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“Calling it a dance is misleading - it’s a sexual act.”

Israeli police shut down the three biggest strip clubs in Tel Aviv. While this marks a new peak moment in the battle against the sex industry, welfare and support organizations aren’t breaking out the champagne just yet. Instead, they’re getting ready for the aftermath, reach out to women who worked at these clubs, and invite them to get support and help. Be it therapy, help in finding a new line of work, or simply a lunch and a place to rest their heads. Yelena Divawain, who left the world of stripping, is being interviewed here without obstructing her face. She explains why the strip clubs must be shut down and tells us about the organizations that changed her life. “It’s important that other girls read this and know that there’s those who wish to help.”

Written by: Noam Barkan

She’s 33 now. A secretary at a law firm. Three and a half years “out of the business.” She spent more than four years at the clubs, on high heels, scantily clad with clothes that had to slightly slide down when she was on a client’s lap. Constantly losing herself and who she was.

“I was 26. My mom, whom I loved so dearly, was diagnosed with cancer,” Yelena tells us. “She was the most stable thing in my life. I had an abusive partner and I felt like my life was ending along with my mother’s. That was the physical, external reason. Inside, psychologically, I learned at a very young age to treat myself as if I was a worthless person. Six months before my mom got sick, a friend told me that she works at the clubs. She told me she makes 15,000 NIS a month (Approx. \$4400.) When my mom got sick and I didn’t have the energy to pull myself together, this became a possibility.”

Nowadays, after a rehabilitation process, she looks back, empowered and sure. This interview takes place a week after the police raided three of Tel Aviv’s most famous clubs, *Gogo Girls*, *Shendo* and *Babydolls*, and shut them down with an administrative order, as part of the effort to shut down all strip clubs in Israel.

This action came about following instructions from now-former Attorney General, Shay Nitzan, who explained to the authorities how they need to deal with crimes adjacent to the prostitution world. The criteria Nitzan defined as the act of prostitution, that have to do with the nature of the sexual act and exchange around it, sometimes included lap dancing. “These clubs had to be shut down,” Yelena declares. She’s being interviewed not just to uncover the reality about the clubs, but also to call upon women who were just left behind when these clubs shut down, to urge them to contact the organizations and programs that can offer them a different life.

Well, almost nine year ago, Yelena called Club *Shendo*. “The owner picked up and referred me to meet with his wife, Tanya. It took me almost a week to get to that meeting. It’s not a easy decision to make. It’s not like deciding to work at a restaurant or a gas station. It has a lot of consequences, and you’re thinking about these consequences in advance. Truly, like a suicidal thought. So I arrived at the club and put down some ground rules. I told her I observe Shabbat and holidays. She said that was fine. I went up to the club, saw the women. At that point in time they seemed to me like strong, beautiful women, who do whatever they want. I thought that here, at the club, I had a certain way of becoming a star. That’s what I thought at those moments. When I came to work Tanya saw me in, she was so nice and went to get me cigarettes. I made 400 NIS that night and I was overjoyed.”

So what made it such an awful experience?

“Where do I begin? There were so many awful things. We had to get high all the time. There’s no way of going through with it if you don’t drink. The owners? Your word means nothing. If they tell you to do something, it’s a sacred thing. Even if a client hurts you, which has happened, they force you to give the money back to the client. A girl gets hurt and she’s being blamed for having done something, and she’s forced to pay back, and we’re left with nothing to do but consoling her.”

“I learned first hand how these things worked.”

Meeting the clients, Yelena tells us, sent her down a dark path. “60% of the customers have hurt me, tried to get me to react. I’d just do my dance, without any other communication, and they started pinching my body, including intimate parts. I looked them in the eyes and said nothing. They pinched harder. It’s not normal. It’s not a sexual release. It crosses lines. It’s sick.”

But you can decide what the lines are, can’t you?

“There was one guy, he gave me money, grabbed me and kissed my stomach. I gave him the money back and said ‘listen, there are many girls here whom you can kiss. I’m not one of them.’ He apologized and gave me the bill again. I sat on him and started dancing. I took my bra off and when my hands were caught behind me, he grabbed my face. I pushed him as hard as I could. Each lap dance is like this crazy choreography. The girls are trying, while dancing, to get out of this confinement, to move the guys’ hands. It’s a sexual act. Granted, there’s no penetration using their genitalia, but sometimes they do use their fingers. They do things like that all the time. Calling it a dance is misleading.”

Strip clubs are quick to declare they’re prostitution free, but they all have private rooms. “When we would take the key for the private room, we’d have to stop by the bar, pay a hundred NIS, and take the key. They’d give us the key with a condom. The moment the client sees I have a key and a condom in my hand, what do you think goes through his mind? It doesn’t matter what I tell the client. I used to think every day that ‘tomorrow is the day I become a prostitute,’ and all the girls would tell me ‘you’re already there.’”

