



the Hustle

HOW WOMEN ARE CLAIMING THEIR STAKE IN ONE OF THE MOST STIGMATIZED INDUSTRIES.

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When Nikki Night was on the verge of being evicted, she had never heard of “camming.” She could barely operate her email account, let alone navigate the technical marketing of the online sex age. Recently divorced and unsure of her options, the former freelance makeup artist had no idea she would be tripling her income in just three short months with little more than a cheap webcam.

Night got her fresh start by becoming a cam-girl. Cam-girls are online performers who broadcast live sex shows from the comfort of their own homes. Viewers pay to access the show and can tip the performer at their discretion. In chat rooms, users can shower the cam-girl with compliments or suggest what they would like to see. Still, the cam-girls are in full control of their show and whatever they may choose to perform.

Besides giving Night total financial independence, camming has also inspired a sense of empowerment and a new bodily confidence. Like most women, Night has experienced her share of insecurities. She was painfully aware that her body didn't match those of women in popular media. She engaged in the near-universal female ritual of comparing herself to others and felt let down every time. When she started camming, Night began to see herself through the eyes of her viewers who would fawn over her curves. She began to love her body. “I don't compare my body to other people on the street anymore. I don't have that constant thing in my mind. I just see my body for the beauty it is.”

In Night's eyes, camming has been one of the greatest things to ever happen to her. “I rely on nobody and nothing now... there's an emotional side of things that make you feel a sense of power, like you're in control,” Night says. “The hard work keeps you honest, the viewers keep you happy, and well, the orgasms also help.”

THE “CAM-GIRL COACH”

After years of successful hustling as a cam girl, Night decided she could use her skills in a new way. Her heart has always been rooted in education—she comes from a long line of teachers and she's taught makeup seminars in the past. She now prides herself on being a cam-girl coach, giving young women seeking to join the industry a sense of direction and a leg-up (pun intended).

Night holds a weekly online cam-girl class. The show is in the same format as any other cam show, only instead of performing sex acts, she's giving invaluable advice. She chooses a weekly topic such as increasing tips, then asks her viewers to send her their experiences and questions. Night is passionate about the educational aspects of camming, so much so that she offers her classes completely for free. It's just important to her to help anyone who wants to learn.

If the girls learn anything from Night, it's how to look out for yourself in this industry. She drives home multiple safety points. Don't share the same photos on your cam profile and personal social media accounts. Take location tags off any photos you upload. Never share your personal life. Never meet up with fans in person. She also warns against using Paypal, since it requires your real name and info. If someone pays you on Paypal, they get access to your information. Some of her tips may sound obvious, but it's easy to overlook small details.

“When I first started camming, there was no one. So I just want be everything that I wish that I had,” Night says.

THE ONLINE SEX INDUSTRY

There's a huge amount of money to be made in the online sex world. Camming has grown to be a colossal industry, bringing in nearly \$2 billion annually. By committing to the hustle, women all over the world have been able to pay off student loans, put themselves through school, put a payment down on a house, or even just have spending money. Where a day job can pay very little by the hour, hustlers can

make hundreds of dollars in a single day with little more than a camera phone.

But camming isn't the only method for those seeking to cash in on the online sex industry. Websites like Seeking Arrangements help connect “sugar babies” to “sugar daddies.” Daddies will do anything from showering their babies with lavish gifts to helping to pay their tuition. What they expect in return is a varying spectrum from simple company to sexual favors. It all depends on the terms set between the two parties.

Other women have turned to selling risqué pictures and videos of themselves through platforms like Patreon, a site which allows patrons to set prices and distribute their content to loyal subscribers. Even social media has become an avenue for the online sex industry. Some women charge for access

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to private Snapchats where they might post provocative pictures and videos. Others may also use Findom, a community on Twitter where men pay women to ignore or verbally abuse them. The options are endless.

RISK + REWARD

Bente, a young woman from the Midwest who has recently relocated to Los Angeles, has engaged in many forms of “hustle” over the years. She’s been financially independent since before turning 18, providing herself a sense of control and stability. She’s done it all: private Snapchats, Patreon accounts, nude modeling, even allowing artists to take full-body casts of her. But Bente’s main hustle has been working as a stripper in various Los Angeles clubs.

