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THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION  
RESEARCH AND POLICY INSTITUTE

RESEARCH

# Facing Reality

Addressing the role of pornography in the  
pandemic of violence against women and girls



**Ruth Breslin and Dr Monica O'Connor**

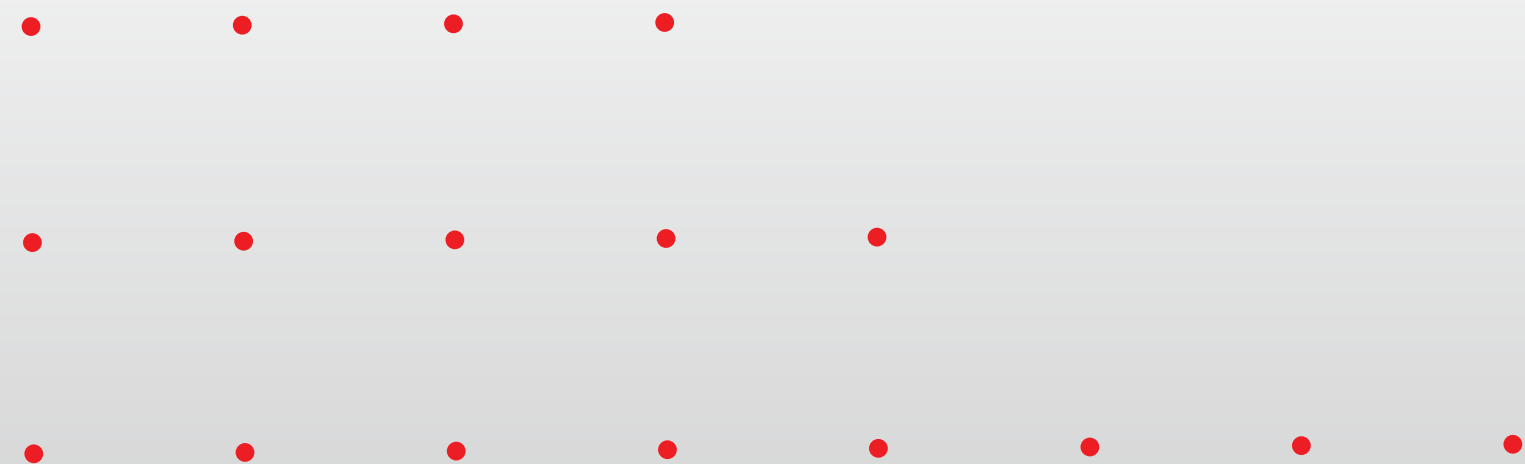
THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION RESEARCH AND POLICY INSTITUTE

STUDY COMMISSIONED BY WOMEN'S AID AND  
FUNDED BY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION IRELAND

**OCTOBER 2024**

Women's  Aid

Community  
Foundation  
Ireland



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# About The SERP Institute

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The Sexual Exploitation Research and Policy Institute is Ireland's only independent research body dedicated to the study of commercial sexual exploitation. Our research influences academic discourse and creates useful knowledge for law and policy makers, practitioners, survivors and activists.

The SERP Institute is a centre of excellence in generating new evidence and informing policy to combat the harms of all forms of commercial sexual exploitation in Ireland and beyond. The team has over 35 years of expertise combined in research, policy and advocacy work on these issues. We monitor and investigate the nature and impact of the sex trade on victims, survivors and wider society, bridging the gap between research and frontline practice to disrupt the myths and expose the truth about the commercial sex trade.

The SERP Institute investigates, with integrity, the ways in which sexism, poverty, racism and individual vulnerabilities are exploited in the pursuit of profit. In doing so, the Institute's work enhances the broader understanding of commercial sexual exploitation and the different manifestations of the sex trade in all its guises including:

- Prostitution
- Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation
- The sexual exploitation of children and young people
- Pornography and other forms of sexual exploitation that take place online
- New and emerging forms of commercial sexual exploitation, occurring both on and offline.

For more information on our work and previous research, please visit [www.serp.ie](http://www.serp.ie)

# Acknowledgements

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We extend a warm thanks to Women’s Aid for having the foresight to commission this study investigating the role of pornography in the perpetration of violence against women and girls. Thanks in particular go to Sarah Benson and her team for their comprehensive feedback during the undertaking of the research, which was vital in informing the wide variety of issues addressed in this study.

We acknowledge too the important role played by the many stakeholders brought together by Women’s Aid, whose helpful insights assisted in shaping and refining the focus of this final report. Thanks also to Christina Sherlock for her input on the design of this document and for her work in preparing the launch.

The need for this study was further driven and informed by the women accessing Women’s Aid’s services, who have shared their experiences of the many harmful impacts of pornography on their lives. We are hopeful that, in suggesting measures to tackle these harms, this study will play its role in preventing them for future generations of women and girls.

We are hugely grateful to all of our Irish and international key informants whom we consulted for this study – Eoghan Cleary, Alex Cooney, Tom Farr, Dr Richard Hogan, Professor Robert Jensen, Gemma Kelly, Dr Madeleine Ní Dhálaigh and Dr Meagan Tyler – your guidance, expertise and insights made a crucial contribution to shaping this final report, in particular the measures identified to address the negative impacts of pornography on individuals, on our culture and on society at large.

Within The SERP Institute we continue to benefit from the invaluable wisdom and leadership of our Board – John Cunningham (as Chair), Professor Patricia Barker, Mia de Faoite, Lucy Maguire and Tina Roche – we are incredibly thankful for all that you do.

There are many others who support The SERP Institute’s work in different and important ways and also deserve our sincere thanks, including Jerry O’Connor, Adam May, Katy Finnegan and the excellent team at Language, and Alex Pigot and his equally brilliant team at Tico.

Last but by no means least, we wish to extend our gratitude to the study funders – Community Foundation Ireland, a philanthropic partner with an equality mission. We are especially grateful to Denise Charlton who has the foresight and vision to see the real value in supporting research that strengthens the evidence base on gender-based violence in Ireland and beyond. We thank the Foundation for all your support in assisting us and all readers of this study to face the reality of the pornography trade’s negative impacts on our lives, and to explore what can be done to mitigate the harms.

**Ruth Breslin & Dr Monica O’Connor**  
**The SERP Institute**  
**October 2024**

# Foreword

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A strategic intervention into the discussion about the harm of pornography, *Facing Reality* must inform policy decisions so we can become a society free from sexual violence.

There is no question that this study, commissioned by Women's Aid and undertaken by the researchers of the Sexual Exploitation Research and Policy Institute, is a disturbing read, but it is an essential one.

The findings cannot be clearer. The commercial sex trade, including both porn and prostitution, is a multibillion-euro business seeking to normalise extreme acts and promote the dehumanisation of women and girls.

Like the drugs trade, the aim is to hook young people, in particular boys and men, exposing them to extreme and often violent sex that puts them at risk of perpetrating criminal sexual acts. The sole intent of these abuses is for pimps, traffickers and thugs to line their pockets.

By ignoring or avoiding this issue we let our young people down by passing on a legacy of gender-based violence to a new generation. Porn is the gateway to that violence.

The Government has committed to 'raise awareness of the harm of pornography and of how the sex trade and pornography fuel misogyny and violence.' Now this research sets out with clarity the harm which is being committed and the danger it represents.

The complexities are identified, as is the need for cross-agency and cross-Government action. Central to that is awareness raising and education.

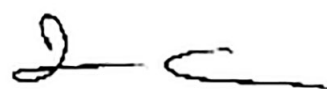
Community Foundation Ireland is proud to have partnered the research and the awareness campaigns which led to the introduction of consent classes across all educational curricula. A similar robust response is needed in tackling porn and ending the danger it represents.

Together with our partners we believe it is time for Ireland to take the next step. To continue the leadership we have seen in outlawing coercive control, making it illegal to buy sex, and the recognition of prostitution as gender-based violence, by now shutting down harmful and exploitative porn for good.

We must work too with other countries in recognition of the fact that, like the drug trade, those who profit from the commercial sex trade operate beyond borders and the laws of any single jurisdiction.

We are proud to partner with the top researchers, advocates and most importantly the survivors who are confronting these harms and have a vision of a safer society, free from the influence of those who profit from threats, violence and exploitation.

As a partner, Community Foundation Ireland fully endorses this research and its recommendations in line with our mission of Equality For All in Thriving Communities.



**Denise Charlton**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Community Foundation Ireland**



# Preface

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As a leading national organisation that has been working in Ireland to stop domestic violence against women and children since 1974, we are certain that pornography is a form of gender-based violence. It is harmful to the development of healthy human sexuality and damages the safe and equal participation of women and girls in society. This conclusion has been arrived at over our fifty years in operation and is echoed by our research on national public attitudes towards pornography. There is widespread concern and agreement that pornography is damaging, but there has been limited meaningful action so far to address the harms.

Women's Aid commissioned this important research report to examine the impacts of pornography and to inform strategies to support efforts to confront this destructive global industry in Ireland.

Pornography has become increasingly more accessible, violent, and degrading. In our direct work we also see the dangerous interplay between pornography and intimate partner violence and abuse.

Women accessing our frontline services report that pornography has provided a blueprint for their partner on how to abuse them sexually, verbally, and physically, with women forced to watch and re-enact pornography. Women also report their intimate images, including images of sexual assaults, being taken and shared by their partners to porn and mainstream websites and on social media, without their consent.

Pornography has created a vicious cycle which impacts negatively on young women, in particular. The proliferation of pornography and resulting 'porn culture' has created the context in which boys and young men feel entitled to ask or demand, and girls and

young women feel they are expected to share nudes or to film intimate videos as a 'normal' part of romantic relationships. Such images may then be shared without consent by their partners/ex-partners or held against them as forms of blackmail and coercion. By sharing these images, intimate partners are in practice creating more pornography for further consumption, as well as to harass, threaten and shame young women. While the impact on survivors can be long-lasting, multi-faceted, and completely devastating, there is no accountability for the commercial platforms which allow, and even encourage, this to happen.

Pornography also has a hugely negative impact on young people and society more generally. It shapes the sexual expectations of children and young people in ways that normalise harmful, coercive, dangerous, and abusive behaviours. It reinforces misogynistic and disrespectful stereotypes and undermines any educational work on consent, on safe, healthy and respectful relationships and towards gender equality.



As well as considering the harms to young people and society in general, we cannot overlook the extremely serious harms that performers are subjected to, and the links with trafficking, prostitution and child sexual abuse in this multi-billion-euro business.

While previous Women's Aid research has shown there is great societal consensus regarding the impacts and harms of pornography in Ireland, not enough has yet been done to even start to counter this damage. We welcome the further insights and measures recommended in this report. We will continue our work to support the creation of a multi-stakeholder coalition for action: bringing together those with shared interest in this work from among civil society, statutory and public bodies, and concerned individuals as a next step to work together to deliver on these recommendations and to strategically tackle this very harmful and hugely profitable and powerful industry.



**Sarah Benson**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Women's Aid**

*“...porn culture is a pervasive presence in the lives and sexual psyches of millions, and billions in fact, of boys, young men and men. Therefore, it’s impossible to understand or effectively work to end men’s violence against women without addressing the deeply misogynist porn that so many boys are exposed to from their earliest encounters with the genre...the porn widely available today, especially that which is targeted at heterosexual men, by far the largest group of consumers, has normalised and sexualised men choking and strangling women during sex, verbally degrading them and spitting in their faces, among countless other acts of callousness and cruelty. It requires wilful naivety to pretend that this has no negative effects on generations of young people’s sexuality or has no connection to the ongoing pandemic of men’s violence against women.”*

Dr Jackson Katz<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Statement given in evidence to the Inquiry into the pornography trade conducted by the UK’s All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation – see: All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023. *Pornography Regulation: The Case for Parliamentary Reform*. London: All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, p. 20.

# Introduction and Context

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The ‘ongoing pandemic of men’s violence against women’, as described by scholar and activist Dr Jackson Katz above, is not abating, despite a much greater contemporary understanding of gender-based violence and concerted efforts to prevent it. The number of brutal physical and sexual assaults and murders of women by men in Ireland remains persistently high. While concerns about the detrimental impacts of pornography in Ireland are not new,<sup>2</sup> experts and commentators have begun to more frequently question what is fuelling the misogyny that leads to such egregious violence. Attention is turning to pornography and the increasingly central place it now holds in the lives of many Irish adults, children and young people.

Women’s Aid commissioned this study to gain a better understanding of the root causes of the violence the women and girls they support are experiencing in their daily lives. It is now widely acknowledged that pornography is creating a conducive context for such violence. Indeed, women contacting Women’s Aid for support have identified their partner’s pornography use as part of the abuse they are enduring, while others have described their experiences of image-based sexual abuse, in which explicit content is shared without their consent by a current or former partner, proliferating online as pornography.

The Irish Government has highlighted the need to ‘raise awareness of the harm of pornography and of how the sex trade and pornography

fuel misogyny and violence against women and undermine gender equality.’<sup>3</sup> The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls has recently identified pornography as part of a system of exploitation and gender-based violence that undermines the safe and equal participation of all women and girls in society.<sup>4</sup> More broadly, there is greater societal consensus regarding the impacts and harms of pornography – research by Women’s Aid based on a nationally representative sample reveals that 63% of adults aged 18+ believe that pornography leads to increased sexual violence in society; 57% believe that pornography increases inequality between men and women; and 74% agree that pornography undermines healthy sexual development for young people.<sup>5</sup>

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2 O’Connor, M., 2006. *The Second National Report of the Irish Observatory on Violence Against Women: Pornography*. Dublin: NWCI; Moane, G., 2004. *Violence in Pornography and Media - Research and Theory: Paper Presented at the Women’s Human Rights Conference of the European Union Presidency, Dublin Castle, 2004*; Moane, G., 2006. *Exposure and Reaction to Pornography Among a Sample of College Students*. University College Dublin: Department of Psychology.

3 See: Government of Ireland, 2022. *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence Implementation Plan Dublin: Government of Ireland*; and Department of Justice, 2024. *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence 2024 Implementation Plan*. Dublin: Department of Justice.

4 See: United Nations, 2024. *Press Release: Special Rapporteur Urges Global Action to Recognise and Combat Prostitution as a System of Violence Against Women and Girls*, 21/06/24 (last accessed 06/10/24); United Nations, Human Rights Council, 2024. *Prostitution and Violence Against Women and Girls – Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, Its Causes and Consequences, Reem Alsalem, A/ HRC/56/48*. Geneva: United Nations.

5 Women’s Aid, 2022a. *It’s Time To Talk About Porn – Irish Attitudes On The Links Between Pornography, Sexual Development, Gender Inequality And Violence Against Women And Girls*. Dublin: Women’s Aid.

While there is no single accepted definition of pornography, pornography has typically been defined as sexually explicit content, images or videos, whose primary purpose is to sexually arouse the consumer.<sup>6</sup> Over the decades, feminist writers and academics have refined and extended this definition, arguing that a key defining feature of pornography is that it subordinates women and girls, and that it does so by conditioning ‘male sexual arousal and orgasm to sexual objectification and sexual violence’ (Itzin, 1992).<sup>7</sup>

While defined in such terms in the late 1980s and early 1990s, long before the explosion of the sex trade online, these elements are truer than ever for the pornography of the 21st century, which, as this study will show, is saturated by the degradation of primarily women and girls for the sexual pleasure of men. This study therefore moves *beyond* this definition of pornography as merely featuring ‘sexually explicit content’ to demonstrate that much of what features in the mainstream pornography of today *in fact constitutes sexual violence* (see Findings Section 1).

Further, it is this sexually violent content that is shaping the sexual behaviour of many pornography consumers, both adults and children in Ireland, to the extent that pornography actively distorts or even breaks the boundary between sex and sexual violence (see Findings Sections 2-3). It does this by serving up content to consumers that is ever-more violent and extreme purely to maximise profit – it cannot be ignored that pornography is a multi-billion-euro global industry with incredible reach and influence (see Findings Section 4).

To confront this reality, it is important to understand that this critique of pornography is not derived from a position that favours the censorship of erotic or sexual material, but rather from the perspective that there is an urgent need to comprehend and address pornography for what it truly is – the ‘sexual violence, torture and degradation’ of real women and girls on film,<sup>8</sup> which for consumers, and children and young people in particular, is acting as a ‘school for sexual violence.’<sup>9</sup> It is in this context that numerous contributors to this study posited that to be genuinely ‘sex-positive’ is to be ‘porn-critical’ – in other words if our goal as a society is to promote positive, healthy, and mutually pleasurable sexual relationships then we must reject the violent, ‘pornified’ version of ‘sex’ that the trade has effectively forced upon us.

Contrary to the silencing of censorship, this study demonstrates the pressing need to have an open and frank conversation about pornography consumption and its wider impacts on Irish society. This is the first step in a series of many actions (outlined in Findings Section 5) that can be taken to arrest the onslaught of pornography in our lives.

6 Children’s Commissioner (England), 2023a. ‘A lot of it is actually just abuse’ – *Young People and Pornography*. London: Children’s Commissioner.

7 Itzin, C., 1992. Introduction: Facts, Fiction and Faction. In Itzin, C., (Ed.), *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 1-24.

8 Abalo Rodríguez I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024. *Impact of Male Pornography Consumption on the Perpetration of Sexual Violence: Analysis from Feminist Theory and Psychology for Training and Awareness Raising* (English translation version). Madrid: Lobby Europeo de Mujeres en España (LEM España), p. 34.

9 See: Chrisafis, A., 2023. ‘French Equality Watchdog Finds 90% of Online Pornography Abuses Women’, *The Guardian* (last accessed 06/10/24) – this article reports on this French study: Haut Conseil à l’Égalité Entre Les Femmes et Les Hommes, 2023. *Pornocriminalité: Mettons Fin à l’Impunité de l’Industrie Pornographique*. Paris: Haut Conseil à l’Égalité Entre Les Femmes et Les Hommes.

# Aims and Methods

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This study aims to explore the nature and impacts of pornography consumption, with particular attention to children and young people, and to make recommendations for strategies and actions to counter any negative impacts.

Commissioned by Women's Aid, the study is intended to provide the evidence base to inform both policy and advocacy measures required to effectively address the role that pornography plays in the perpetration of violence against women and girls. A number of methods were employed to this end, including:

- A review of the literature on pornography, with a particular focus on the nature of pornography, its consumption, its impacts and the consequences of consumption for gender equality, sexuality and gender-based violence
- Consultations with key informants, both domestic and international, to draw on their professional experience and insights on this issue
- Regular feedback sessions during the conduct of the study with Women's Aid as commissioners, and other key stakeholders, to present emerging findings and gather their input, which ultimately assisted in shaping and refining the focus of the final report.

