

# J.Lo's pole dancing during the Super Bowl is not benign

Women have learned to conflate sexual subservience and objectification with sexual empowerment.

FEBRUARY 10, 2020 by [LAURA MCNALLY](#), *Feminist Current*

<https://www.feministcurrent.com/2020/02/10/j-los-pole-dancing-during-the-super-bowl-is-not-benign/>

Remember the meme that said, “Camping: when rich people spend a fortune to live outdoors like poor people”? That could similarly be extended to pole “sport,” where wealthy women pay to re-enact women’s sexual servitude.

But don’t take my word for it. According to one upscale strip club manager in South Carolina, quoted in a 2016 [study](#), “An exotic dancer is simply a product to be bought and sold.” Another club manager quoted in the same study explains, “What we serve is women.”

After J.Lo’s recent Super Bowl halftime show [performance](#), many women expressed criticism in relation to her pole dancing. As is often the case when women push back against the normalization of the sex industry and of objectification, the response was less than fair. Could it

be that women all over the world are just angry and prudish? Jealous of how exciting and empowering it must be to pole dance like J.Lo? Or could it be that some women are actually sick and tired of being peddled the lie that dancing like a stripper is empowering?

Consider the realities of how pole dancing “empowers” women:

- 100 per cent of dancers report assault on the job with 82 per cent saying they have been punched by customers.
- Over half of dancers report being digitally raped at work.
- In countries where women’s economic status increases (e.g. Canada), economically vulnerable women are trafficked from overseas to dance under poorer conditions.
- Earnings of US dancers are generally decreasing while demands for more nudity and physical touch are increasing.
- Dancers are increasingly expected to accept physical harassment, in part due to the proliferation of free pornography.
- Strip clubs are illegal in egalitarian jurisdictions like Finland where they are recognized as a driver (and consequence) of gender inequality.

The ugly realities of pole dancing are hand waved away, not just by men, but, increasingly, by women. This is understandable in some ways. Many of us want to defend our right to be sexual beings — to not feel ashamed or repressed about how we dance, have sex, or make money. The problem is that, instead of defending women’s right to understand and express our actual sexualities, women are defending the *commoditization* of our sexuality — a “sexuality” that has little to do with female pleasure, and everything to do with performing for the male gaze. Far from defending women’s sexuality, arguments in favour of pole dancing do the opposite.

The pole is not a symbol of female empowerment, rather it symbolizes voyeurism of women’s bodies. It wasn’t all that long ago that “sideshow” of “exotic” women toured the Western world. Indeed, the pole originates from these sideshows — the pole quite literally being the tent pole holding up the circus tent. During this time, [in the 1890s](#), wealthier women began to be sold dance instructions teaching them how to re-enact “exotic dance” at home in order to sexually excite their husbands. Sound familiar?

There is something about fetishizing voyeurism of women’s bodies that is deeply embedded in our psyches. To the extent that, collectively, we cannot even conceive of female sexuality that doesn’t revolve around

objectification. Women's sexuality is so deeply intertwined with our exploitation that the two are often defended as one in the same.

What pole dancing offers us as women is the opportunity to try on how this sexual subservience feels — without the costs and stigma associated with actually being a stripper. This stripper role play may very well be interpreted as feeling sexy or empowered precisely because we are taught to view our own sexual subservience as titillating.

The sexual subservience of women is codified as sexy and exciting for both men and women alike. This helps explain why objectification of women is misinterpreted as women's genuine sexuality, rather than exploitation of it. Even within groups of psychologists, I am told women can “explore their sexuality” by replicating striptease. By no fault of our own, most of us struggle to conceptualize a female sexuality not connected to objectification, because an unobscured female sexuality does not exist and cannot exist in the cultural psyche today, while women continue to be socially, economically, and politically unequal to men.

As Meghan Murphy [wrote](#) in 2016:

“It’s worth asking ourselves why all these practices presented today as ‘expressions of female sexuality’ (from burlesque, to pole dancing, to the sexy selfies young women post on Instagram) are rooted so firmly in male-centred ideas about what ‘sexy’ means. Why does our so-called ‘sexual empowerment’ look so very similar to the pornified imagery men have long imposed on women?”

Andrea Dworkin offers an answer in her 1983 book, *Right Wing Women*:

“Men have constructed female sexuality and in so doing have annihilated the chance for sexual intelligence in women. Sexual intelligence cannot live in the shallow, predestined sexuality men have counterfeited for women.”

The fallacy of pole dance as empowering is not benign, but a dangerous and manipulative lie, designed to undermine women’s ability to truthfully engage with their sense of self, sexuality, and reality. It is gaslighting to continually insist “pole dancing is empowering” against all evidence that it is the opposite, and then claim women who state the facts about this evidence are just cognitively incompetent because they jealously wish they could do pole dancing too. What’s worse is how many women will engage in this gaslighting in a futile bid to reclaim sexual agency.

It is unsurprising to me that many girls experience mental health and body image issues suddenly around sexual maturity, considering the amount of cognitive dissonance we must endure to live in a world where re-enacting subservience is presented as our only path to sexual maturity or exploration. As Adrienne Rich [wrote](#):

“Women have been driven mad, ‘gaslighted,’ for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience. The truth of our bodies and our minds has been mystified to us.”

What chance is there for women’s equality to be taken seriously when the baseline assumption is that all women, deep down, aspire to pole dance like J.Lo, and that, therefore, we cannot possibly have any rational concerns about the facts of stripping.

Women are expected to stay silent on the exploitation of women and its subsequent glamorization in pop culture lest we be chided as irrationally jealous and prudish. We must diligently fall into ranks, fawning over J.Lo’s pole prowess, partaking in strip club culture and signing up ourselves and our daughters to learn pole dance in the hopes that one day, we too might become empowered enough to be sexy.

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