Bente was homeless when she first came to California. Finding work as a dancer helped to change that. “[Stripping] has honestly saved my life in many situations and that’s empowering...” Bente says. “Knowing

that I can go from no money at all to having a dream LA apartment and a car and anything I want.”

From Bente’s perspective, sex work isn’t at all unusual in Los Angeles—it’s more embraced than in different parts of the country, or at least less stigmatized. But she doesn’t plan on stripping forever. Two months ago, she started using her hustle earnings to put herself through school. She hopes to graduate and work as a massage therapist.

But Bente’s self-made financial stability hasn’t come without a cost. Stripping has taken a huge toll on her mentally, physically, and even spiritually. “It’s hell on your body and it’s hell for you mentally too ... to have people touching you all of the time. It’s not easy work at all.”

At one point, Bente was getting assaulted in some form almost every day. She spent six months working in a club that proved to be dangerous, with men physically assaulting

her, verbally abusing her, or people trying to take advantage of her work without financial restitution. “It can go to extremes in the blink of an eye,” Bente says.

Having faced the potentially violent reality of her work, Bente takes her own measures to feel safe. She has since left that club and is now very perceptive of those around her. She’s weary of those trying to “fill her with a dream—if they’re too nice too quick, then they’re up to no good.” She sets boundaries for herself and exercises her right to say no.

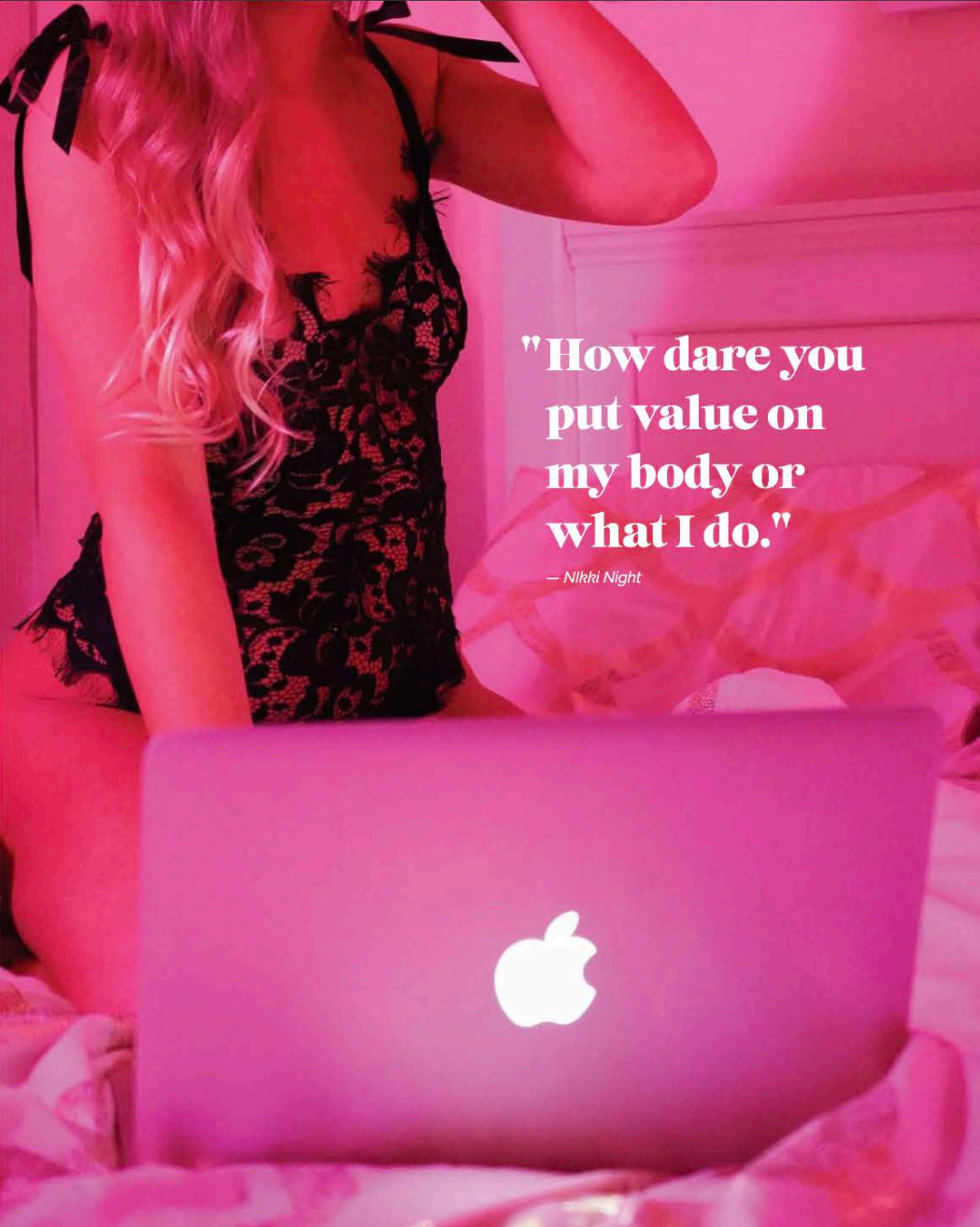
“Before I started dancing, I was a different person, and now I’ve been exposed to darker parts of the world,” Bente says. “Stripping is a great opportunity, but it’s all about how you handle it. If you go in with a strong mentality, you just have to keep that mentality. Know where your boundaries are and never break them, otherwise it will eat you alive.”