## Literature review

The academic literature on pornography is vast and emerges from a wide range of disciplines. It was beyond the scope of this study to undertake a meta-analysis or a wholly

comprehensive systematic review. Rather, a pragmatic approach was adopted to identifying a series of key texts that best illuminate the nature of pornography, its consumption, its impacts and links with gender-based violence. The authors relied on the following criteria, sources and strategies to collate a corpus of material that formed the basis of this review:

- Studies published in the English language and primarily since the start of the 21st century.
- Studies identified and recommended by this study's key informants based on their own professional expertise on the subject of pornography
- Other recent reviews of the literature on pornography and its links with harmful behaviours,<sup>10</sup> which pointed the authors to key/seminal texts, and which in turn had a 'snowball effect', leading to the identification of further sources of note
- Studies with a particular focus on pornography use by children and young people and its impacts, given the overall purpose of this research
- Studies/data on pornography consumption in Ireland
- Studies/research undertaken to inform legislation/policy development or for broader advocacy purposes, alongside contemporary media reporting and

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<sup>10</sup> For example, one such 'starting point' study included: Upton, J., Hazell, A., Abbott, R., and Pilling, K., (The Behavioural Architects for the UK Government Equalities Office), 2020. *The Relationship Between Pornography Use and Harmful Sexual Attitudes and Behaviours: A Literature Review Prepared by the Behavioural Architects*. UK: Government Equalities Office.

investigative journalism on the issue of pornography – these sources were useful in filling some of the gaps not so well-addressed in the academic literature, particularly on the subject of the pornography trade’s business model (see Section 4 below).

Ultimately, hundreds of studies and sources were reviewed and synthesised by the authors using the above approach. The findings are presented throughout this report.

## Key informant consultations

One-to-one consultations were carried out for the purposes of this study with eight ‘key informants’. These individuals, from a range of different disciplines, were identified on the basis that through their professional work they have had the opportunity to observe and respond to the issue of pornography consumption and its implications, and the majority have written, critiqued and/or commented publicly on these issues, with a number having developed extensive expertise on the topic. Four key informants represented international perspectives from the UK, the USA and Australia:

- Tom Farr, Barrister and Legal Consultant UK, and previously an advocate against sexual exploitation, who has written widely on pornography<sup>11</sup>
- Professor Robert Jensen, emeritus professor in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Texas at Austin USA, who has researched and written extensively over many years on the media, law, ethics and politics including on the theme of sex, sexuality and pornography<sup>12</sup>
- Gemma Kelly, Head of Policy & Public Affairs, CEASE (Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation), UK<sup>13</sup>

- Dr Meagan Tyler, Research Education and Development, La Trobe University, Australia, who has researched and written extensively on the subject of pornography.<sup>14</sup>

Four key informants provided insights from the Irish context as follows:

- Eoghan Cleary, Assistant Principal and Teacher, and co-author of the *My Wellbeing Journey* series of textbooks for the new SPHE<sup>15</sup> curriculum in Irish schools
- Alex Cooney, CEO and Co-Founder of CyberSafeKids
- Dr Richard Hogan, Family Psychotherapist and author
- Dr Madeleine Ní Dhálaigh, General Practitioner with expertise in women’s health.

In these semi-structured consultation sessions key informants were asked to share their professional perspectives on pornography consumption and its impacts, and provide insights, strategies and lessons learned in terms of ‘what works’ to address any of the harms and negative consequences of pornography identified for society at large, and children and young people in particular.

Consultations ranged in length from 47 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes and were conducted either in-person or online via Zoom, depending on the key informant’s location and availability. Each consultation session was recorded with the consent of the informant and professionally transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were then subject to thematic analysis. This process, combined with the insights provided by the literature, identified a series of common themes emerging from the data as a whole, and led the authors to determine when a saturation point had been reached. The findings of this study are broadly arranged according to these themes, with the inputs from the key informants subsumed

11 See for example: Farr, T., 2022. ‘Porn on Trial: The Exploitative Economics of Online Pornography’. *The Critic* (last accessed 06/10/24).

12 See for example: <https://robertwjensen.org/topics/sexuality/> and <https://robertwjensen.org/books/>

13 See: <https://cease.org.uk/about/>

14 See: <https://scholars.latrobe.edu.au/metyler/publications>

15 The Social, Personal and Health Education curricula provided in Irish secondary schools for both Junior and Senior Cycle students.



throughout, along with a number of verbatim quotes included to further illustrate some of their key points.

## Study limitations

It must be borne in mind that this is not a prevalence study on pornography consumption, nor is it research with consumers, although both are certainly warranted, particularly in Ireland where there is a dearth of evidence in these areas (see 5.3 on recommendations for future research). Nor is this study an all-encompassing systematic review of the enormous body of literature on pornography, but rather a pragmatic, solution-focused approach to understanding the key evidence on the nature of pornography, its consumption, its impacts, the links with gender-based violence, and how these can be mitigated. The examination of the literature undertaken is further enhanced and supported by the additional insights and expertise provided by the key informants identified above.

In parts, this study relies quite heavily on evidence from the USA and particularly the UK, as again research on pornography consumption and its impacts on both adults and children and young people is lacking in Ireland. Given that the majority of pornography is made for and consumed by heterosexual males, this was the focus of the analysis. A greater understanding of pornography consumption, motivations and impacts among LGBTQ+ people is needed in Ireland and requires a deeper, more focused investigation.

One of the world's most popular mainstream pornography websites, Pornhub, is a regular focus of the analysis and critique. This is largely because this site has come under particular public scrutiny in recent years, primarily due to a number of journalistic exposés. It should be noted that a small number of other pornography platforms are similarly influential in this space; it is simply the case that less is publicly known and written about them.

## Content warning

This study involves 'facing the reality' regarding the content of pornography, who is consuming it and what impact it is having. As feminist researchers, the authors follow the principle that to truly understand something challenging we must confront, name and describe it for what it really is – hence this study includes descriptions of pornographic video content and titles that are uncensored and not 'sugar-coated'. We therefore warn that some readers may find some of the content of this report disturbing, particularly in its depiction of painful, degrading and violent sex acts involving women and children. That said, it must be borne in mind that while we provide this 'content warning' for adult readers, the actual videos containing such content are accessible online to anyone, including children, in mere seconds, and within a few clicks or taps.



# Findings

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## 1. Understanding what pornography is

### 1.1 The content of pornography

#### Violence against women and girls

Overt violence against women is prolific in mainstream pornography. Pornography has evolved in a matter of decades from an underground, niche trade in the 1960s and '70s to a global industry that is now widely accepted in mainstream society, while delivering increasingly extreme and violent content.

One of this study's key informants, Professor Robert Jensen, describes this evolution:

“The industry's desire to increase profits drove the development of new products, in this case a wider variety of sexual acts in pornographic films. The standard sexual script in pornography...expanded to keep viewers from becoming satiated and drifting away... Where did the industry go from there? As pornographers sought to expand market share and profit, they continued to “innovate.” Routine acts in pornography now include slapping and spitting on women, pulling women's hair, and ejaculating not just on women's bodies (the longstanding “money shot”) but especially on their faces (a “facial”). A number of specifically pornographic sex practices – acts that are typically not part of most people's real-world sex lives but are common in pornography – followed the normalizing of anal sex, including:

- double penetration (two men penetrating a woman vaginally and anally at the same time);
- double vag (two men penetrating a woman vaginally at the same time);
- double anal (two men penetrating a woman anally at the same time);
- gagging (oral penetration of a woman so aggressive that it makes her gag);
- choking<sup>16</sup> (men forcefully grasping a woman's throat during intercourse, sometimes choking the woman); and
- ATM (industry slang for ass-to-mouth, when a man removes his penis from the anus of a woman and, without visible cleaning, inserts his penis into her mouth or the mouth of another woman).<sup>17</sup>

In the ‘infinite scroll’ of options offered in online pornography, England's Children's Commissioner (2023a) similarly notes that: ‘violent themes which would, 20 years ago, have existed on the ‘margins’ – for example, simulated depictions of incest, aggression, exploitation and coercion – are now front and centre of mainstream adult sites.’<sup>18</sup> In her recent content analysis of pornography, Alario (2020) found that the most common practices depicted usually involve causing ‘some kind of displeasure, physical discomfort, or pain to women’, such as hair pulling, slapping the buttocks, vulva, breasts, and face, spitting in the face, mouth, or other parts of the body; grabbing the neck forcibly and for long periods of time; and penetrating the mouths of women

16 This practice is colloquially known as ‘choking’ within the pornography trade and mainstream media; but can be more accurately described as strangulation in that it typically involves the placing of hands, arms, legs or a ligature on or around the neck and applying pressure (whereas choking more accurately refers to something *inside* the throat that is blocking airflow). Strangulation results in restriction of oxygen intake and blood flow to the brain. It is often used as a tactic of control and abuse. It has been argued that terms such as ‘choking’ or ‘breath play’ are used by the pornography trade to obfuscate the reality of ‘strangulation porn’ – see CEASE, 2024. *Profits Before People: How the Pornography Industry is Normalising and Monetising Sexual Violence*. UK: CEASE.

17 Jensen R., 2021. ‘What Do Men Tell Us about Pornography? What Does Pornography Tell Us about Men?’ (last accessed 06/10/24).

18 Children's Commissioner (England), 2023a; *op cit*, p. 13.

until they gag, cry, and regurgitate.<sup>19</sup> Giving evidence to a UK Inquiry on pornography, Professor Gail Dines highlighted what is at the heart of easily accessible contemporary content:

*“The porn we are talking about today is not your father’s Playboy... contemporary porn is violent, abusive, cruel, body-punishing and based on the debasement and degradation of women. It is free and a click away.”<sup>20</sup>*

Indeed, the levels of physical, sexual and psychological violence present in mainstream pornography are confirmed by multiple studies that have analysed content both quantitatively and qualitatively. A content analysis of over 300 scenes from popular pornographic videos found that almost nine in ten scenes (88.2%) contained physical aggression, while 48.7% contained verbal aggression (Bridges *et al*, 2010). Perpetrators of aggression were typically male (committing over 70% of aggressive acts), while the targets of aggression were largely female – 94.4% of aggressive acts in scenes were directed towards women.<sup>21</sup>

Individual scenes were found to contain 11.52 acts of aggression on average. Across the 304 scenes analysed, women were made to visibly gag<sup>22</sup> 756 times, were slapped with an open hand 361 times and choked<sup>23</sup> (strangled) 180 times. In their analysis of what the authors term ‘nonnormative sex acts,’ ATM occurred in 41.1% of scenes and double penetration in 19.1% of scenes. The most common form of verbally aggressive act recorded was name-calling – primarily calling the female targets a ‘bitch’ or a ‘slut.’<sup>24</sup> The authors of this study emphasised that when aggressed against, 95.1% of targets were shown to respond neutrally or

with expressions of pleasure to the aggression they experienced.

While the above study is now quite dated, it is widely considered to be a seminal work, particularly in its methodology and use of a very comprehensive definition of ‘aggression.’ A number of this report’s key informants noted that if a study using the same methodological approach was applied to current, popular pornographic content today, it is likely to reveal even higher levels of aggression, use of ‘nonnormative’ and risky sex acts, and acceptance of or the deriving of pleasure from aggression.

A recent study of over 4000 heterosexual sex scenes accessed on two leading free pornography sites – Pornhub and Xvideos – found that 45% of scenes from Pornhub and 35% of scenes from Xvideos contained at least one act of physical aggression – the five most common of these acts were gagging,<sup>25</sup> choking,<sup>26</sup> spanking, slapping and hair-pulling (Fritz *et al*, 2020).<sup>27</sup> The lower levels of aggression found when compared to Bridges *et al*’s findings may be explained in part by a key difference in sampling – Bridges *et al* sampled from the most popular videos, while Fritz *et al*’s sample was randomly selected from all available videos. Nevertheless, similar findings were made regarding targets of aggression and their responses. Men were the perpetrators of aggression against women in 76% of scenes, while women were the targets of the aggression in 97% of the scenes.

19 Alario, M., 2020, cited in Abalo Rodríguez I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024; *op cit*, p. 38.

20 Statement given in evidence to the Inquiry into the pornography trade conducted by the UK’s All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation – see: All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023. *Pornography Regulation: The Case for Parliamentary Reform*. London: All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, p. 12.

21 Bridges, A.J., Wosnitzer, R., Scharer, E., Sun, C., and Liberman, R., 2010. ‘Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update.’ In *Violence Against Women*. 16(10):1065-85.

22 Defined in the above study as an object or body part, e.g. penis, hand or sex toy, inserted into the mouth, visibly obstructing breathing.

23 Defined in the above study as the placing of hands around the other person’s throat with applied pressure.

24 Bridges *et al*, 2010; *op cit*.

25 Gagging in this study (Fritz *et al*, 2020) was defined as: ‘Any instance in which an object (including the genitals) is inserted into a person’s mouth, such that it appears to cut off their ability to breathe freely and/or causes them to experience a throat spasm.’

26 Choking in this study (Fritz *et al*, 2020) was defined as: ‘To cause another to stop breathing, if only for a moment, by grabbing the throat.’

27 Fritz, N., Malic, V., Paul, B., Zhou, Y., 2020. ‘A Descriptive Analysis of the Types, Targets, and Relative Frequency of Aggression in Mainstream Pornography.’ In *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. 49(8):3041-3053.

Women were found to respond to physically aggressive acts either neutrally or with pleasure in 97.4% physical acts of aggression appearing on Pornhub, and 92.7% of scenes containing aggression on Xvideos.<sup>28</sup>

## Youth

Coy (2016) notes that the commercial sex trade across the globe is a market where ‘youth is eroticised’ and ‘where young women are sexualized as premium commodities’<sup>29</sup> so it follows that ‘teen’ is a hugely popular category in mainstream pornography. Age, as well as sex, is certainly an important factor when it comes to the targets of aggression in mainstream pornography. In a study of popular videos on Pornhub, video titles featuring female teenagers were three times more likely to indicate aggression than titles featuring adult women, and although all female ‘performers’ were more likely to express pleasure following aggression, this association was stronger in videos featuring teenagers.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, teen ‘performers’ were five times more likely than adult ‘performers’ to appear in videos featuring forceful anal penetration (with apparent intent to cause pain), with some titles indicating teenagers being ‘fucked hard’ and ‘destroyed’ (Shor, 2019). Similarly degrading and aggressive titles depicting teens such as ‘Teen Fuck Holes’, ‘Teenage Spermaholics #3’ and ‘Anal Teen Tryouts’ have also been noted in other analyses.<sup>31</sup>

In a more recent analysis specifically focusing on *sexual violence* in mainstream online pornography, the term ‘teen’ (almost always meaning a female teenager) was the most frequently occurring word in the video titles that comprised the study’s entire dataset, and the most frequently occurring word in titles that described sexual violence specifically.<sup>32</sup>

Numerous scholars have also contended that while it is impossible to know for certain whether the ‘teens’ featured in such content are over 18 or not, terms and visual cues such as pigtails, teeth braces, homework and school uniforms, alongside titles such ‘Daddy, I Don’t Want to Go to School!’ are clearly designed to indicate underage status.<sup>33</sup>

## Incest and child sexual abuse

Content depicting incest is increasingly present in mainstream pornography, alongside clear evidence of filmed child sexual abuse hosted by some of the most popular and accessible pornography sites. In the aforementioned study of the video titles found on the landing pages of the three most popular pornography websites in the United Kingdom, the most frequent form of sexual violence in the data was that of sexual activity between family members (Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021). Within this, blood relationships were indicated more often than step relationships, with the majority of titles describing sexual activity between family members referring to members of the immediate family – ‘When Mom’s Mad, Dad Goes To His Daughter’ and ‘Daddy keeps fucking daughter till she likes it’, being just some of the examples of the many thousands of incest-related videos found on the most popular mainstream sites.

In addition to the ‘teenagers’ of unknown age featured in pornography, as described above, there is ample evidence of content clearly featuring the sexual abuse of prepubescent and early adolescent children. Content of this nature (increasingly known as CSAM – child sexual abuse material) has been exposed in high profile ways by campaigns such as ‘Traffickinghub’<sup>34</sup> and via investigative journalism.

28 *Ibid*.

29 Coy, M., 2016. ‘Joining the Dots on Sexual Exploitation of Children and Women: A Way Forward for UK Policy Responses.’ In *Critical Social Policy*, 36(4), pp. 572-591.

30 Shor, E., 2019. ‘Age, Aggression, and Pleasure in Popular Online Pornographic Videos.’ In *Violence Against Women*, 25(8): 1018–1036.

31 Bridges *et al*, 2010; *op cit*.

32 Vera-Gray, F., McGlynn, C., Kureshi, I., and Butterby, K., 2021. ‘Sexual Violence as a Sexual Script in Mainstream Online Pornography.’ In *The British Journal of Criminology*, Volume 61, Issue 5: 1243–1260.

33 See for example: *ibid* and Bridges *et al*, 2010; *op cit*.

34 See for example: <https://traffickinghub.com/>; Mickelwait, L., 2021. ‘The Underage Guessing Game.’ *The Critic* (last accessed 06/10/24); Dawson, B., 2022. ‘Mother Takes Pornhub Parent Company to Court Over ‘Traumatizing’ Rape Videos of Her Teenage Son Uploaded.’ *Business Insider* (last accessed 06/10/24).