What do you remember from the rooms?

“It happened when I started at *Gogo*. It made *Shendo* look like a dump. I drank a lot, everything seemed new and shiny. I felt more assured, there were two security guards. I took 400 NIS and

I told the client, 'only a dance, I'm not doing anything else.' I took the key and I started dancing. He stood in front of me, then against me, and then he pushed me and placed himself on top of me. I was so freaked out. He shoved a thousand NIS at me. I told him, 'I'm only giving you a dance!' We're alone, it's the second floor, there are no security guards in there. I didn't know what to do. Somehow I managed to push him off. He yelled at me, I gave him his money back, and he turned around and left. It could've ended way worse. I learned first hand how these things worked. You settle on 400 NIS and then they add money and other things happen."

The effort to shut down the strip clubs started back in 2016. The coalition against prostitution, which includes the organizations for support and policy change in regards to prostitution and women trafficking, launched this battle following testimonies from women who escaped the club life. They described incidents of prostitution in the private rooms, applied pressure to drugs and alcohol use, and also the downfall process that starts with the lap dance. "These strip clubs, that operated for years while the authorities turned a blind eye, were, for too many women, the gateway into the world of prostitution," says Nitzan Cahana, a lawyer, and head of the prostitution battle HQ. "This recent development will prevent many other young women from turning into the world of prostitution."

What do you have to say to those who think that shutting down the clubs is an extreme measure?

"The club owners were given many chances by the authorities. In the last six months alone, one of the clubs had their license renewed under many limiting conditions which would've allowed the club to still operate. But the owners would rather make bank on the backs of the women and not abide by the conditions. Which resulted in these women being abused with no paychecks, being lured into prostitution, and there's also a suspicion that that club income was not properly reported. The tax authorities took part in that raid."

What about the women who worked at these clubs? Where would they go now?

"Once the clubs were shut down, we started preparing for them. This past week both the coalition and welfare approached the women in order to inform them about the different rehabilitation options."

Food and a new line of work

There are 11 support organizations in Israel. Three of those are part of the ministry of welfare in Tel Aviv, Be'er Sheva and Haifa, the rest are private organizations. "For years now these organizations accompany the women who come from the prostitution and stripping world, help them rebuild their lives," Cahana says. "These days we're fighting to expand the state budget, but it's important for me to clarify that even now these women can get an incredible treatment that will help them start on a new path."

What does that entail?

It can be a short term support, such as material help and food packages, help dealing with the state when it comes to understanding and acting upon certain rights and income guarantee, emergency sheltering, and more. And it can be a long term support: emotional support, vocational training, rehabilitative hostel." So far, the state has allocated 15 million NIS (over

\$4M) for the rehabilitation of the sex industry survivors, and the ministry of welfare foresees an even bigger sum once a new government is established.

For Yelena, the change had started when she got accepted into the first ever class of "Platforma" theater, a program that provides theater related training to women who suffered from sexual violence. "We met once a week," she recalls. "Before that I was only 'Bianka,' my character at the club. Suddenly, I was me for six whole hours, and I even earned some appraisal. I'd carry these positive feelings of self esteem with me as I arrived at work after class. It became very hard with the clients gradually, they stopped picking me, too. I'd stand there for a whole night and they'd pass by me and not look at me. That change from within had an extreme impact on the outside. It was an eight-months long gradual process. When I left the stripping behind I also quit 'Platforma' and suffered from an existential crisis. I cried on the phone on the message I left welfare. I felt like I was losing my footing. I crumbled, like a final collapse.

According to Yelena, a social worker contacted her, and eventually referred her to *Ofchot et HaYotzrot*. "She said it was an organization to help women who're involved in prostitution," Yelena says. "I reached out to them, but I said I had nothing to do with prostitution. I was very resistant at first, and it was hard for me to grasp that someone in this world can help me. I didn't scare them away, neither did my words. At first I arrived for lunches, conversations, they helped me with National Insurance (Social Security.) Then I was trained to mentor at-risk youth, I started volunteering at ELEM's center in Tel Aviv. At the same time I also took classes at the university - the digital world, and introduction to psychology. It's like climbing out of the abyss. It's a long process, but it's worth it."

What do you wish for other women know about the process?

"That there's a rehabilitation process for everyone, depending on her specific needs. That it creates an environment that allows us to evolve in a healthy manner and that's way more important than money. They also helped me with the bureaucracy so I can get a stipend from the state. Once you strengthen your soul, there's room to talk about the rest, and I received every sort of care I needed. It's important that girls read and know that there's someone who'll help them."