, that we still have this form of “entertainment” on offer in Warrnambool.

My thinking around this has taken time to develop and there are times when I am still not sure how I can best explain that in no way do I want to shame/patronise the women involved in stripping/topless barwork/private dancing, while at the same time hating the industry in which they work.

I had a conversation with an escort the other day about this very thing: she once ran a brothel. I asked her how she felt about strip clubs and she summarised my thoughts so much better than me.

She explained the difference between how it felt to be involved in a private, quiet, one-on-one business transaction between a sex worker and a client, and women stripping or shaking their breasts, or lap dancing in front of “the mob” (as she termed it).

I certainly don't come at this argument from a place of superiority – I am the last person to judge a woman on how she

chooses or has to make a living – but I am saddened, truly saddened, that at a time when our domestic violence rates are astronomical, women are still valued for their ability to strip for men.

Again, these are not my thoughts alone, but based on years of trying to make sense of it all by reading and thinking and talking to others.

One of the best pieces on “false empowerment” I have read recently was by the feminist writer Clementine Ford, you may enjoy it too: [here is the link](#).

I am sure you will have your own views on what I have written, and perhaps disagree with most of it, but I appreciate you asking and hopefully at least something I have written here helps to flesh out the connections.”

– Carol