In 2019, a UK Sunday Times investigation revealed the presence of child sexual abuse material, including indecent images of children as young as three, videos of voyeurism and secretly filmed content of young girls on Pornhub,<sup>35</sup> some with hundreds of thousands of views.<sup>36</sup> This was followed in 2020 by a New York Times investigation entitled ‘*The Children of Pornhub*’ which led its writer to conclude that Pornhub:

‘is infested with rape videos. It monetizes child rapes, revenge pornography, spy cam videos of women showering, racist and misogynist content, and footage of women being asphyxiated in plastic bags.’<sup>37</sup>

The journalist behind this investigation concluded that it was possible to ‘find hundreds of apparent child sexual abuse videos on Pornhub in 30 minutes’, some offered on playlists with titles including ‘less than 18,’ ‘the best collection of young boys’ and ‘under- - age.’ He also identified videos that were recordings of assaults on unconscious women and girls, describing how ‘The rapists would open the eyelids of the victims and touch their eyeballs to show that they were nonresponsive.’<sup>38</sup>

Given the sheer volume of ‘teen’ content on the mainstream pornography sites, Vera-Gray *et al* argue that it is ‘possible’ that some girls featured are under 18, which technically means the viewer is in possession of child sexual abuse material – a serious criminal offence in most jurisdictions. By positioning teens as legitimate targets for both sex and sexual aggression, Shor (2019) finds that this contributes to the sexualisation of very young women and girls and gives pornography

consumers the idea that such abusive practices are ‘not only acceptable, but in fact may also be normative and desirable.’<sup>39</sup>

## Image-based sexual abuse

Content filmed and/or shared without consent is an increasingly common feature of mainstream pornography. Almost 3000 videos were detected over a six-month period whose titles indicated image-based sexual abuse – described as ‘the non-consensual creation and/or distribution of sexual images including material commonly known as ‘revenge porn’ and ‘upskirting,’ as well as voyeurism including hidden cameras and ‘spy cams.’ (Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021). While the authors note that it cannot be claimed that all such content was filmed or distributed without consent, the predominant focus of content was on voyeurism – the nonconsensual creation of content using ‘hidden’ or ‘spy’ cameras.<sup>40</sup> The aforementioned Sunday Times investigation in turn found videos of schoolgirls that were secretly filmed, as well as those of men performing sex acts in front of teenagers on public transport.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to secret recordings, is the filming and subsequent sharing on mainstream sites of acts which themselves were not consented to – including rape. Many cases have been documented of women and girls being raped or sexually assaulted and then subsequently discovering that recordings of them being violated have been posted online and hosted on mainstream pornography sites, often attracting hundreds of thousands of views, and further compounding the extreme trauma they have experienced.<sup>42</sup>

35 As of July 2024, Pornhub was the 16th most visited website in the world. It is probably the most well-known of the mainstream pornography ‘tube sites’ amongst the general public and is highlighted throughout this study as one of the clearest exemplars of how the mainstream pornography trade’s business model operates. See: <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/> (last accessed 31/07/24).

36 Das, S., 2019. ‘Unilever and Heinz Pay for Ads on Porn Site That Hosts Child Sex Abuse.’ *The Sunday Times* (last accessed 06/10/24).

37 Kristof, N., 2020. ‘*The Children of Pornhub*.’ *New York Times* (last accessed 06/10/24).

38 *Ibid.*

39 Shor, 2019; *op cit*, p. 1032.

40 This is typically covertly filmed material (sometimes known colloquially as ‘spy-cam porn’) showing footage from cameras hidden in women’s bedrooms, toilets, locker rooms, gynaecology wards, etc. – see CEASE, 2021. *Expose Big Porn: Uncovering the Online Commercial Pornography Industry and the Urgent Need for Regulation*. UK: CEASE.

41 Das, S., 2019; *op cit*.

42 See for example Rose Kalemba’s case: Mohan, M., 2020. ‘I was raped at 14, and the video ended up on a porn site.’ *BBC Online* (last accessed 06/10/24); and <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/432/ETHI/Brief/BR11156366/br-external/KalembaRose-e.pdf> (last accessed 06/10/24); Kristof, N., 2020; *op cit*; Alario, M., 2021. *Sexual Politics of Pornography. Sex, Inequality, Violence*. Madrid: Cátedra, cited in Abalo Rodríguez I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024; *op cit*.



## Pimping and sex trafficking

Just like the ‘in-person’ sex trade, there is ample evidence globally of the trafficking and pimping of women and girls for the purpose of pornography production. In 2021, a large majority of OSCE participating States (28 out of 41 surveyed) reported cases involving the production of pornography using victims of trafficking.<sup>43</sup>

In 2021, Pornhub’s parent company Mindgeek (recently rebranded as Aylo), settled a California lawsuit brought by 50 women who were victims of a sex trafficking operation run by ‘Girls Do Porn’. As a pornography production company with a popular channel on Pornhub, Girls Do Porn had deceived and coerced the women, filming them in explicit scenes on the promise that these would only be distributed via DVD in a far-off market. The women were given alcohol and pressured into signing fraudulent consent forms.<sup>44</sup> Instead of the promised DVD, the footage was uploaded to Pornhub and shared widely, which led the victims to take a case against Mindgeek for hosting videos of the abuse and exploitation they had endured.<sup>45</sup> The aforementioned New York Times investigation reveals the extent to which ‘online is almost always forever’ – even after the owners and key employees of Girls Do Porn were prosecuted for sex trafficking, videos of its victims continued to resurface on Pornhub.<sup>46</sup>

In France, investigations of the owners and managers of the ‘French Bukkake’ pornography website revealed ‘an organized criminal system of rape, pimping, and trafficking.’<sup>47</sup> Subscribers to this site were invited to participate in gang rapes of women who had been groomed

and recruited by the website ‘managers’ for this purpose. One site representative used social media networks to identify and target vulnerable young women in difficult economic circumstances.<sup>48</sup> Using a fake profile, he posed as a friendly woman online to groom the victims, persuading them to try ‘luxury escorting’, using tactics straight from the playbook of those who pimp and traffic women into prostitution. The young women were then offered to multiple, hooded sex buyers at once ‘on a pallet like a piece of meat’, the rapes were filmed and posted online, and despite legal action, remain available to date on both subscriber and free pornography sites.<sup>49</sup> Reporting on the case, media commentators observed that pornography is at its heart a ‘low-cost industry that crushes its raw material: young women.’<sup>50</sup>

## ‘Permitted’ content

Scholars have noted that there is a ‘large gulf’ between what the companies running mainstream pornography platforms *say* they prohibit according to their own sites’ terms and conditions, and the content that is actually available on these sites (Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021). The sites’ terms typically suggest a near blanket ban on material depicting criminal or abusive behaviours, including incest, sexual violence, non-consensual recording (real or simulated) and invasions of privacy, and yet the sites are clearly awash with such material, essentially making a mockery of their own terms and conditions.

Similarly, in their recent investigation of the pornography trade, CEASE (2021) also concluded that mainstream platforms are wholly failing to enforce their own terms of

43 OSCE, 2021. *OSCE Survey Report 2021 of Efforts to Implement OSCE Commitments and Recommended Actions to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings*. Vienna: OSCE.

44 Farley, M., Bergkvist, E., Asbogard, M., Pethrus, J., Lannergren, M., Fein, L., and Jerari, NB., 2023. *Pornography Production Harm in Sweden: Filmed Prostitution is Inseparable from Non-Filmed Prostitution*. Stockholm: PRE.

45 Fight the New Drug, (undated). ‘50 “GirlsDoPorn” Trafficking Survivors Settle Lawsuit Against Pornhub’s Parent Company.’ *Fight the New Drug* (last accessed 06/10/24).

46 Kristof, N., 2020; *op cit*.

47 Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*, p. 67.

48 Similar tactics are used by exploiters around the world to groom and coerce women for the purpose of prostitution, including in the Irish sex trade – see O’Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020. *Shifting the Burden of Criminality: An Analysis of the Irish Sex Trade in the Context of Prostitution Law Reform*. Dublin: SERP.

49 Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*, p. 68.

50 *Le Monde*, 2021, cited in Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*, p. 68.

service consistently and transparently: ‘There is a blatant discrepancy between what porn platforms allow in theory (i.e. according to their terms of service) and what they allow in practice. For example, whilst certain terms are prohibited (e.g. “rape”, “incest”), other similar or even synonymous terms are allowed (e.g. “violation”, “family”).’<sup>51</sup>

A regularly updated online catalogue of ‘what the sites allow’ provides greater insight into the content and nature of contemporary pornography.<sup>52</sup> In addition, as recent research on pornography has demonstrated, a lot can be gleaned from the videos’ titles alone – Table 1 below sets out the findings from an analysis by CEASE of ‘banned’ versus ‘permitted’ search terms on Pornhub, and examples of video titles that can be found under the themes analysed, including how some of the ‘acceptable’ terms are used.

**Table 1: Banned and permitted search terms on Pornhub, via CEASE’s analysis \*\***

Prohibited depictions & banned search tags	Search tags (permitted)	Example titles of hosted videos
<b>Underage sexual activity</b>		
Banned terms: children, underage, child young	babysitter, classroom teacher, young, virgin, little, tiny, exxxtrasmall, barely legal	Tiny Babysitter Does What She Must TO Keep Her Job My Teen Student Lets me f*** Her for a Better Grade F***ing my Cute Step Daughter While She Studies for a Test Cute schoolgirl gets f***ed by her english teacher
<b>Non-consensual activity</b>		
Banned terms: Rape, assault	‘used like meat’, violation, fake taxi, crying, stop, debt, sex for rent	Young chubby toilet slave gets pissed on and fucked with her head in toilet She cries in pain as I hold her down (at 5:40) & make her take creampie in rough doggy style Stepdaughter got stuck- daddy uses her helplessness to f*k her like a doll Lucky guy can use redhead as a whore because she has debts
<b>‘Revenge porn’</b>		
Banned terms: Revenge porn, spy cam	real hidden camera, spy, voyeur changing room, hiding	Freaky ob-gyn doctor records his mature female patient on hidden camera HIDDEN CAMERA IN THE WOMEN’S FITTING ROOM College freshman fucked from behind Onlyfans leak... FCK News- Leaked Footage Of Doctor Fucking His Blonde Patient

51 CEASE, 2021; *op cit.* p. 18.

52 See Site Restrictions: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1vwKN-yuOJDILiOa8CyCVA8BMpXg7knCZxS8YgFE98Y/edit?gid=0#gid=0> (last accessed 28/07/24) – this catalogue was developed and is regularly updated by pornography performer ‘Sophie Ladder’.

Prohibited depictions & banned search tags	Search tags (permitted)	Example titles of hosted videos
<b>Violence</b>		
Banned terms: Hurt, kill	sexuallybroken, choking slapping, extreme choking, hard flogging, pain, destruction, sex slave rough gangbang	Dazed 18 year old fuck-meat choked and degraded by 42 year old cock Slave Tied Up in Filthy Mattress Stupid slut gets beat and degraded in hotel room Linet bound gagged stripped whipped vibed machine-fucked Oriental slave girl tortured
<b>Incest</b>		
Banned terms: Incest	Family, Niece and uncle, Daddy, daddy's little princess/ daddy's little whore, Grandpa and granddaughter	IT HURTS DADDY PLEASE STOP!- BBW SPANISH TEEN GETS HARD ANAL CREAMPIE PURE TABOO Sleazy Step-Uncle Deceives Niece To Get Her Alone Daddy Fucks Me Hard Before School teen pussy shared at family orgy tight daughter ass destroyed by stepdad
<b>Racial slurs</b>		
-	black maid, ebony slave girl	Black slavegirl tied and fucked good House Bitch Enjoyed by Her White Masters

\*\* The contents of Table 1 are reproduced with kind permission from a table developed by CEASE UK based on their analysis of the inconsistencies between Pornhub's prohibitions and the search tags and videos it allows on its site. CEASE notes that this table was created *after* Pornhub removed the majority of its content in 2020 and stated its renewed commitment to removing videos that violate its terms of service.<sup>53</sup>

Failures to uphold their own terms highlight the pornography industry's unwillingness to self-regulate. At the same time, Vera-Gray *et al* (2021) argue that site users are likely to have a 'realistic expectation' that none of the material they can access on the mainstream sites depicts 'criminal sexual acts', given the prohibitions set by the sites themselves. Yet the authors conclude that the mainstream sites are indeed hosting material that is 'unlawful to distribute or download' and that consumers therefore need to understand that such sites 'do not protect them from potentially committing criminal offences.'<sup>54</sup>

It is, however, very important to note in this context that the distinction between 'legal' and 'illegal' content on mainstream pornography websites is almost impossible to delineate, and it is very likely that a broad expanse of grey area exists between the two. CEASE elaborate on this in their analysis:

'Most video uploads featuring trafficked and exploited individuals are camouflaged in a vast ocean of similar-looking content. Victims of abuse rarely turn to the camera and announce that they are being abused, and even videos where individuals register distress blend in with the plethora of rape and abuse-themed porn that has become mainstream.'<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> CEASE, 2021; *op cit.* p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021; *op cit.* p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> CEASE, 2021; *op cit.* p. 17.



In other words, it is simply not possible for any consumer or even moderator of pornography (whether human or bot) to know for certain whether the ‘teen’ videos they are viewing contain someone under or over 18, or whether the acts they are viewing have indeed been fully consented to or not. Furthermore, even if participants have consented, this consent is likely to be ‘constrained’ or compromised by the many often complex factors<sup>56</sup> that have led them to become involved in pornography production in the first instance (see 1.3 below). With reference to mainstream pornography, the terms ‘legal / illegal content’ and ‘consensual / non-consensual content’ should therefore be used with great caution. Similarly, it is becoming increasingly challenging to define or warn against the consumption of ‘extreme’ pornography, when so much of what was once considered ‘extreme’ in this context is now entirely mainstream and even ‘standard’.

## 1.2 Pornography is real

Advice sometimes offered to parents in mitigating the harms of pornography consumption is to tell their children that pornography is ‘not real’. What is usually meant by this is that pornography does not provide a realistic version of sex and/or bodily aesthetics, or that what is being viewed is merely ‘role play’, performed by actors playing a part.

But the fact is that pornography is experienced as very real by those who are filmed for its purposes, as Alario asserts based on her recent content analysis: ‘Nothing we see in pornography is fiction: it is all real, happening to real women.’ The writer Adrian Nathan West also starkly describes this reality:

‘we are accustomed to dismissing the savagery of pornography by saying, it is only a movie, they are just actors. But no one pretends to cover a woman’s face in semen, or choke her, or piss in her mouth... She did not pretend to gasp or burst into sobs when she awoke.’<sup>57</sup>

This is not ‘fantasy’ but the reality for the women filmed for pornography. Even women ‘acting’ or ‘role playing’ such acts can nevertheless experience them as painful or degrading. Furthermore, the impact on the consumer of consuming this violent pornography is likely to be broadly the same (see Section 3), regardless of whether what they viewed was truly ‘role play’ or otherwise.

The levels of violence in mainstream pornography mean that even for those who have consented to be filmed for this purpose, their ‘consent’ is unlikely to make the open-handed slap hurt any less, or make being gagged with a penis to induce vomiting feel any less disgusting, or make being strangled to the point of light-headedness feel any less frightening. Just as for women in prostitution, acquiescence to these unwanted, degrading and harmful sexual acts should not be equated with meaningful sexual consent.<sup>58</sup> In this context one must question whether consenting to experience such harms in the production of pornography in fact represents what is understood as sexual consent in its truest form – a freely-given, voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity and have your choices respected, free from pressure, coercion, force or the threat of force.<sup>59</sup>

The notion of pornography as ‘not real’ also serves the purposes of the pornography trade itself, given that it constantly attempts to frame the extreme sexual violence depicted on its platforms as mere ‘role play’. Pornhub,

56 O’Connor, M., 2017. ‘Choice, Agency, Consent and Coercion: Complex Issues in the Lives of Prostituted and Trafficked Women’. In *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 62, p. 8-16.

57 West, AN., 2016. *The Aesthetics of Degradation*. UK: Repeater.

58 For a further exploration of these issues in the context of the commercial sex trade see: Döring, M., 2022. *Any Girl*. Dublin: Hachette Books; Moran, R., 2013. *Paid For: My Journey Through Prostitution*. Dublin: Gill Books; Farley, M., and Moran, R., 2019. ‘Consent, Coercion, and Culpability: Is Prostitution Stigmatized Work or an Exploitive and Violent Practice Rooted in Sex, Race, and Class Inequality?’ In *Arch Sex Behav*. 48(7):1947-1953; MacKinnon, C., 2016. ‘Rape Redefined’. In *Harvard Law & Policy Review*, 10, 431-77; Bacik, I., 2021. ‘#MeToo, Consent and Prostitution – The Irish Law Reform Experience’. In *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 86, 102457, p.1-9; O’Connor, M., 2017; *op cit*.

59 See: Gov.ie, 2019. *Consent* (last accessed 06/10/24); see also: <https://www.we-consent.ie/> (last accessed 06/10/24).

for example, concedes in its ‘Violent Content Policy’ that while some may interpret content on its site labelled ‘Hardcore’ or ‘Rough sex’ as ‘dehumanising’, it claims that these terms are ‘entirely subjective.’<sup>60</sup>

In this context, it is also important to note that the vast majority of contemporary pornography is not commercially produced. One key informant consulted for this study, Gemma Kelly, Head of Policy & Public Affairs with CEASE UK, provided estimates of an 80/20 split – with up to 80% of pornography now ‘user-generated’, rather than filmed and produced in a commercial studio. She noted that this 80% essentially represents the ‘Wild West’ of pornography – explicit content can now be filmed, and quickly and easily shared by any member of the public, anywhere in the world – all that is required is a smartphone or similar device and an internet connection. It is in this user-generated, almost entirely unregulated world, that much of the most harmful content on pornography platforms – CSAM, filmed rape and image-based sexual abuse – is permitted to flourish.<sup>61</sup>

However, this is not to suggest that more commercially-produced pornography is harm-free – numerous studies have documented the harms experienced by those filmed for pornography during the production process, as the next subsection outlines.

### 1.3 Pornography as filmed prostitution

Pornography is widely recognised as a particularly lucrative sector of the global commercial sex trade<sup>62</sup> in which the bodies of primarily women and girls are monetised for profit, just as in prostitution. With the growth of ‘camming’ and online platforms such as

OnlyFans, pornography is also increasingly being understood as ‘filmed prostitution’<sup>63</sup> – buyers/subscribers/‘fans’ pay to gain sexual access to the bodies of women and girls in the virtual world just as they do in the real world. Indeed, OnlyFans is one of the fastest growing pornography providers in the world, facilitating filmed prostitution. It is a place where ‘fans’ pay a monthly subscription to access ‘exclusive’ content from those they follow in a range of areas of interest. However, the bulk of content on OnlyFans is sexually explicit, created primarily by young women for consumption by their primarily male ‘fans’. OnlyFans itself takes a 20% cut of the subscription fees paid by ‘fans’ to so-called ‘content creators.’<sup>64</sup> And just as in prostitution – the same power imbalance between the seller and the consumer typically applies in pornography – consumers use their disposable income to gain online sexual access to the bodies of often vulnerable young women and girls who do not enjoy the same power and economic status in society as they do.<sup>65</sup> Even when pornography is consumed free at the point of access, there are always third parties who financially benefit from filmed prostitution – such as the channel owners and platform hosts who reap the rewards of advertising revenue.

A recent study provides a rare and valuable insight into the experiences of those filmed for the purpose of pornography, drawing on 104 interviews with individuals who were involved in pornography production, filmed and unfiled prostitution (Farley *et al*, 2023). The sample included those who featured in pornography produced by third parties and those who had created pornographic content themselves. This study demonstrates that pornography cannot be easily distinguished

60 Pornhub’s Violent Content Policy – see: <https://help.pornhub.com/hc/en-us/articles/4419863430291-Violent-Content-Policy> (last accessed 06/10/24).