Night also admits that working in the sex industry has had adverse effects on



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her personal life, specifically in terms of intimacy. It can be hard to build new relationships; she sees the darker side of people in how they treat her after they find out she cams for a living. People are judgmental and for Night that can be infuriating at times. "How dare you put a value on me or my body or what I do. I love what I do. I don't regret it even a day," Night says.

THE LEGAL STRIFE OF THE SEX INDUSTRY

Katherine Sears is a criminal defense attorney who's passionate about the nitty gritty of the sex industry—that is, the decriminalization of sex work. There's a reason it's so important to her. She used to be a sex worker herself. Before graduating from law school, she worked in a legal brothel in Nevada for years.

Given her background, she knows what she's talking about both legally and personally, and when it comes to the law and sex work, she doesn't like what she sees. "We have no business charging people," Sears says. "It's consensual sex between adults, it's not the state's business what terms someone puts on their consent ...

consensual adult sex is not illegal. There is no reason that we should be threatening people with an aggravated misdemeanor."

Given her passion and understanding, Sears has offered her legal services pro bono to those seeking defense for prostitution cases. Beyond the fact that prostitution is illegal in Iowa, sex workers face other legal hurdles regularly. Sears explained there are many issues in family law and custody battles in which sex workers are threatened with losing their children. What's more, workers' bank accounts are often frozen since they technically earn their money illegally. They have trouble finding and maintaining stable housing. If a landlord thinks they might be doing sex work in their home, the worker may get evicted.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

In many ways, sex is still taboo in mainstream society, so it's no surprise that the sex industry is widely stigmatized. With outside stigma and legal resistance, sex work typically isn't highly regarded. But most sex workers still know their worth.

When it comes to sex work on the internet, women are able to control what they do on camera, for whom, and when

they do it. This agency has allowed girls across the world to make a sufficient living for themselves on their own terms.

In Night's eyes, camming and other hustles aren't something a person gets cornered into doing. It takes guts to tackle and it's a lot more work than most would assume. Most of all, the work can be a positive experience. "It's empowering," Night says. "No one is telling you what to do. It's not shaming you."

Sears agrees that sex workers don't necessarily do this job because they have no other options. "You should always have another choice...if your options are 'I'm going to sell blowjobs or I'm going to work the drive-thru at Taco Bell,' you can choose one of those over the other," Sears says. "Whatever better fits your lifestyle and your preferences."

Even with all of the stigma that surrounds sex work on and offline, it's important to remember these women aren't so different from the rest of us. Night pointed out, "There are so many people who do it because they like it. Is everyone in the best place in their life? No. But can you say that for anyone who works in an office job? No." ■