

Is Pole Dancing The New Yoga? Ruminations On Fitness In The Gentry



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New wave pole dance is new the yoga: it is the latest health/fitness/wellness craze for the middle class. It's been appropriated into the mainstream from a marginalised/removed space that's considered exotic, it's associated with themes of empowerment and body positivity, and its studios are scattered all over well-to-do neighbourhoods. It's marked by all the same elements: gentrification, appropriation with a surface-level comprehension of the practice's roots, and privilege. The pole trend is also polished with self-care-era empowerment packaging.

But how deeply imbedded in the gentry is this trend? And are "pole-fitness" enthusiasts aware of their *I-only-pole-dance-in-a-studio* privilege? Have they interrogated their *I'm-definitely-not-a-stripper* defensiveness?

Pole athlete and World Pole Dance Championship participant, Kat Bailey, [was quoted as saying](#): "We call it 'pole fitness' to get away from the negative connotations... it's more part of the sports industry than stripping industry". The pole fitness community in South Africa seeks to distance itself from strippers and the sex industry in a similar way. Having trained and danced in numerous South African studio spaces myself, I've become acutely aware of this and had to interrogate it within my own framework as a dancer. I've found that this intention to remove pole dance/pole fitness from its association with the sex industry is often coloured by class judgement, moralistic disdain and sex-worker-shaming.

In her insightful article, *Why is There an Ongoing Feud between Strippers and Pole Dancers?*, [Alana Massey](#) points out that many pole fitness enthusiasts claim that the dance form has its roots in [Chinese and Indian \(Pole Mallakhamb\)](#) traditions. However, as she argues, "their marketing relies almost exclusively on stripper aesthetics and sex appeal." To quote stripper and sex worker rights activist [Matilda Bickers](#), the pole fitness community's claim that their dance form is rooted in ancient Asian practices rather than in a middle class appropriation of strip club allure is "a pseudo-spiritual orientalist face lift", which [Massey](#) argues is "not dissimilar from clumsy western appropriations of yoga."

Modern pole fitness studios exploit the edginess of the strip club roots for marketing and then denounce the already stigmatised sex workers who pioneered the dance form in popular culture. Here are some typical pole fitness studio logos I pulled from the internet:



Much like the yoga studios in gentrified neighbourhoods, pole studios can charge exorbitant prices for classes because they cater to a privileged market. Many dance instructors and students (paying around R700 a month to learn pole dancing in a studio) cling to the distinction that what they do is morally acceptable, but that stripping in a club to pay rent or feed your children is not. They've rationalised that doing it for fun, for fitness, for a sense of empowerment is fine, but doing the same thing with less clothing for an income is a step too far.

Of course, they're doing a sanitised version of the same thing. What these dancers seek to impress on people so defensively is not only that they are nothing like sex workers, they also want to emphasise the idea that they're *not that kind of girl*. In her article, *How to be a Woman*, [Danielle Bowler](#) writes: "How not to be 'that girl' ... is a dangerous and pervasive policing of body and behaviour under what is deemed 'respectable', 'acceptable' and 'good'".

So this phenomenon of yoga and pole dance classes for a privileged slice of gentrified suburban society has a slightly more insidious thread running through it. The moralistic attitudes of many studio pole dancers and other South Africans towards strippers and other sex workers are harmful.

When we portray strippers (all sex workers) as people who are devoid of morals; as sub-par human beings we need to distance ourselves from, we make it [easier for society](#), the media and the justice system to dismiss them when they are [murdered](#), abused by [the police](#), and turned away by health facilities. It allows society to feel ok about not valuing their lives.

We don't criminalise blessers or trophy wives. On the continuum between this kind of lifestyle choice and 'survival' sex work, our notions of what's acceptable or legitimate lean more towards the former. "There are constant reminders that society demands a particular kind of womanhood," writes [Danielle Bowler](#). I've found so much truth in this. We're more comfortable with someone using their body/sexuality/beauty/youth to secure a desired lifestyle or career upward mobility than we are with sex workers using their work to overcome more dire circumstances. While, as a society, we would judge the former as a gold-digger and consider them morally reprehensible, at no level do we believe it should be criminalised even though it's on the same continuum.

Public opinion is influential. It's felt by the people who hold positions of power and thus actively affects the very serious [issue of law reform](#). In the sex work industry specifically, something as un-interrogated as a public distaste for sex workers undermines the cause of decriminalisation. When this becomes an attitude that is widely adopted and accepted by South Africans, we perpetuate an abusive system.

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