61 CEASE, 2021; *op cit*.

62 *Ibid*.

63 United Nations, Human Rights Council, 2024; *op cit*, p. 2; Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*, p. 11.

64 For a further analysis of how OnlyFans operates as part of the global commercial sex trade see: Breslin, R., 2022. *OnlyFans is Surviving and Thriving – But Why Celebrate?*

65 See for example: Yonkova, N., and Keegan, E., 2014. *Tackling Demand for Sexual Services of Trafficked Women and Girls*. Dublin: Immigrant Council of Ireland; Cantillon, S. and O’Connor, M., 2021. ‘Gender, Equality and the Sex Trade.’ In *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 89.102532.

from prostitution.<sup>66</sup> For those with lived experience of both, there was no clear differentiation – pornography was perceived as prostitution with a camera present, as one survivor explained:

*“You get money for having sex, it’s as simple as that. The only difference is that one is documented and the other is not.”*<sup>67</sup>

Based on their study of women and men whose prostitution was photographed, filmed or livestreamed, Farley *et al* conclude that:

‘pornography is fully integrated into and usually indistinguishable from other arms of the multinational sex trade. [Those] in the sex trade move from online locations to physical locations to webcam sessions and then to wherever the sex buyers are located and wherever the pimps send them...’<sup>68</sup>

Just like women and girls with experience of in-person prostitution,<sup>69</sup> those who have also been filmed for pornography have faced many adversities in their early lives which rendered them vulnerable to being drawn or coerced into the commercial sex trade, as numerous survivors have highlighted.<sup>70</sup> These include physical and sexual abuse in childhood, experience of State care, and experience of living in poverty.<sup>71</sup> Another commonality is the experience of being sexually exploited as children – with some first drawn into prostitution and pornography production before they have reached the age of 18.<sup>72</sup> Thirty-seven percent of those in Farley *et al*’s

sample had been filmed while under 18 being sexually violated by adults, in 23% of cases they were 15 or under when this occurred.<sup>73</sup>

Many of the documented harms are also the same – women in prostitution and pornography experience serious levels of physical, psychological and sexual violence at the hands of a host of perpetrators including sex buyers/consumers, pimps and traffickers. In Farley *et al*’s sample, 84% had been raped, the majority on multiple occasions, with the perpetrators variously identified as sex buyers, male partners, pimps, pornography fans or followers, and pornography producers, actors, and directors. Fifty-five percent were physically beaten during filming. Over half were tricked or coerced by sex buyers or pornography platforms into creating and sending pornographic content and then not getting paid as promised. Many also described being photographed or filmed without their consent, and 44% of the sample disclosed that a pimp or trafficker was involved in the production of their pornography, profiting as a result.<sup>74</sup>

The detrimental physical, sexual and mental health impacts of prostitution on women are well documented,<sup>75</sup> including in the Irish context.<sup>76</sup> Very many of these same impacts are observed in those filmed in pornography. Interviewees in Farley *et al*’s study had suffered:

- Serious physical injuries, with 77% reporting head injuries, while over half had been strangled

66 Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*.

67 *Ibid*, p. 7.

68 *Ibid*, p. 12.

69 Breslin, R., and Canning, M., 2023. *Pathways to Exit: A Study of Women’s Journeys Out of Prostitution and the Response to Their Complex Support Needs*. Dublin: SERP.

70 See for example the testimony of survivor Alia Dewees: <https://www.appg-cse.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Alia-Dewees.mp4> (last accessed 07/10/24).

71 Breslin, R., and Canning, M., 2023; *op cit*; Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*.

72 Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O’Connor, M., 2021. *Confronting the Harm: Documenting the Prostitution Experiences and Impacts on Health and Wellbeing of Women Accessing the Health Service Executive Women’s Health Service*. Dublin: SERP; Breslin and Canning, 2023; *op cit*; Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*; Donevan, M., 2021. “In This Industry, You’re No Longer Human”: An Exploratory Study of Women’s Experiences in Pornography Production in Sweden.’ In *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 6: Iss. 3.

73 Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*.

74 *Ibid*.

75 Farley, M., Cotton, A., Lynne, J., Zumbeck, S., Spiwak, F., Reyes, M., Alvarez, D., and Sezgin, U., 2003. ‘Prostitution and Trafficking in Nine Countries: An Update on Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.’ In *Journal of Trauma Practice*, 2: 3/4, (pp.33-74); Farley, M., Banks, M., Ackerman, R., and Golding, J., 2018. ‘Screening for Traumatic Brain Injury in Prostituted Women.’ In *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. 3: 2, Article 5; Zimmerman, C., Hossain, M., Yun K., Roche B., Morison L., and Watts, C., 2006. *Stolen Smiles: Report on the Physical and Psychological Health Consequences of Women and Adolescents Trafficked in Europe*. London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

76 Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O’Connor, M., 2021; *op cit*.

- Repeated exposure to sexually transmitted infections – 27% of interviewees had been prevented from using a condom during pornography production
- Mental health impacts so serious they led to suicide attempts in 65% of the sample, and other forms of self-harm
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – 81% of interviewees met the criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD (versus 6% in the general population), and two-thirds had severe or very severe PTSD symptoms, accompanied in many cases by dissociation arising from the extreme trauma they had experienced in the making of pornography.

Sexual health risks to which those involved in pornography production are particularly prone include HIV, rectal and throat gonorrhoea, tearing of the throat, vagina, and anus and chlamydia of the eye.<sup>77</sup> These specific health risks appear to be closely related to the most prevalent acts that are now the mainstay of mainstream pornography, as highlighted above, including condomless sex acts, anal sex, women being ‘pounded’ in all orifices, women being made to gag by a penis and ‘facials’.

Also common to those in both in-person and filmed prostitution is the erosion of the boundaries they originally set for themselves. This is the case even when pornographic content is self-generated – women describe constant pressure and manipulation from subscribers/‘fans’ to perform increasingly explicit or harmful acts they are not comfortable with.<sup>78</sup> This is often accompanied by threats to ‘dox’<sup>79</sup> the woman or cancel their subscription if she refuses to comply with their demands. In pornography production involving third parties, 71% of Farley *et al*’s

interviewees reported that they had been coerced to perform sex acts they did not want to perform. Coercion tactics used included verbal abuse, being made to feel stupid, threatened with less or no money, threatened with violence, and manipulation with alcohol and/or drugs.<sup>80</sup>

In the vast majority of instances, whether filmed or not, prostitution is dominated by a power imbalance between the buyer and the seller, as described above, which undermines meaningful sexual consent. Consent is not ‘freely-given’ by the seller – rather she has been coerced or she has acquiesced to granting the buyer unwanted sexual access to her body in exchange for the money or other items of value she badly needs. Indeed, women involved in in-person prostitution in Ireland are clear that the sex acts they engage in in the context of prostitution are both undesired and unwanted, they only engage in them because they are forced to do so by a pimp or a trafficker and/or because they are in desperate financial need.<sup>81</sup> The trauma of regularly enduring unwanted and often intrusive and violating sex acts without true consent during pornography production is echoed throughout Farley *et al*’s research and succinctly described by this interviewee:

*“...it is about one’s body and that it is used in an inhuman way. That someone else decides what you should do with your body. It feels like a power imbalance, because they have the money, they have the power. They know I will do what it takes to get that money. At the same time, it’s disgusting because those guys know I would never have been here if they hadn’t given me money. They know I don’t really want to be here.”<sup>82</sup>*

77 Dines, G., 2022. ‘Porn is an Un-Recognised Link in the Harm Chain of the Commercial Sex Industry’. *Alliance Magazine* (last accessed 07/10/24).

78 Farley, M., 2020. ‘Prostitution, the Sex Trade, and the COVID-19 Pandemic’. In *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture*: Vol 19, No. 1; Breslin, R., 2020. *Exploitation ‘as usual’: Emerging Evidence on the Impact of Covid-19 on Ireland’s Sex Trade*. Dublin: SERP; Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*; Donevan, M., 2021; *op cit*; Breslin, R., 2022; *op cit*.

79 Doxing (also ‘doxxing’) is the practice of publishing private or identifying information about a person on the internet, typically with malicious intent. The victim’s family, friends and employers are often targeted with this information, but as the information is posted online the person is also publicly exposed. In this particular context, the threat usually relates to exposure of the person’s involvement in prostitution and/or pornography production, including non-consensual sharing of explicit content in which they feature.

80 Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*.

81 Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O’Connor, M., 2021; *op cit*.

82 Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*, p. 47-48.



Based on their extensive findings of the very high levels of physical and sexual violence ingrained in pornography production, the extent of manipulation, coercion and absence of consent of those who are filmed for its purposes, and the severe harms that ensue as a result, Farley *et al* conclude that the physical, sexual and psychological treatment of women in pornography constitutes torture, as defined by international legal conventions:<sup>83</sup>

‘Women in pornography are often unrecognized torture survivors who have been coerced into participating in the filming of violent sex acts in real time. Specific acts commonly perpetrated against women in prostitution and filmed as pornography are the same as the acts defining what torture is: verbal sexual harassment, unwanted sex acts, forced nudity, rape, sexual mocking, physical sexual harassment such as groping, and not permitting basic hygiene... Because women in pornography are coerced into smiling, their abuse is dismissed because they are seen (incorrectly) as having freely consented to torture...’<sup>84</sup>

It is therefore unsurprising that the desire to exit – to leave the commercial sex trade – is strong among the majority of those engaged in prostitution, whether filmed or not. It is increasingly understood that those who have been sexually exploited need specialist exiting supports that take account of the deep levels of trauma they have experienced in the sex trade.<sup>85</sup> This leads Farley *et al* to conclude that:

‘Since so many of those who are involved in the production of pornography have had their experiences of torture filmed... we think that all services for people in the sex trade should be informed by torture rehabilitation best practices. Physical health

care of pornography survivors requires expertise in treating sexual torture victims. Their mental health care requires far more training than what is today casually named “trauma-informed care.”<sup>86</sup>

The majority of participants in Donevan’s study (2021) also wanted to exit pornography production, but a significant barrier to doing so was the ongoing distress and ‘monumental burden’ of having one’s commercial sexualised exploitation filmed, spread outside of one’s control, and for the images and videos to remain online indefinitely.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the very nature of pornography production and distribution has led numerous scholars to argue that it is a particularly harmful form of prostitution.

One of this study’s key informants, Dr Meagan Tyler, has explored in her research how pornography production, as a form of prostitution, can cause ‘specific and additional’ harms for women; harms that are particularly ‘pernicious.’<sup>88</sup> While nonfilmed prostitution more typically involves one sex buyer for an allotted period of time, pornography production often involves having to submit to a wider variety of the more physically extreme sex acts that are now expected in the ‘gonzo’ genre (see 1.5), including double penetration by more than one man at a time, and for long periods of filming that may stretch over many hours or more. Furthermore, the continuing existence of the images and videos made in pornography can cause huge distress to the women involved who fear being exposed publicly and to family, friends and employers now or in later life, but also because multiple permanent records<sup>89</sup> now exist of times when they felt particularly vulnerable or in pain, degraded or violated. It is therefore not unexpected that persons involved in pornography production had significantly

83 Including the Istanbul Protocol, see: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1999. *Istanbul Protocol: Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*. New York & Geneva 2004: United Nations.

84 Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*, p. 40.

85 Breslin, R., and Canning, M., 2023; *op cit*.

86 Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*, p. 57.

87 Donevan, M., 2021; *op cit*.

88 Tyler, M., 2015. ‘Harms of Production: Theorising Pornography as a Form of Prostitution.’ In *Women’s Studies International Forum*. 48, 114-123.

89 Farley, M., *et al*, 2023; *op cit*.

more severe symptoms of PTSD than women in prostitution who did not have pornography made of them.<sup>90</sup> It is in this context that pornography is increasingly recognised as not just fuelling gender-based violence (see Section 3), but in its very making/production and distribution it is a form of gender-based violence in itself.<sup>91</sup>

The concept of prostitution and pornography as synonymous is also apparent in the Irish commercial sex trade. A common ‘fantasy’ demanded by sex buyers of women engaged in in-person prostitution is the ‘porn star experience’ (often known as ‘PSE’), where women are required to perform the behaviours and sex acts typically seen in pornography.<sup>92</sup> Breslin (2020) documented the development of the platform Escort Fans during the Covid-19 pandemic in Ireland.<sup>93</sup> Established by the owners of Ireland’s main prostitution advertising website Escort Ireland,<sup>94</sup> and modelled on OnlyFans, this platform initially facilitated Irish sex buyers’ continued sexual access to women in prostitution during the pandemic lockdowns by virtual means. It now claims to feature nearly 10,000 ‘escorts’, alongside over 200,000 so-called ‘fans.’<sup>95</sup> ‘Fans’ (sex buyers) pay a monthly subscription to interact with ‘escorts’, view pictures and videos, chat and watch live ‘performances’, all of a pornographic nature. Just like OnlyFans,<sup>96</sup> to be featured on the platform women must pay a fee to Escort Fans for acting as their ‘agent’, which is deducted from fans’ subscription fees. The company behind Escort Fans retains the full and perpetual rights to the retention and use of any materials that women upload to it,

indicating the real and ever-present risk on this, and indeed all pornography platforms across the globe,<sup>97</sup> of women losing or never having control over the use and resale or redistribution of their explicit images and videos. Arising from this is the ongoing fear of being doxed/outed to family and friends and the general public, as a number of recent Irish cases attest.<sup>98</sup>

## 1.4 Pornography as domestic abuse

As outlined in 1.1 above, content that constitutes image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) is a common and increasingly popular feature of mainstream pornography.<sup>99</sup> This is defined as taking or creating naked or sexual images or videos without the subject’s consent (including making ‘deepfake’ material – see 4.3), and/or sharing or threatening to share these images or videos, usually online, without the subject’s consent. Based on their research with survivors of IBSA, McGlynn *et al* (2019) argue that IBSA is not a mere ‘communications offence’, but rather is experienced by its victims as a form of sexual assault.<sup>100</sup> The evidence suggests that IBSA is most commonly perpetrated against women by a current or former male intimate partner. Sharing or threatening to share intimate images, made either consensually or without the woman’s consent, during the course of a relationship, is increasingly recognised as a tactic used by abusers as part of a wider pattern of coercive control,<sup>101</sup> as one survivor explained:

90 Farley, M., 2007. *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connections*. San Francisco: Prostitution Research & Education.

91 As asserted by Reem Alsalem, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, see: United Nations, Human Rights Council, 2024; *op cit*.

92 O’Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*.

93 Breslin, R., 2020; *op cit*.

94 See: <https://www.escort-ireland.com/> (last accessed 06/10/24).

95 See: <https://www.escortfans.com/> (last accessed 07/10/24).

96 Breslin, R., 2022; *op cit*.

97 Farley, M., *et al*, 2023; *op cit*, Tyler, M., 2015; *op cit*; Donevan, M., 2021; *op cit*.

98 See for example: McLean, S., 2022. ‘Three Jailed for Blackmailing Teen Girl Over OnlyFans Photos.’ *Breakingnews.ie* (last accessed 07/10/24); Dublin Live, 2024. ‘Woman Understood to be on OnlyFans Has Pictures Leaked in Child’s School.’ *Dublin Live* (last accessed 07/10/24).

99 Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021; *op cit*.

100 McGlynn, C., Rackley, E., Johnson, K., Henry, N., Flynn, A., Powell, A., Gavey, N., and Scott, A., 2019. *Shattering Lives and Myths: A Report on Image-Based Sexual Abuse*. UK Report for the Australian Research Council.

101 McGlynn *et al*, 2019; *ibid*; Women’s Aid, 2023. *Submission to Coimisiún na Meán’s Call For Inputs: Developing Ireland’s First Binding Online Safety Code for Video-Sharing Platform Services*. Dublin: Women’s Aid.

“... he just was not a nice guy and I think ... he was very controlling and manipulative. So, when we were going out ... he would jokingly say ... “If we ever fall out I can show people these photographs” ... And in hindsight now I realise that that is very controlling behaviour.”<sup>102</sup>

Survivors of IBSA in McGlynn *et al*'s study described being pressured or coerced into making sexually explicit images or videos, either filming themselves or being filmed by their abusive partner, and subsequently discovering that this material had been shared with their family and friends, across multiple social media platforms and on mainstream pornography websites, where in some cases it had attracted tens of thousands of views. Survivors outlined the devastating impact this abuse had on their lives, which they experienced as intrusive and violating but also as never-ending, because once such content has appeared online, or remains in the hands of the perpetrator, the threat of exposure/re-exposure is constant.<sup>103</sup>

In the Irish context, Women's Aid have similarly documented cases in which IBSA is actively used as a specific tactic to control, humiliate and harass a current or former partner:

‘Many women have told us that their partner or ex-partner has taken and/or published sexually explicit images of the woman without her consent, damaging her reputation, self-esteem and possibly work opportunities and relationships. The perpetrators use these images to

threaten, blackmail, and humiliate the woman, especially if she has indicated her desire to end the relationship or has already done so. In other cases, he uses the images for his financial gain without the woman's knowledge or consent by uploading them onto commercial websites. In some cases, her contact details (including phone, address, and social profiles) are also published, for example on escort [prostitution advertising] websites.’<sup>104</sup>

Recent research with young women in Ireland demonstrates that of those who have experienced intimate relationship abuse (1 in 5 young women aged 18-25), nearly half had experienced some form of abuse using digital technology which was perpetrated by their partners or ex-partners.<sup>105</sup> Of these, 20% had images or videos taken of them without their consent, 15% received threats to share sexually explicit intimate photos and/or videos of them, and 17% had directly experienced sexually explicit videos or images being shared without their consent.<sup>106</sup> Linked to the proliferation of IBSA, the sharing of intimate images or the threats to do so have recently been outlawed in Ireland through the *Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act, 2020*.<sup>107</sup> Since the passing of this legislation, cases of IBSA can now be reported to hotline.ie – Ireland's national centre combatting illegal content online.<sup>108</sup> In 2023, hotline.ie received 915 reports of suspected ‘intimate image abuse’, 760 of which were classified as breaching the above legislation, an increase of 71 cases on 2022.<sup>109</sup>

102 McGlynn *et al*, 2019; *op cit*, p. 4.

103 IBSA, which is gendered in nature and as the evidence shows is often carried out by a male intimate partner/former partner, needs to be understood as a distinct but related phenomenon to that of ‘catfishing’ and ‘sextortion’, which are more often carried out by a stranger encountered online, and can affect both women and men, and girls and boys. Catfishing is normally understood as using false information and images to create a fake online identity that is used to trick, harass, or scam another person. This identity is used to create online relationships under false pretences, sometimes to lure people into financial scams. The ‘catfish’ may also obtain intimate images from their victim and use them to extort or blackmail the person – commonly known as ‘sextortion’ – see: Nguyen, S., 2024. ‘[What Is Catfishing And What Can You Do If You Are Catfished?](#)’ *CNN Business* (last accessed 07/10/24) – which can have fatal consequences – see this case for example: Campbell, J., and Kravarik, J., 2022. ‘[A 17-year-old Boy Died By Suicide Hours After Being Scammed](#).’ *CNN US* (last accessed 07/10/24).

104 Women's Aid, 2023; *op cit*, p. 4-5.

105 Women's Aid, 2020a. *One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse in Ireland*. Dublin: Women's Aid.

106 *Ibid*.

107 *The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act, 2020* (also referred to as Coco's Law) commenced in February 2021, see: Gov.ie, 2022. *Policy information Intimate Image Abuse* (last accessed 07/10/24); and Women's Aid, 2020b. *Briefing on the Harassment, Harmful Communications Act 2020 Also Known as 'Coco's Law'*. Dublin: Women's Aid.

108 See: <https://hotline.ie/> (last accessed 07/10/24).

109 Hotline.ie, 2024. *Your Voice Matters: Help Us Stop Repeat Victimisation by Reporting – Annual Report 2023*. Dublin: hotline.ie; see also Conneely, A., 2024. ‘[Parents Urged to Educate Children About Internet Safety](#).’ *RTE News* (last accessed 07/10/24).



Victims and survivors of IBSA describe the coercive tactics used by intimate partners to secure sexually explicit images/videos from them, including threats of physical violence, threats to end the relationship, constant requests and other methods that gradually 'groom' women and girls into providing increasingly explicit content.<sup>110</sup> In their multi-country study of 14-17 year-olds, Stanley *et al* (2018) explore the circumstances in which 'sexting' – a common feature of contemporary dating relationships generally, and among teenagers in particular – crosses the line into what is now understood as image-based sexual abuse. This typically occurs when messages, images or videos sent consensually via 'sexting' are shared without consent.<sup>111</sup> In this study, girls were more likely than boys to experience the negative impacts of sexting, as one 17-year-old girl who participated in the study explains:

*"It's just a game ... many people do it ... I liked it but thought it was going to stay secret! I would never have thought he would use it against my will."*<sup>112</sup>

In this study 'sexting' was conceptualised as 'a process whereby young people produce their own pornography', and some interviewees highlighted a commonality between sending sexual images and viewing pornography online. This study highlights the extent to which girls sending sexual content to boys, despite the risks this may entail, has become a normalised practice in young people's intimate relationships. It is argued that that this in itself is influenced by pornography and the proliferation of a 'pornified' culture, in which girls are valued primarily for their appearance and sexual availability to both their peers and older men (see 1.5 and Box 1 for further discussion of the 'pornification' of culture and society).

It is worth noting here the link between experiencing intimate relationship abuse

and the specific risk of exposure to IBSA – in all countries young people who reported experiencing intimate partner violence were at least twice as likely to have sent a sexual image or text compared to young people who had not experienced such violence.<sup>113</sup> Despite the normalisation of practices such as sexting, Stanley *et al* found that the young people they interviewed who had experienced intimate partner violence were able to identify ways in which the sharing of 'sexual images and messages could be used to inflict humiliation and control in ways that reproduced the values of pornography.'<sup>114</sup>

This evidence as a whole speaks to a distinct phenomenon in which pornography has normalised the sharing of explicit content in intimate relationships, with women and girls feeling pressure to comply with this practice but suffering hugely negative consequences if such content is shared without their consent. At the same time, when women and girls experience IBSA at the hands of male partners/ex-partners, what is also generated in this process is essentially new pornographic content, often proliferated online for wider consumption, in turn driving the demand for even more pornography created under these abusive and coercive circumstances.

In short, IBSA constitutes both a devastating tool of intimate partner sexual abuse and a form of pornography created and/or shared non-consensually. This phenomenon is characterised by the often-complex intersection of many forms of gender-based violence at once – domestic violence/intimate partner abuse, coercive control, image-based sexual abuse, sexual violence and even sexual exploitation – transecting in women and girls' lives both on and offline, with devastating results, inspired by and in turn inspiring the very nature of mainstream pornography.

110 McGlynn *et al*, 2019; *op cit*; Stanley, N., Barter, C., Wood, M., Aghaie, N., Larkins, C., Lanau, A., Överlien, C., 2018. 'Pornography, Sexual Coercion and Abuse and Sexting in Young People's Intimate Relationships: A European Study.' In *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 33(19):2919-2944.

111 Stanley *et al*, 2018; *ibid*.

112 Stanley *et al*, 2018; *ibid*, p. 2935.

113 *Ibid.*, and see also: STIR - Safeguarding Teenage Intimate Relationships (undated). *Executive Summary and Briefing Paper 2 on Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships*. STIR.

114 Stanley *et al*, 2018; *op cit*, p. 2940.

## 1.5 Pornography as sexual violence

In determining the nature and extent of sexual violence in mainstream pornography it is worth noting that both Vera-Gray *et al* (2021) and Alario (2021) relied on the World Health Organization definition of sexual violence in their content analyses. This is the most widely accepted policy definition of sexual violence globally, which defines it as ‘any sexual act... directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion’ including force, intimidation, blackmail or threats.<sup>115</sup> It also includes circumstances where someone is unable to give consent, for example while intoxicated or asleep. This aligns with the definition often applied in the Irish policy context, developed by the Central Statistics Office for the purpose of the national Sexual Violence Survey, which defines sexual violence as ‘any sexual act which takes place without freely given consent or where someone forces or manipulates someone else into unwanted sexual activity.’<sup>116</sup>

Based on the content of pornography outlined above (see 1.1-1.4), and the extent to which consent to being filmed for its production and distribution is so often constrained or indeed absent (see 1.3), there is little doubt that much of what is depicted onscreen constitutes sexual violence. Drawing on her own content analysis of pornography, Alario takes a step further to argue that while pornography has been increasingly normalised and socially conceptualised as ‘sexually explicit material’, in fact contemporary pornography does not depict ‘sex’ in itself, but rather *sexual violence masquerading as ‘sex’*. She contends that ‘pornography’ and ‘sex’ have become synonymous – that real ‘sex’ has been ‘hijacked’ by pornography and replaced with sexual violence.<sup>117</sup> In making this case, she highlights the significant prevalence of videos on pornography sites that feature rape and lack

of consent on the part of women and girls. As just one example, she describes the La Manada case,<sup>118</sup> in which five young men gang raped an 18-year-old woman in Pamplona Spain and filmed the attack,<sup>119</sup> which later appeared and then trended on mainstream pornography sites across the globe.

On Xvideos, Pornhub and Xhamster, three of the most visited websites in Spain, the video of the gang rape in the above case was one of the most searched for videos in Spain in the months following the trial of the perpetrators. Alario notes that ‘the search for a rape video became a trend.’ Citing the significant popularity of sexually violent content such as this in mainstream pornography, she concludes that pornography, therefore, does not simply show ‘sex’, it shows ‘what males experience as sexually arousing, which includes sexual violence, since men, for whom it is made, go to pornography sites to watch rape videos.’<sup>120</sup>

In making the case that pornography is in fact not ‘sex’ but ‘filmed sexual violence’, Alario explains her thinking further:

‘Pornography is a problem not only because it contributes to the reproduction of sexual violence; it is a problem because it is actually sexual violence, torture and degradation of real women on film...an industry that allows this to happen, even in a minority of cases, is a criminal industry whose existence endangers all women simply because they are women...’<sup>121</sup>

Alario further emphasises the way in which pornography and its version of what ‘sex’ is has seeped into our wider culture – a ‘pornified society’ in which male domination of and violence against women and girls has been normalised, eroticised and in turn passed off as ‘what sex is’. One of many negative consequences of this phenomenon she

115 World Health Organisation, 2012. *Understanding and Addressing Violence Against Women: Sexual Violence*. WHO, p. 2.

116 Central Statistics Office, 2022. ‘*Sexual Violence Survey 2022 – Main Results*.’ CSO (last accessed 07/10/24).

117 Alario, M., 2021; *op cit*, cited in Abalo Rodríguez I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024; *op cit*, p. 39.

118 La Manada translates as ‘The Wolf Pack’, as the perpetrators called themselves in their WhatsApp group. This multi-perpetrator sexual offence against a young woman occurred during the San Fermin festivities in Pamplona, Spain in 2016, often known as ‘the running of the bull’.

119 BBC, 2018. ‘*Spain ‘Wolf Pack’ Case: Thousands Protest Over Rape Ruling*.’ BBC (last accessed 07/10/24).

120 Alario, M., 2021; *op cit*, cited in Abalo Rodríguez I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024; *op cit*, p. 32.

121 *Ibid*, p. 34.

identifies is that it becomes more difficult than ever for women to name the sexually violent experiences they may have had in their lives as rape or 'sexual violence', given that such violence is now conceptualised as mere 'sex'. This echoes previously cited research (Bridges *et al*, 2010) which asserted that pornography portrays male sexuality itself as inherently aggressive, and with women so consistently responding neutrally or with pleasure to the violence they experience, they noted that this apparently 'consensual' depiction of aggression 'is concerning as we run the risk of rendering true aggression against women invisible.'<sup>122</sup>

The reality that some of the extreme acts portrayed in pornography are now being understood simply as 'sex' was echoed by one key informant, who highlighted how open access to technology is accelerating this understanding for Irish children and young people:

***"...there's a window, a closing window, I would say, where we can address this, because if we don't, porn, what's currently in porn will just be normal. It will become sex for this generation. So, there is an urgency around it... 25% of Irish 6-year-olds now have their own smartphone. The kids that I have currently sitting in front of me didn't get a smartphone until they were 12. In six years' time the kids that are going to be sitting in front of me will have had a smartphone since the age of 6. I'm just so concerned that critical literacy [in relation to pornography] will be irrelevant by the time this generation becomes adults."***

Eoghan Cleary, Assistant Principal and Teacher

In his writings on this subject, Jensen (2021) explores how contemporary pornography speaks to the way in which boys and men have been socialised since birth:

'What this material [pornography] says about men is simple: In contemporary patriarchy men are socialized to find control of women arousing. Pornography eroticizes

domination and subordination, with the core power dynamic of male over female.'<sup>123</sup>

Similarly, in his research on aggression towards teenage 'performers' featured in pornography, Shor notes how such videos 'legitimate and even celebrate' aggression and degradation, particularly by portraying these acts as consensual and even pleasurable. He concludes that such videos 'reinforce the idea that women desire and derive pleasure from aggressive and degrading sexual practices, an idea that serves to perpetuate a rape culture.' In focusing their study on the sexual violence of pornography, Vera-Gray *et al* (2021) noted how frequently physically aggressive language was used to describe specific sex acts, such as 'brutal', 'throat/skullfucked' and 'pound', with their analysis here capturing titles such as: 'Crying blonde bitch takes rough cunt drilling' and 'Meth whore wife throat fucked and pounded by dealer'. Akin to Shor, Vera-Gray *et al* identify 'rape supportive discourse' in mainstream pornography.<sup>124</sup>

The argument is often made that 'not all porn is harmful'. But given a deeper understanding of the content of mainstream, 'everyday' online pornography as outlined by the scholars and key informants above, of which sexual violence is a core feature, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand what lasting benefits *consuming* such content can bring to any individual or indeed to society as a whole. This was especially reflected by one key informant:

***"...there's a lot of kind of discourse out there around the benign aspects of pornography and that it's maybe an educational tool and that that's how we maybe satisfy some sort of normal sexual curiosity. And that would be all fine if that was actually the case. That is not the case. That's not how you satiate normal sexual curiosity. Because currently what pornography is, is hardcore extreme material, and so it's about constraint, it's about spitting and choking and taking consent off people... I don't believe, in***

122 Bridges *et al*, 2010; *op cit*, p. 1080.

123 Jensen, R., 2021; *op cit*.

124 Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021; *op cit*, p. 1249.

*all the research I've done...I don't believe there's such a thing as 'ethical porn'... I don't see any goodness in it, if I'm being honest. I don't see anything positive that comes out of it. I don't think a child learning very early about choking someone or taking consent off them...that's really deleterious to their understanding...what's the benefit of that?*

*"It's not about being puritanical... It's about having some laws in place that protect children so that in real life they can be protected and online they can be protected, and they can have healthy relationships with their technology and understand too that pornography is there, but it's nothing for them that has any value... The movement towards sexuality, that's an important part of their [young people's] lives, and that's a great thing, and that's something to celebrate. [But] pornography doesn't bring you towards that sexuality in a positive way."* Dr Richard Hogan, Psychotherapist

Key informants highlighted that these same arguments can be made in respect of adult consumers – that pornography is effectively working against the development and promotion of positive sexual relationships in adulthood, as well as against the wider goal of achieving gender equality, which have negative societal impacts that potentially reach far into the future.

## 1.6 Pornography as a learning context

The most common form of pornography in the mainstream setting today is 'gonzo porn'.<sup>125</sup> This style of pornography is virtually devoid of any storyline, attempts to place the viewer directly into the scene for a more immersive experience and its hallmarks include

continuous 'scene after scene' acts of violence and degradation,<sup>126</sup> including choking, gagging, slapping and spanking. Within this genre is 'point-of-view porn' (POV), which is filmed by the person receiving sexual gratification, who is typically holding the camera themselves – aiming it at the person who is performing the sex act. This is designed to be hyper-real – to make the consumer feel almost as if they are experiencing the sex act themselves. These genres almost always prioritise the male gaze.

Given the visceral experience this affords the consumer, it is easy to understand how effectively mainstream pornography is shaping sexual scripts, and the sexual scripts of children and young people in particular. Sexual script theory<sup>127</sup> is useful in explaining how phenomena in the external environment influence the development of individuals' understandings of sexuality, including the 'guidelines' to follow in their sexual encounters and the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviour.

A study of men aged 18-29 demonstrates the extent to which pornography use not only influences but is inextricably linked with the shaping of men's sexual scripts (Sun *et al*, 2014). It found that the more pornography men consumed, the more likely they were to use pornography during sex, request pornographic sex acts of their partner, and intentionally conjure images of pornography to maintain arousal during sex. This led the authors to conclude that: 'consumers use pornographic sexual scripts to navigate real-world sexual experiences... In other words, pornography is not simple fantasy; it is an easily accessible template for actual sexual behavior.'<sup>128</sup>

Scholars who have applied sexual script theory in their own research (such as Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021; Shor, 2019) have determined that mainstream pornography in its prolific form:

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>126</sup> McVey, L., Gurrieri, L., and Tyler, M., 2021. 'The Structural Oppression of Women by Markets: The Continuum of Sexual Violence and the Online Pornography Market'. In *Journal of Marketing Management*, 37:1-2, 40-67.

<sup>127</sup> Originally defined by Gagnon and Simon (1973) and further expanded on by the same authors in 2003. See: Gagnon, JH., and Simon, W., 1973. *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*. USA: Aldine Publishing.

<sup>128</sup> Sun, C., Bridges, A., Johnson, J.A. & Ezzell, M.B., 2016. 'Pornography and the Male Sexual Script: An Analysis of Consumption and Sexual Relations'. In *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45:983-994, p. 985.



- Is acting as ‘a key social institution’ for developing sexual understanding<sup>129</sup>
- Promotes sexual scripts premised on underage participants and/or coercive practices
- Positions minors as legitimate targets for sexual encounters and sexual aggression
- Positions aggression, coercion and non-consent in sexual interactions as ‘normative heterosexual practice’<sup>130</sup>
- Signals that aggression either enhances or simply does not interfere with women’s (especially young women’s) ability to experience sexual pleasure
- Positions sexual violence as both normative and legitimate
- Positions sexual offences as ‘ordinary’ or even humorous
- Distorts or even breaks the boundary between sex and sexual violence.

Put more simply, pornography is actively shaping both adults’ and children’s understandings of how one should behave in sexual encounters and what is both acceptable and unacceptable in this context.

According to social cognitive theory – which posits that individuals learn within a social context where they influence and are influenced by their environment<sup>131</sup> – behaviours that are rewarded are more likely to be learned, while those punished are less likely to be learned.<sup>132</sup> This is significant in this context given the extent to which, as previously demonstrated, women in pornography must respond neutrally or with pleasure to the violence they experience, rather than register pain or show active resistance. Added to this is the fact that the sexual violence of pornography is rarely explicitly labelled ‘rape’ and is presented to consumers as ‘normal’

sexual behaviour without sanction. This is the content that is directly shaping sexual scripts and in doing so is ‘producing and reproducing...the “cultural scaffolding of rape”, namely the construction of cultural norms and practices that support rape or set up its preconditions.’<sup>133</sup>

This is particularly the case for children and young people – there are currently no effective measures in place in most jurisdictions to prevent children from accessing mainstream pornography in all its violence – a fact well demonstrated by Vera-Gray *et al’s* (2021) study, which found that one in eight video titles shown to first-time viewers of pornography, which are likely to include children, on the initial landing pages of the mainstream sites constitute sexual violence.<sup>134</sup>

Consuming content featuring young female ‘teen performers’ Shor (2019) argues, is likely to have an especially powerful effect on teenage consumers as this content features their age peers (for young women) or their most likely potential sexual partners (for heterosexual young men).<sup>135</sup> Given that many of these young people may be trying to ‘learn about sex’ from pornography (see 2.3 below), the implications of pornography consumption for the development of their sexual scripts are particularly concerning, as Shor explains:

‘When young women watch videos of their peers, in which aggressive and degrading acts are mostly associated with pleasure, they may feel pressures to also enjoy (or at least pretend to enjoy) such acts. Young men may also find such scripts limiting and distressing as these seem to demand that they act aggressively against their romantic and sexual partners if they wish to satisfy their partners’ sexual fantasies and urges...men who watch pornography may engage in aggressive sexual acts with

129 Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021; *op cit*, p. 1257.

130 *Ibid*, p. 1257.

131 Bandura, A., 1986. *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. USA: Prentice-Hall.

132 Fritz *et al*, 2020; *op cit*.

133 Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021; *op cit*. p. 1256, citing Gavey, N., 2004. *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. UK: Routledge.

134 Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021; *op cit*.

135 Shor, E., 2019; *op cit*.

their partners simply because they believe such acts are normative and likely to extract a pleasurable response. Ironically, this may indeed be the response to such aggression as young women may also feel normative pressures to perform a pleasurable response, even when it is disingenuous.<sup>136</sup>

In the Irish context, one key informant described the impacts he has observed on young people of behaviour learned directly from pornography, the ways in which it has normalised sexual violence, and the confusion and hurt it has caused as a result:

*“...young men come into my clinic a lot, teenage boys, trying to get off pornography... I think about them out there isolated and lonely and caught in this thing, which could happen to anybody... And I sit with teenage girls, and they tell me what they’ve been asked for in a relationship, and that motivates me, thinking, ‘how could this 14-year-old girl have a 14-year-old boyfriend who thought that this [violent/aggressive act during sex] was something that you do with somebody at 14 years of age?’... and then I meet a lot of guys who have done something [that resulted in an allegation made against them]. And they’re trying to think ‘what the hell happened? Why did she say I was aggressive with her?’ So, they’re confused by what’s happened... And they’re annoyed with her, and then they’re kind of confused... they’re really just at sea. They don’t know what they’re doing. There’s been so much confused messages [from pornography]... And the response [from the girl] is incongruent to what they’ve seen, and then they’re going, ‘what the hell’s wrong with her?’ first of all. And then ‘why did she say this about me?’* Dr Richard Hogan

Based on their findings, Vera-Gray *et al* (2021) conclude that ‘what counts as ‘sexual’ in our

social environment’ mutually shapes and is being shaped by pornography, and that this has significant and concerning implications at the societal level, because of the insidious ways in which mainstream pornography has distorted the boundaries between sex and sexual violence, and between sexual pleasure and sexual harm.<sup>137</sup>

The nature of pornography as a powerful learning context, providing a set of ‘lessons’ to the consumer that influences their future sexual behaviour is further explored by Abalo Rodríguez and Alario Gavilán (2024).<sup>138</sup>

They argue that for men in particular, who are much more likely than women to use pornography for masturbatory purposes, pornography is an especially potent learning context, accompanied as it is by the ‘reward’ of sexual arousal and orgasm. This creates a learning context that is more powerful than merely watching television or playing video games because pornography is consumed whilst masturbating, greatly heightening the physical, sexual and psychological experience of its consumption and therefore the learning that happens as it is consumed. Supported by the very immersive and visceral nature of ‘gonzo’ or POV pornography, as described above, when consumed for the purpose of masturbation the content viewed becomes powerfully eroticised.

Given what is known about the extent to which pornographic content is sexually violent, the authors conclude that what is learned by men and boys in masturbating to pornography is that sexual violence can be arousing – that ‘the behavioral rules acquired during pornography consumption are likely to lead to unequal sexual interaction...and violent practices in the interpersonal “sexual” context.’<sup>139</sup> Some of the most common ‘lessons’ or ‘behavioural rules’ identified by Abalo Rodríguez and Alario Gavilán that adult men and adolescent boys derive from pornography include:

136 *Ibid*, p. 1032.

137 Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021; *op cit*.

138 Abalo Rodríguez, I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024; *op cit*.

139 *Ibid*, p. 69.

- When a woman says ‘no’ in a sexual interaction she really means ‘yes’, even when she resists, displays displeasure or is experiencing pain, because ‘deep down she wants it’ or is merely ‘playing hard to get’
- Insulting or humiliating a woman is sexually arousing
- Ignoring a woman’s boundaries is sexually arousing – her lack of desire or even lack of consent is erotic
- Inflicting pain on a woman is an erotic act
- Perpetrating violent sexual acts against a woman is erotic
- Engaging in sex acts with a woman who is asleep, intoxicated or unconscious is appropriate and arousing
- A man has the right to use the body of any woman or girl to satisfy any of his desires, whether she wants to or not, and regardless of her age.<sup>140</sup>

Ultimately, they argue that what pornography demonstrates to men and boys is ‘A model of sexuality centered on male pleasure, in which women’s real sexual pleasure has completely disappeared, replaced by the idea that women receive pleasure by giving pleasure to men.’<sup>141</sup> It also conveys to men and boys that where women do not actively resist violence in pornography, then what they are viewing is simply a depiction of ‘what sex is’, in turn entirely obscuring the sexually violent nature of pornography and inuring its consumers to this violence to such an extent that they risk reproducing it in their own sexual interactions and relationships.

This conclusion is echoed by Jensen (2021) who asserts that:

‘Pornography is not just sex on film but rather sex in the context of male domination and female subordination... The sexual experience in pornography is made more intense through sex acts that men find pleasurable but women may not want.’<sup>142</sup>

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34-39.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34.

<sup>142</sup> Jensen, R., 2021; *op cit*.



## 2. Pornography consumption

The extent to which consuming pornography is now a common practice in contemporary society cannot be underestimated.

Pornography consumption is prolific and increasingly normalised, with notable gendered differences in frequency, motivations and impacts of consumption, as the following data attest.

### 2.1 Adults

Data from a variety of UK sources provide some useful insights into levels of pornography consumption, and their gendered nature:

- Half of the male adult population in the UK (50% of adult males with internet access) accessed Pornhub (one of the world's most popular mainstream pornography sites) in a single month alone in September 2020,<sup>143</sup> versus 16% of adult females<sup>144</sup>
- Amongst younger users, 75% of males aged 18-24 visited Pornhub in September 2020 versus 33% of females in the same age group<sup>145</sup>
- Men are more likely than women to be regular viewers of pornography at all ages – 36% of men use pornography at least once a week versus 4% of women<sup>146</sup>
- 51% of men in Britain say they 'frequently' use pornography versus 15% of women – in fact 40% of women in Britain say they have never viewed pornography.<sup>147</sup>

Data from Ireland are not as robust given a lack of nationally representative sampling in surveys on this issue. However, results from a large, self-selecting survey reveal high levels of pornography consumption, with gendered differences in consumption also detected:

- 83% of participants in an Irish Times online 'sex survey' conducted in 2015<sup>148</sup> stated that they had used pornography – 96% of men and 69% of women<sup>149</sup>
- In the same survey, 41% of men said they used pornography more than once per week versus 9% of women
- 22% of women said they had never used pornography versus 4% of men.

Another self-selecting survey of over 1000 adult men, commissioned by Ireland's Men's Development Network in 2022, found that the vast majority are consuming pornography, with:

- One fifth of all respondents under the age of 55 using pornography at least once a day
- 70% of respondents under the age of 45 using pornography at least once a week.<sup>150</sup>

Pornhub itself states that of all countries in the world, 'Ireland ranks 42nd for traffic' to its site.<sup>151</sup> Several popular pornography sites regularly feature in the top twenty of Ireland's most visited websites per month, ranking alongside household names such as Twitter (X), Instagram, The Irish Times, Wikipedia, Netflix, Amazon and LinkedIn.<sup>152</sup>

143 This number is likely to be influenced to some extent by the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns in the UK, which saw more people at home and spending longer periods of time online.

144 Ofcom, 2021. *Online Nation: 2021 Report*. UK: Ofcom.

145 *Ibid.*

146 Kirk, I., 2022. 'How Often Do Britons Watch Porn?' *YouGov* (last accessed 07/10/24).

147 *Ibid.*

148 Holmquist, K., 2015. 'The Sex Survey: How You Answered the Porn Questions.' *The Irish Times* (last accessed 08/07/24).

149 These data should be treated with caution and are likely to be overestimates as they are derived from a self-selecting sample of Irish Times readers who were invited to complete a 'sex survey' online.

150 Men's Development Network, 2022. *Men's Attitudes Now: Survey – Interim Report*. Ireland: MDN; and reported in the media here: Harney, C., 2022. '20% Of Men In Ireland Under The Age Of 55 Watch Porn Once A Day, According To A Survey.' *Kfm* (last accessed 07/10/24).

151 See: <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/ireland-2024> (accessed 08/07/24).

152 See for example: <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/ireland/> (accessed periodically since early 2022 and last accessed in July 2024). In May 2022, May 2023 and August 2023 Stripchat was the 5th most accessed site in Ireland. By June 2024 Stripchat had fallen to 17th most popular, overtaken by the more well-known Pornhub as 12th most popular, falling just behind x.com in 11th place and just ahead of LinkedIn in 13th place.

## 2.2 Children and young people

Once again, data from a variety of UK sources provide some insights, including into the gendered nature of pornography consumption amongst children and young people:

- 51% of 11–13-year-olds reported that they had seen pornography at some point, rising to 66% of 14–15-year-olds, with some first viewing as young as age 7<sup>153</sup>
- In a separate study, 64% of young people aged 16–21 reported that they had seen online pornography<sup>154</sup>
- Of this 64%, the average age to first be exposed to pornography was 13, but 10% had first seen it by age 9 and 27% by age 11
- 21% of males aged 16–21 had intentionally viewed pornographic content at least once a day in the two weeks prior to the survey, compared to just 7% of females; while 47% of males in this same age group reported consuming pornography between one and six times per week.<sup>155</sup>

Research with young people in Ireland has identified similarly high levels of consumption, its gendered nature and age at first viewing.

- 48% of young people in Senior Cycle education in Ireland (broadly aged 16–18) reported having used pornography; of those, 86% were male and 24% female<sup>156</sup>
- 44% of male students reported using pornography more than once a week versus 8% of female students
- At age 20, based on a nationally representative sample of young adults in Ireland, 64% of young men and 13% of young women reported using the internet to access pornography<sup>157</sup>

- In a survey of nearly 2000 students in one Irish university, male students (broadly aged 18–25) were four times more likely than female to students to report using pornography ‘a few times per week’ – 44.6% of male students versus 11.8% of female students<sup>158</sup>
- Female and transgender students were most likely to ‘never’ use pornography – 25% and 23.1% respectively
- Students in the same survey reported first viewing pornography at a young age – 53.3% of male students and 23.1% of female students said they were aged 10–13 when they first viewed pornography.

## 2.3 Motivations for consumption

According to one of this study’s key informants, pornography currently occupies a strange ‘cultural space’ – he noted that while its consumption is highly prevalent and therefore increasingly normalised, at the same time it is not widely socially acceptable for adults to speak openly about pornography, and one’s own consumption of it in particular:

*“...the issue always has been that porn occupies this weird space, I think, where it’s culturally really, really prevalent, but it’s unacceptable to talk about it... if porn is so acceptable, then why is it that men hide it from their girlfriends and their wives? If it was as acceptable as people are saying, then they wouldn’t find the need to hide it. But, actually, there’s clearly that uncomfotability within users and consumers of it where they’re thinking I need to hide this... That’s why often men don’t talk about it [their consumption of pornography] amongst other men.”* Tom Farr, Barrister

153 BBFC (British Board of Film Classification), 2020. *Young People, Pornography and Age-verification*. UK: BBFC.

154 Children’s Commissioner (England), 2023a; *op cit*.

155 *Ibid*.

156 Dooley, B., O’Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A., and O’Reilly, A., 2019. *My World Survey 2: The National Youth Study of Mental Health in Ireland*. Dublin: Jigsaw.

157 Nolan, A., and Smyth, E., 2024. *Use of Pornography Young Adults in Ireland*. Research Series No. 117. Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute.

158 Dawson, K., NicGabhainn, S., and MacNeela, P., 2021. *Porn Report: Surveying Students on Pornography Use and Involving Them in Planning Critical Learning Interventions*. Galway: NUI Galway.

Adults' most common motivations for consuming pornography include for sexual pleasure (including during masturbation), sexual curiosity (including to 'gather new ideas for sex'), emotional distraction or suppression, stress reduction, fantasy, boredom avoidance, lack of sexual satisfaction and self-exploration.<sup>159</sup> Men are more likely than women to use pornography for all of these reasons except for sexual curiosity and self-exploration.<sup>160</sup>

In the study of Irish university students cited above, just over 60% stated they use pornography for masturbation regularly (Dawson *et al*, 2021). Two thirds of male students agreed that pornography is 'fun and exciting' to view versus 37% of female students. While the majority of students disagreed with the suggestion that pornography portrays sex in a 'realistic way', 21% have nevertheless used pornography for 'new sexual ideas'.<sup>161</sup>

Two main differences between men and women in terms of their pornography consumption were noted by Abalo Rodríguez and Alario Gavilán (2024). Firstly, the tendency for men is to increase the frequency of their consumption over time, while for women the tendency is to reduce it. Secondly, for the majority of men, their primary motivation for pornography consumption is masturbation, while for women it is to learn about 'sex'.<sup>162</sup> Several of this study's key informants confirmed this gendered difference in motivations for viewing, particularly with regard to teenagers.

In respect of younger children, the evidence demonstrates that rather than intentional consumption, initial exposure to pornography is often accidental or something children 'stumble' upon. Sixty-two percent of 11–13-year-olds in the UK who had viewed pornography reported their viewing as 'more

unintentional' – pornography was found by them via 'uninformed' Google searches,<sup>163</sup> being sent links by peers but not knowing what the content was before clicking, via adverts or pop-ups on sites such as film/sport streaming or gaming sites, or being shown videos on a friend's phone.<sup>164</sup> Many children in this study described feeling 'grossed out' and 'confused' when they first saw pornography, particularly those who had seen it first when they were under the age of 10.<sup>165</sup> While this viewing of pornography was indeed accidental on the children's part, it should be borne in mind that the pornography trade's methods of actively drawing children to its content online is far from accidental and should not be underestimated, as Section 4 below outlines.

In the same UK study, children aged 14 and over were more likely than their younger peers to seek out pornography intentionally. Young people who had intentionally sought out pornography cited reasons including curiosity and wanting to 'learn' about sex. In fact, many young people are regularly using pornography before their first ever sexual experience with another person, and this in turn is influencing expectations about that very first sexual encounter, as this key informant working with young people in Ireland explains:

***"...this is... about your children assuming that in their first sexual encounter that they might have to have anal sex or might have to be choked the first time...take away all of the difficulty of navigating your first encounter of penetrative sex. Having to then also deal with trying to navigate whether or not you're going to be expected to partake in anal sex or the sex of choking...I think it's kind of unimaginable [for adults]. I don't think adults who I give this talk to, I don't think they can really cognise what that would entail."*** Eoghan Cleary

159 Bóthe, B., Tóth-Király, I., Bella, N., Potenza, M. N., Demetrovics, Z., & Orosz, G. 2021. 'Why do people watch pornography? The motivational basis of pornography use.' In *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 35(2), 172–186.

160 *Ibid*.

161 Dawson *et al*, 2021; *op cit*.

162 Abalo Rodríguez I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024; *op cit*.

163 Described as 'unwittingly searching terms such as "sex" or "porn" without understanding what these words meant', BBFC, 2020; *op cit*, p. 16.

164 BBFC, 2020; *ibid*

165 *Ibid*.

Other researchers have similarly noted that online pornography has become ‘a significant source of sex education for young people’,<sup>166</sup> but within this the gendered differences are again apparent. According to the authors of the study by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) in the UK:

‘Girls in particular reported watching pornography to meet the perceived sexual expectations of boys, which they believed were in turn informed by the viewing of pornography... When asked why they wanted to learn about sexual acts, girls commonly replied that boys likely had higher expectations around sexual performance due to viewing pornography. Female respondents often worried about being embarrassed if they did not know what they were doing when with boys, who were thought to be “in the know” because they were more open about discussing sex and were known to be watching pornography from a young age.’<sup>167</sup>

One respondent, an 18-year-old young woman, described this phenomenon as follows:

*“I feel like boys already know what to do so we [girls] thought we should also watch it [pornography] to know what they want to do... Things like anal – we need to understand how to do it.”*<sup>168</sup>

Boys in this same study were less likely than girls to describe actively trying to learn about sex or sexual acts through pornography. They were using pornography to masturbate – in fact many boys in the study claimed that they had never masturbated *without* pornography. However, when asked how they learnt about sex initially, many boys said that pornography was a key source in understanding ‘what to do’ during sex.

It is clear that boys’ overreliance on pornography to ‘teach’ them what to do during sex and girls’ overreliance on it to understand

what boys expect from them during sex is an issue of serious concern given the extent to which mainstream pornography is saturated with sexual violence (see 1.4). Pornography, as a powerful learning context (see 1.5), is moulding sexual scripts and young people’s sexual scripts in particular, in ways that have the potential to cause significant harm. As previously outlined in Section 1 and supported here by the data on the widespread use of pornography to ‘learn about sex’, men and boys are learning from pornography that dominating, degrading and violating women and girls is both acceptable and erotic, while women and girls are learning that they must accept or acquiesce to such treatment during sexual encounters with men, regardless of whether they want to or not. At the same time, pornography conveys that male sexual pleasure is the priority, while genuine sexual pleasure for women and girls is largely absent or irrelevant. It is therefore unsurprising that some girls in the BBFC study disclosed avoiding heterosexual pornography that features men because of its hyperfocus on male pleasure only, and because they found it too degrading and ‘forceful’ towards women, preferring instead to watch content featuring women alone or with other women.<sup>169</sup>

Drawing on her own recent research with young people,<sup>170</sup> England’s Children’s Commissioner summed up the particularly negative impacts of the total normalisation of violent pornography on the next generation as follows:

*“Young people have told us that pornography consumption is utterly normalised. Even if they know it’s wrong, boys tell us that they feel unable to say ‘no’ to friends for fear of social isolation. They say that viewing pornography is no longer a choice. As one boy told me... “I was pressured into watching horrific pornography that affects how young boys behave towards and think they can treat*

166 Sun, C., *et al*, 2016; *op cit*, p. 984.

167 BBFC, 2020; *op cit*, p. 33.

168 *Ibid*.

169 *Ibid*.

170 Children’s Commissioner, 2023a; *op cit*.



women. As a boy myself, I was unable to understand the everyday struggle of the girls in my class. Then one day I did, and I was ostracised for not cat-calling girls in the class, watching pornography, or sexually assaulting any girls.” That’s a boy aged 16 [who said that].<sup>171</sup>

## 2.4 LGBTQ+ people

Given that the largest group of pornography consumers are heterosexual males,<sup>172</sup> much of mainstream pornography is heterosexual in nature and/or designed with heterosexual male pleasure in mind, including so-called ‘lesbian porn’. The data are therefore more limited when it comes to the motivations and implications of pornography consumption among LGBTQ+ people, and adolescents in particular.<sup>173</sup>

46% of LGB young people who participated in the BBFC study in the UK reported that they had accessed pornography specifically to help them learn about their own sexuality and figure out who they are attracted to. Only 5% of heterosexual young people reported this same motivation.<sup>174</sup> In Ireland, the ESRI found that ‘LGBTQ+ youth are turning to pornography as a source on information on sex’, including those who are unsure of or questioning their identity and sexual orientation.<sup>175</sup>

These studies highlight a distinct lack of formal sex education that features LGBTQ+ relationships, with some young people turning to pornography to fill this gap.<sup>176</sup>

Jensen (2021) notes that in pornography targeted at gay men, while the ‘male domination/female subordination dynamic’

is obviously absent, ‘top/bottom and other inequality dynamics replicate the eroticizing of power, including racist themes.’<sup>177,178</sup>

## 2.5 Access to pornography

A number of key informants noted that while adults are more likely to access pornography directly via the dedicated pornography sites, with Pornhub, Xvideos and Xhamster currently the most popular sites globally,<sup>179</sup> children and young people often come to pornographic content via more varied routes. Most young people in the BBFC study searched for pornography on the above dedicated sites, but it was also very common for them to have encountered pornography through social media. In the Children’s Commissioner for England’s study, Twitter (now X) was the platform where the highest percentage of young respondents had seen pornography (41% of the sample), followed by dedicated pornography sites (37%), Instagram (33%), Snapchat (32%) and via search engines (30%).<sup>180</sup> The Commissioner notes that the level of pornographic content on these well-known social media platforms is ‘disturbing’ given that anyone aged 13 and over is permitted to join. She cites a 2020 study which found that ‘algorithms push adult content towards boys’ accounts on Instagram, including invitations and direct links to paid-for adult sites and services.’<sup>181</sup>

It is also important not to overlook the growing popularity of so-called ‘social’ platforms such as OnlyFans, where sexually explicit content dominates, including

171 Statement given in evidence by Dame Rachel de Souza, England’s Children’s Commissioner to the Inquiry into the pornography trade conducted by the UK’s All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Commercial Sexual Exploitation – see All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*, p. 29.

172 Jensen, R., 2021; *op cit*.

173 Peter, J., and Valkenburg, P.M., 2016. ‘Adolescents and Pornography: A Review of 20 Years of Research.’ In *The Journal of Sex Research*, 53:4-5, 509-531.

174 BBFC, 2020; *op cit*.

175 Nolan, A and Smyth, E., 2024; *op cit*, p. x.

176 BBFC, 2020; *op cit*; Nolan, A and Smyth, E., 2024; *op cit*.

177 Jensen, R., 2021; *op cit*.

178 Exploring these dynamics further was outside the scope of this study but certainly warrants further investigation in the Irish context.

179 See: <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/> where Pornhub ranks 16th, Xvideos 24th, Xhamster 33rd and Xnxx ranks 44th in the top 50 most popular websites globally in July 2024 (last accessed 28/07/24). See also ‘Adult’ rankings: <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/adult/> (last accessed 28/07/24).

180 Children’s Commissioner; 2023a; *op cit*.

181 *Ibid*, p. 14, citing a study by 5Rights Foundation, 2021. *Pathways: How Digital Design Puts Children at Risk*. Scotland: 5 Rights Foundation.



livestreamed pornography for subscribers only. Hugely popular in Ireland is Stripchat, which describes itself as a ‘social network’ and a ‘community’ featuring free live-streamed webcam ‘performances’. This site has ranked quite consistently in the top 20 most popular websites in Ireland for at least the past two years.

Pornography is being accessed by both adults and children via a wide range of devices. The devices children were using at the time they first encountered pornography varied, including family desktops, laptop computers, personal tablets and smartphones.<sup>182</sup> It has been suggested that first-time access to pornography happens once a child is given their first smartphone.<sup>183</sup> However, one key informant was keen to emphasise that the specific device/s children are using to access a whole host of harmful online content, including pornography, is less relevant than the setting and extent of unsupervised access they may have to any internet-enabled device. She and other key informants highlighted how parents are increasingly concerned with their children’s physical safety and may feel more comfortable when they know they are at home and ‘safe’ in their bedrooms.

But if children are regularly in a room alone with unfettered online access, then they are in reality potentially unsafe, exposed to all the risks that harmful online content poses to their psychological wellbeing:

***“...little Johnny [is] sitting in his room upstairs, he’s not tearing around the estate causing trouble, you know exactly where he is... He is safe, in that you know where he is and so on, but what he’s doing?... A child on any device that connects to the internet in their bedroom with the door shut is vulnerable. You don’t know what they’re looking at. You don’t know who they’re talking to. You don’t know how long they’re spending in certain places online... you as the parent or carer are completely excluded.”*** Alex Cooney, CyberSafeKids

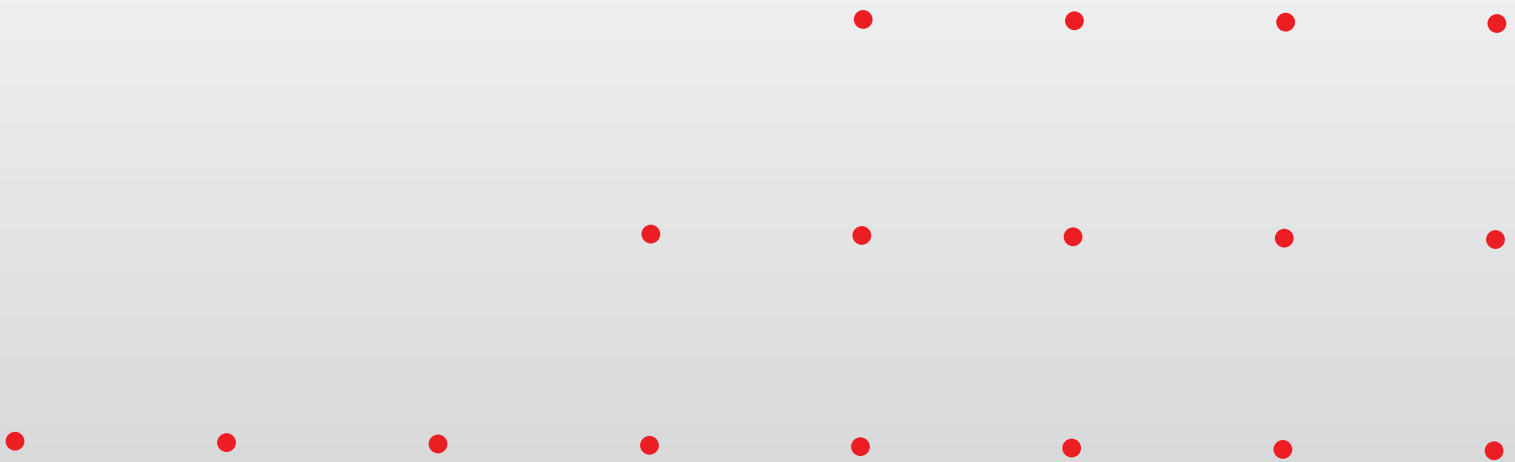
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182 BBFC, 2020; *op cit.*

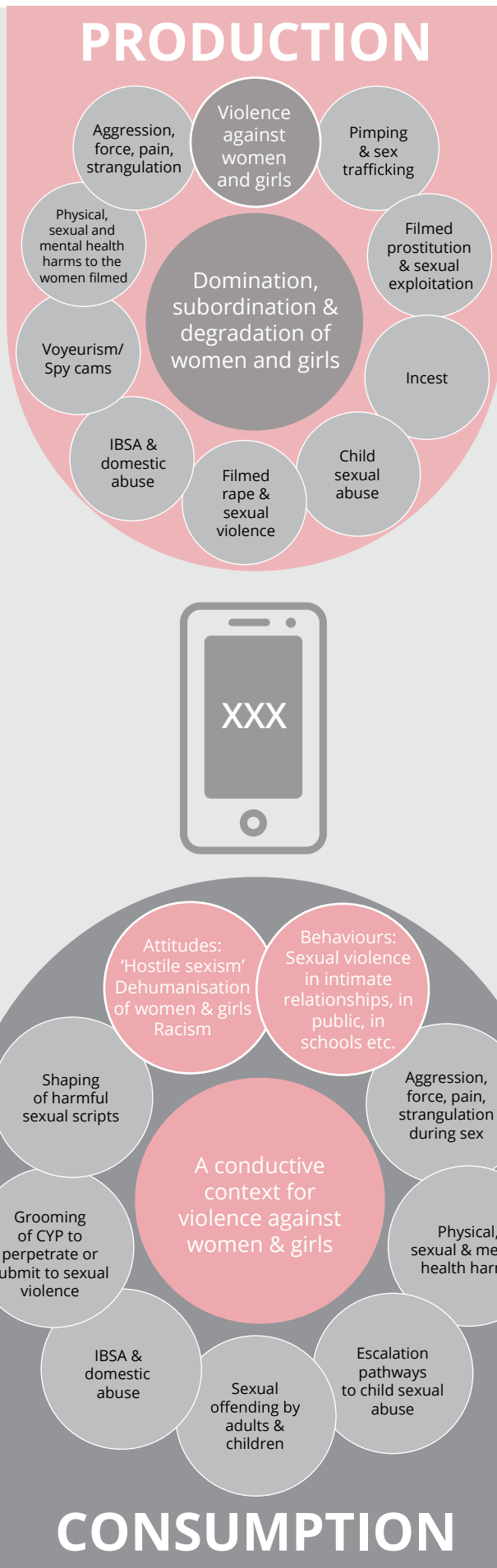
183 O’Brien, B., 2023. ‘[When Do Children First Get Exposed to Pornography?](#)’ *The Irish Times* (last accessed 07/10/24).

*“You can’t talk about child-on-child sexual abuse increasing without talking about pornography. You can’t talk about escalation pathways without talking about pornography. You can’t talk about an increase in violence against women and girls without talking about pornography. And those girls who are having violence perpetrated against them, the majority of the time [it’s] being done by their peers, so it is technically child-on-child sexual abuse. Everything is linked. And then you can’t talk about any of it without talking about the fact – well, who are the women and the girls in the videos?”*

Gemma Kelly, CEASE, UK



**Figure 1 –  
The harms of  
pornography  
that exist on  
both sides of  
the screen**



### 3. The implications of pornography consumption

It is clear that pornography is responsible for multiple, serious harms on both sides of the screen – in production but also in consumption (see Figure 1). The evidence below illustrates the implications for the consumer in particular.

#### 3.1 Attitudes

Amongst men, higher pornography consumption has been found to be associated with views and attitudes towards women that amount to ‘hostile sexism’.<sup>184</sup> In his analysis of popular Pornhub videos, Shor (2019) finds that because aggression is so often responded to with seeming ‘pleasure’ by women and girls, this is likely to influence attitudes ‘about the acceptability (or even desirability) of aggression in sexual and romantic relationships.’<sup>185</sup> A detailed review of nine studies examining various aspects of men’s attitudes and behaviours found a significant positive association between the consumption of violent pornography and attitudes supporting violence against women.<sup>186</sup> A recent Inquiry by a parliamentary group in the UK highlighted a wealth of research evidence which demonstrates that ‘pornography consumption is associated with higher levels of sexist attitudes, opposition to affirmative action for women, stronger endorsement of rape myths, and being less likely to intervene as a bystander to prevent sexual assault.’<sup>187</sup>

A study of US college students further demonstrates that viewing pornography is associated with a lower willingness to intervene as a bystander in an incident of sexual assault

(Foubert and Bridges, 2017). The authors conclude: ‘If the knowledge about sex that college students gain through pornography includes the very common theme of violence... it comes as no surprise that these students would report being less likely to intervene to prevent similar behavior in their daily lives.’<sup>188</sup>

Given the nature of pornography as a particularly powerful learning context (see 1.6 above), it is unsurprising that the evidence demonstrates that pornography perpetuates sexist and misogynistic attitudes, as Dr Michael Flood explains in his evidence to the above Inquiry, describing pornography as a form of ‘sexist education’:

*“Pornography teaches sexist and sexually objectifying understandings. It shapes how boys and young men see girls and women, and how girls and young women see themselves. Studies find that young people’s use of pornography leads to higher levels of sexist attitudes among boys and girls.”*<sup>189</sup>

#### Racist stereotypes

Migrant women and women of colour are overrepresented in the sex trade the world over, and pornography is no exception.<sup>190</sup> Multiple studies demonstrate the extent to which mainstream pornographic content promotes racist attitudes and stereotypes. A study analysing the depiction of black women and men in pornographic scenes on Xvideos and Pornhub concluded:

‘Findings suggest black women are still more often the target of aggression when compared to white women. In addition, black men are more often portrayed as

184 Hald, GM., Malamuth, NM. and Lange, T., 2013. ‘Pornography and Sexist Attitudes Among Heterosexuals.’ In *Journal of Communication*, 63: 638–660.

185 Shor, 2019; *op cit*, p. 1031.

186 See for example: Hald, GM., Malamuth, NM. & Yuen, C., 2010. ‘Pornography and Attitudes Supporting Violence Against Women: Revisiting the Relationship in Nonexperimental Studies.’ In *Aggressive Behaviour*, 36: 14–20.

187 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*, p. 25.

188 Foubert, JD. and Bridges, AJ., 2017. ‘What Is the Attraction? Pornography Use Motives in Relation to Bystander Intervention.’ In *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 32(20): 3071–3089, p. 3084.

189 Statement given in evidence by Dr Michael Flood to the Inquiry into the pornography trade conducted by the UK’s All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Commercial Sexual Exploitation – see All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*, p. 24.

190 United Nations, Human Rights Council, 2024; *op cit*; Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*.

the perpetrators of aggression against women...in comparison to white men.<sup>191</sup>

In her extensive research, Dr Carolyn West has demonstrated how pornography frequently fetishises black women, depicting them as animalistic and hypersexual, deserving to be ‘conquered’, especially by white men. She argues that this view of black women has been used now and throughout history to ‘justify enslavement, rape, forced reproduction and other forms of sexual coercion... Ideas that originated in slavery continue to live on and be graphically depicted in pornography.’<sup>192</sup> This phenomenon is clearly demonstrated in evidence given to the aforementioned Inquiry, which highlighted popular channels on mainstream pornography platforms entitled ‘Exploited Black Teens’, ‘Exploited African Immigrants’, and ‘African Sex Slaves.’<sup>193</sup>

While Asian women featured in mainstream pornography are stereotypically depicted as ‘passive, submissive, or eager to please’ they are found to suffer from greater aggression than women from other ethnic and racial backgrounds (Shor and Golriz, 2019). These authors suggest that Asian women’s apparent lack of resistance to aggression in the making of pornography is ‘perceived as encouragement’ to harm and violate them.<sup>194</sup>

Women and men involved in pornography production reported being verbally abused based on the colour of their skin, because they are Muslim, Latina, from Eastern Europe or Asia, based on their immigration status, culture or religion (Farley *et al*, 2023). The authors of this study conclude that pornographers have ‘eroticized racism and

monetized slavery’, noting that Jensen (2011) has described pornography as ‘the most openly racist mass-media genre in contemporary society.’<sup>195</sup> This is reinforced by Taina Bien-Aimé, of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), in her evidence to the UK Inquiry:

*“No other commerce could advertise its product on the pervasive dehumanisation of human beings based on race or ethnicity, and yet governments allow...the sale and distribution of pornographic materials segregated by the worst forms of race- and ethnicity-based negative stereotypes.”*<sup>196</sup>

### 3.2 Behaviours

Moving beyond attitudes, there is also a significant body of research evidence demonstrating the relationship between consumption of pornography, in particular regular consumption, and the perpetration of violence against women and girls.

With regard to domestic violence specifically, problematic (excessive, compulsive) consumption of pornography by men in ‘batterer intervention programs’ in the USA was found to be associated with more frequent perpetration of both physical and sexual violence against their female intimate partners.<sup>197</sup> Qualitative research in this area has also revealed that many women experienced their intimate partner ‘attempting to imitate humiliating, degrading, and/or violent acts seen in pornography within their intimate relationship.’<sup>198</sup> This is echoed by experiences from the frontline in Ireland, with Women’s Aid describing how pornography is playing

191 Fritz, N., Malic, V., Paul, B., and Zhou, Y. 2021. ‘Worse Than Objects: The Depiction of Black Women and Men and Their Sexual Relationship in Pornography.’ In *Gender Issues*, 38:100–120, p.100.

192 West, CM., (undated). ‘How Mainstream Porn Normalizes Violence Against Black Women.’ *Fight the New Drug* (last accessed 07/10/24); see also West, CM., 1995. ‘Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and Their Implications for Psychotherapy.’ In *Psychotherapy*, 32(2), 458-466.

193 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*, p. 26-27.

194 Shor, E., and Golriz, G., 2019. ‘Gender, Race, and Aggression in Mainstream Pornography.’ In *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 48(3), 739–751.

195 Farley *et al*, 2023; *op cit*, citing Jensen, R., 2011. ‘Stories of a Rape Culture: Pornography as Propaganda.’ In Reist, M. T. & Bray, A. (Eds.), *Big Porn Inc.: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornography Industry*. Australia: Spinifex

196 Statement given in evidence by Taina Bien-Aimé to the Inquiry into the pornography trade conducted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*, p. 26.

197 Brem, MJ., Garner, AR., Grigorian, H., Florimbio, AR., Wolford-Clevenger, C., Shorey, RC., and Stuart, GL., 2021. ‘Problematic Pornography Use and Physical and Sexual Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration Among Men in Batterer Intervention Programs.’ In *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(11-12):NP6085-NP6105.

198 DeKeseredy, WS., and Hall-Sanchez, A., 2017. ‘Adult Pornography and Violence Against Women in the Heartland: Results from a Rural Southeast Ohio Study.’ In *Violence Against Women*, 23, 830–849.



a significant role in the verbal, sexual and physical abuse being reported by the women accessing their services. This includes ‘horrific’ name-calling and insults, severe levels of physical aggression, including strangulation to the point of unconsciousness during sex, women being forced by their partner to watch and then reenact the acts portrayed in pornography, including being raped and coerced into sexual acts, sometimes with other men. Women’s Aid have determined that the content of mainstream pornography is providing a ‘blueprint’ for the sexual, verbal and physical abuse of women by their male intimate partners.<sup>199</sup> Scholars have noted in this context that more research is needed to better understand the complex role that pornography plays in the dynamics of domestic abuse and coercive control experienced by both women and girls in their intimate relationships.

A comprehensive review of the literature commissioned by the UK’s Government Equalities Office (GEO) in 2020 concluded that: ‘pornography use is one among other potential factors that appear to contribute to a permissive and *conducive context* that allows harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours to exist against women and girls’ (emphasis added).<sup>200</sup> Based on the literature, the authors determined that there is an ‘influential relationship’ between consumption of pornography and these harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours, and that this is ‘especially true’ for the use of violent pornography. As previously discussed (Sections 1 & 2), violent pornography is now mainstream and easily accessible by viewers of all ages – 79% of young people in England aged 18-21 reported encountering sexually violent pornography before the age of 18, the majority of which was perpetrated against women.<sup>201</sup>

Exploring these connections in greater depth, the GEO review implicated pornography in a number of harmful practices that can lead to the ‘real-world’ perpetration of violence against women and girls, as follows:

- Pornography consumption can desensitise men to the treatment of women as sex objects, in turn reducing their feelings of empathy towards the women who appear on screen to the point where sexual aggression perpetrated against them is completely normalised
- Pornography portrays women as choosing and enjoying violent and degrading sex acts (as previously highlighted in Section 1), reassuring the viewer that it is acceptable to watch women being abused, and potentially leading men to ‘misinterpret signals’ of non-consent in real life scenarios
- Pornography is therefore negatively shaping men’s ‘sexual scripts’ (as explained in Section 1), creating the false understanding/expectation that women enjoy and therefore will submit to ‘porn-like sex’, including aggressive and degrading sexual acts.<sup>202</sup>

An extensive meta-analysis of 46 studies on the effects of pornography consumption (Oddone-Paolucci *et al*, 2000), encompassing a total of over 12,000 participants, concluded that exposure to pornography increases one’s risk of committing sexual offences, leading the authors to state: ‘the research in this area can move beyond the question of *whether* pornography has an influence on violence<sup>203</sup> (emphasis added) – in other words it certainly does. These findings are further consolidated by Wright *et al*’s (2016) meta-analysis, which determined that pornography consumption is *associated* with sexual aggression. This analysis was also able to refute the argument that these associations are due to already sexually aggressive people seeking out

199 Women’s Aid, 2022a; *op cit*, and see also the Preface of this report.

200 Upton, J., *et al*, 2020; *op cit*, p. 8.

201 Children’s Commissioner, 2023a; *op cit*.

202 Upton, J., *et al*, 2020; *op cit*.

203 Oddone-Paolucci, E., Genuis, M., & Violato, C., 2000. A Meta-analysis of the Published Research on the Effects of Pornography. In C. Violato, E. Oddone-Paolucci, & M. Genuis (Eds.), *The Changing Family and Child Development* (pp. 48–59). Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

violent content. It found that while many pornography consumers are not sexually aggressive, the 'accumulated data leave little doubt that, on average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual aggression and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression than individuals who do not consume pornography or who consume pornography less frequently.'<sup>204</sup>

Reflecting the previous discussion on how pornography is influencing sexual scripts (see 1.5 and 1.6), numerous authors have further detailed how particular and often degrading portrayals of women and the prevalence of particular sex acts in pornography are shaping men's expectations of real-world sexual encounters. For example, Flood (2010) highlights how the common pornography portrayal of women as persons with limitless sexual appetites, who are always sexually fulfilled by their male partners, combined with the ubiquity of anal sex, creates the understanding that such behaviours are always 'normal, desirable and enjoyable for women.'<sup>205</sup>

A more recent study found that higher levels of pornography consumption are significantly associated with engaging in sexual behaviours as an aggressor – including hairpulling, spanking and choking, and 'uncommon and/or degrading' activities such as ejaculation in a woman's mouth, anal sex, double penetration and ATM (Bridges *et al*, 2016). This study also finds that men's learned 'pornographic scripts' are being played out in their real-world sexual encounters with women.<sup>206</sup>

Alario argues that the obvious objectification of women 'which is by definition a fundamental and intrinsic characteristic of pornography, is the first step in a continuum that makes possible other kinds of violence against women.'<sup>207</sup> Indeed, researchers have

posited that a key explanatory factor in the link between pornography consumption and the perpetration of violence against women and girls is that of dehumanisation. A recent study (Bevens and Loughnan, 2019) demonstrates that men's dehumanisation of women – a 'denial of women's human uniqueness' – predicts their own sexually aggressive behaviour. In real terms this means that a failure to view women as 'fully human' is a driving factor for sexual offending. It is very likely that the barriers to harming or even murdering women are lowered when one cannot recognise their humanity, when they somehow seem 'less human' than you. Startlingly, this study recommends that efforts to prevent male violence must emphasise to men 'that women are people.'<sup>208</sup> What is clear from the wider literature, is that in no other place, on no other platform, are women more dehumanised or objectified than in the sex trade – in prostitution and pornography. Pornography has played a role in dehumanising women and girls in the eyes of some men and boys to the extent that they not only deem gender-based violence as acceptable in certain circumstances, their propensity to perpetrate such violence is also increased.

### 3.3 Impacts on children and young people

Just as with adults, pornography has been implicated in shaping the sexual scripts of children and young people, and arguably to an even greater extent than for those over 18.

A survey of men aged 18-29 found that current pornography use was significantly associated with age at first exposure to pornography (Sun *et al*, 2016). Specifically, the younger the age at which men were first exposed to pornography, the higher their current use of it. The

204 Wright, P.J., Tokunaga, R.S. and Kraus, A., 2016. 'A Meta-Analysis of Pornography Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies.' In *Journal of Communication*, 66:183–205, p. 199.

205 Flood, M., 2010. Young Men Using Pornography. In Boyle, K., (Ed.), *Everyday Pornography*. London: Routledge, 164-178.

206 Bridges, A., Sun, C., Ezzell, M., and Johnson, J., 2016. 'Sexual Scripts and the Sexual Behavior of Men and Women Who Use Pornography.' In *Sexualisation, Media & Society* Vol.2.

207 Abalo Rodríguez I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024; *op cit*, p. 43-44.

208 Bevens, C., and Loughnan, S., 2019. 'Insights Into Men's Sexual Aggression Toward Women: Dehumanization and Objectification. In *Sex Roles*, Vol 81 713-730.

authors observe that the explosion of online pornography took place after many of the older men in their study had already developed their early sexual identities (18/19 years old). On this basis they argue: ‘It could be that men who developed their sexual arousal patterns outside the modern mainstream pornographic script possess a more diverse and/or experience-based heuristic model of sexual behavior, while the younger men in our study relied more on readily-available internet pornography to form their sexual scripts.’<sup>209</sup> This finding is certainly relevant to the current generation of young people, all of whom have been born into the digital age. The authors conclude that while pornography is often dismissed as pure entertainment or fantasy: ‘pornography is also much more. What happens on the screen may implicate life off of it.’<sup>210</sup>

In his evidence to the aforementioned UK Inquiry, Dr Michael Flood is even more forthright:

*“Let me put this as bluntly as I can. The jury is in. There is a wealth of evidence that pornography exposure is shaping young people’s and adult’s sexual lives, in harmful and violent ways. So, if anyone tells you that that’s not the case, they’re either ignorant or lying.”*<sup>211</sup>

Given how easily accessible pornography is for children and young people as ‘digital natives’, and the proactive way in which the pornography industry targets them as consumers (see Section 4), with many being introduced to its sexually explicit and violent content long before their own first real-world sexual experience, experts have argued that the pornography trade is responsible for essentially grooming some children to perpetrate or submit to sexual violence.

This analysis is borne out in a review of research conducted between 1995 and 2015 on adolescents’ use of pornography (Peter

and Valkenburg, 2016), further highlighting the gendered differences in its impacts. The studies reviewed tended to show that use of pornography was related to a higher likelihood to engage in and experience sexual aggression. The authors report: ‘The relation between pornography use and sexual aggression was stronger for boys, while that between pornography use and sexual victimization was demonstrated mainly for girls.’<sup>212</sup>

A longitudinal study of over 1500 young people aged 10-21 in the US predicted the probability of a young person committing a first act of sexual violence, which included sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape (Ybarra and Thompson, 2018). This study revealed that the two strongest predictors of perpetration of a first sexually violent act were 1) prior exposure to parental/caregiver abuse, and 2) exposure to violent pornography. For boys and young men specifically, exposure to violent pornography was the strongest predictor (albeit with a wider confidence interval) of a first sexually violent act.<sup>213</sup>

One key informant explained how, in his own practice, he regularly observes the impact of pornography consumption on boys, describing how the pleasurable ‘dopamine hits’ in their brain that pornography provides keeps bringing them back for more and more extreme material, with potentially serious real-world consequences:

*“...so, these guys who create pornography understand very clearly how this [process in the brain] works. And so, it’s moved from gangs, and it’s moved from consent. Now if you look at pornography today, it’s about stepsisters, it’s about stepdads. And so, it’s moving towards all the time more extreme, more extreme. Because your dopamine will level out and you won’t get the same kick, and so they have to constantly feed you more extreme material to keep you*

209 Sun, C., et al, 2016; *op cit*, p. 991.

210 *Ibid*, p. 992.

211 Statement given in evidence by Dr Michael Flood to the Inquiry into the pornography trade conducted by the UK’s All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Commercial Sexual Exploitation – see All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*, p. 19.

212 Peter, J. & Valkenburg, 2016; *op cit*, p. 523.

213 Ybarra, ML., and Thompson, RE., 2018. ‘Predicting the Emergence of Sexual Violence in Adolescence.’ In *Prevention Science*, 19(4): 403–415.

*coming back, to keep that memory being programmed, to keep you [revisiting] their platform. And that's why it's particularly problematic. Because if you programme a kid at [age] 10, 8... if you get that into the mind of a young child, what you're doing is you're setting them up...best case scenario, you're probably setting them up for years of isolation and loneliness. Worst case scenario, you're setting them up to be a perpetrator..."* Dr Richard Hogan

The aforementioned large-scale five-country study of over 4000 school-going young people in Europe (see 1.4) further illuminates the key role that pornography consumption plays in boys' perpetration of sexual coercion and violence, including in their own intimate relationships.<sup>214</sup> The study found that boys' perpetration of sexual violence against their sexual partners (ranging from unwanted touching to rape) was significantly associated with regular consumption of online pornography. The authors conclude that there is a pressing need for sex and relationships education that supports young people to discern the critical difference between 'the values and behaviour conveyed by pornography and those that characterise positive intimate relationships.'<sup>215</sup>

This was echoed by one of this study's key informants who works with young people in Ireland. He highlighted the longer-term impact of pornography consumption on young people's ability to enjoy positive, pleasurable sexual relationships into the future:

*"I explain to them [his students] that when you do get to have your first sexual encounter with somebody, if you've trained yourself to use porn for ten years or seven years or five years, you may rob yourself... of the ability to share it with somebody else because what you're going to be having is just an elaborate form of masturbating into or onto somebody else... [you are]*

*potentially robbing yourself of a real sexual experience with somebody else. And [yet]... the whole reason they're into porn in the first place is because they want to learn about sex. And they [young people] really want to have positive sex. They really want to have the sex that they've heard is fantastic. And that actually, they might be robbing themselves of it and they might be really damaging themselves as well in terms of not being able to perform [sexually] – certainly as a man, not being able to perform... when they hit puberty they don't even have a chance to develop their own personal sexual tastes because for years already they know that as soon as their sex hormones are released by their brain they will immediately go to porn... I'm right now concerned about allowing it [porn] to not just inform but dictate the sex script of the current generation of kids."*  
Eoghan Cleary

Finally, it must be noted that in terms of impacts on children and young people, exposure to pornography is increasingly being implicated in child-on-child sexual abuse to devastating effect – this is discussed further in 3.5 below.

### 3.4 Physical, mental and sexual health harms

Some of the significant physical, mental and sexual health harms suffered by those involved in pornography production have been documented above (see 1.3). However, it is evident that on the other side of the screen, pornography consumption can also have a detrimental impact on health.

In the ESRI's study of young people previously cited above, at age 20 pornography use was found to be strongly associated with greater use of negative strategies in coping with stress, including drinking alcohol, taking drugs or

214 Stanley *et al*, 2018; *op cit*.

215 STIR – Safeguarding Teenage Intimate Relationships (undated). *Executive Summary and Briefing Paper 3 on Violence in Teenage Intimate Relationships*. STIR, p. 20.



‘taking to one’s bed.’<sup>216</sup> Males in the study who use pornography were found to have: ‘poorer wellbeing than non-users, being less satisfied with their lives, reporting more depressive symptoms and having a poorer self-image.’<sup>217</sup> Numerous studies have also noted that pornography negatively impacts on consumers’ mental health by ‘imposing unobtainable body ideals,’<sup>218</sup> causing both female and male consumers to unfavourably compare their own bodies to those featured in pornography.<sup>219</sup> Key informants noted that this is the case for both young people and adults. In the Children’s Commissioner’s study, 59% of young people agreed that ‘viewing online pornography affects children and young people’s body image’, with girls in particular highlighting pornography’s role in fuelling body insecurity and anxiety.

Boys and men report that pornography causes them to question their ability to sexually ‘perform’ and be able to ‘live up to’ what they observe men doing in pornography.<sup>220</sup> Recent research has determined that levels of erectile dysfunction in young men (aged 35 and under) are ‘alarmingly high’<sup>221</sup> and significantly associated with ‘problematic pornography consumption.’<sup>222</sup> Just over 21% of the researchers’ large sample of sexually active participants aged 35 and under were determined to have some degree of erectile dysfunction (ED) ranging from mild to severe. More than 60% of those whose ED was categorised as ‘mild’ nevertheless stated that the condition ‘bothered’ them. The study concludes that higher scores on a measure of ‘problematic pornography consumption’ result

in a higher probability of developing ED.

The ESRI determined that young people in Ireland who use pornography are significantly less likely to engage in regular condom use during sex than those young people who do not use pornography. This difference was determined to be ‘sizeable’ – regular condom use is reduced by almost one half among male users, with the authors positing a link with the frequent depiction of condomless sex in mainstream pornography.<sup>223</sup>

In his research, Shor (2019) highlights the evidence that adolescents who consume pornography are more likely than those who do not to engage in risky sexual behaviours, including condomless anal sex,<sup>224</sup> which carries its own particular risks of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In his own study of videos featuring teenagers, Shor concludes:

‘The common depictions of unprotected anal penetration (in particular, forceful anal penetration) in videos featuring teenage performers may also have negative health consequences... The high prevalence of unprotected anal intercourse in such videos may lead female teenagers to engage more frequently in unprotected anal sex, both because they are especially likely to model their sexual behaviors after videos including other teenage performers and because their partners who watch such videos may pressure them to engage in anal sex... This, in turn, increases their risk for various STDs... especially as anal penetration is often forceful and aggressive...’<sup>225</sup>

216 Nolan, A and Smyth, E., 2024; *op cit*.

217 *Ibid*. p. ix.

218 Children’s Commissioner; 2023a; *op cit*.

219 *Ibid*; CEASE, 2021; *op cit*; Doornwaard, SM., Bickham, DS., Rich, M., Vanwesenbeeck, I., van den Eijnden, RJ., ter Bogt, TF., 2014 ‘Sex-related Online Behaviors and Adolescents’ Body and Sexual Self-perceptions. In *Pediatrics*, 134(6):1103-10.; Peter, J., and Valkenburg, P., 2014. ‘Does Exposure to Sexually Explicit Internet Material Increase Body Dissatisfaction? A Longitudinal Study’. In *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 36, p. 297-307.

220 Men’s Development Network, 2022. *Men’s Attitudes Now: Survey – Final Report*. Ireland: MDN; Sun, C., *et al*, 2016; *op cit*.

221 Jacobs, T., Geysemans, B., Van Hal, G., Glazemakers, I., Fog-Poulsen, K., Vermandel, A., De Wachter, S., De Win, G., 2021. ‘Associations Between Online Pornography Consumption and Sexual Dysfunction in Young Men: Multivariate Analysis Based on an International Web-Based Survey’. In *JMIR Public Health Surveill*. 21;7(10):e32542.

222 ‘Problematic pornography consumption’ was measured by the CYPAT (Cyber Pornography Addiction Test), which measures a range of factors such as one’s ability to ‘control’ one’s pornography consumption, the impact of one’s consumption on personal relationships, ignoring commitments to focus instead on consumption, consuming pornography in inappropriate locations such as school/work, overreliance on pornography to achieve sexual arousal, among others.

223 Nolan, A and Smyth, E., 2024; *op cit*.

224 Shor, E., 2019; *op cit*.

225 *Ibid*, p. 1030.



The link between regular pornography consumption and the ‘real-world’ perpetration of physical and sexual violence against women and girls is now well-established, as this Section has demonstrated. This includes pressuring or forcing women and girls to perform unwanted sexual acts, including acts that are ‘painful, risky or humiliating.’<sup>226</sup> Girls who participated in the Children’s Commissioner for England’s study, similarly highlighted pressure to perform acts boys had viewed in pornography, including ‘aggressive, degrading and pain-inducing acts’, as one 16-year-old girl explained:

*“It makes boys think they can do everything they see in porn in real life. Some things like anal are everywhere in porn but most girls don’t want to do that. Boys just think it’s normal and expect us all to do it and it puts pressure on us” (Girl, age 16, survey respondent).<sup>227</sup>*

One of this study’s key informants, an Irish GP with expertise in women’s health, recounted the multiple harms she is witnessing in her practice that arise from pornography consumption, including the case of a primary-school aged boy who was traumatised by the violent pornography he was exposed to when he clicked on a link he was sent, and a young woman unable to walk after ‘rough sex’:

*“And, she said... ‘I find sex really painful. I sometimes can’t walk afterwards’... And we talked about it. And basically, he [the girl’s boyfriend] was being really rough with her, like, super, super rough. And I said, ‘what is that about? Sex isn’t supposed to hurt you where you can’t walk straight.’ And she said, ‘He thinks that’s a great sign that he’s such a big man.’... But that was quite shocking to me that she felt that this is acceptable.”* Dr Madeleine Ní Dhálaigh, GP

This key informant also highlighted during discussion increased levels of sexual violence against young women she observed during the Covid-19 pandemic, including cases in which

vulnerable young women were deceived into trusting someone and then sexually assaulted or raped by them. She noted that none of these young women ever wanted to report these assaults and queried whether experiencing sexual violence had become in some way ‘normalised’ for them against the backdrop of prevalent pornography consumption. She subsequently wrote:

*“The issues of sexual violence/violence against women and children/domestic violence and how all of these issues intersect with pornography and prostitution have always concerned me and while I am a general practitioner in the true sense of the word, down here in rural Ireland I see the effects of it every week at work. With all the disclosures over the years and conversations about sexual health I definitely feel pornography and the now very visible escort service industry now informs the predator and his behaviour. But also, could it somehow normalise/sanitise the assault for the women themselves and create a further barrier to their addressing the violence meted upon them?”* (Dr Madeleine Ní Dhálaigh; written communication with lead author, May 2024).

Dr Ní Dhálaigh also highlighted the links between pornography and the expectation that women and girls perform anal sex, without being aware that anal sex is a riskier practice for women than men:

*“I just feel the whole pelvic floor thing for women is going to be really something that young women probably aren’t maybe feeling the effects of it just yet, but I think porn is having a huge effect on that... the whole action of birth, it just weakens your pelvic floor [with] vaginal birth. But then if you’ve got a porn industry telling you that you should have anal sex or you should have all manner of objects put into your anus... Like, nobody talks about the injuries that women in porn*

226 CEASE, 2021; *op cit*.

227 Children’s Commissioner; 2023a; *op cit*, p. 30.

*suffer, the injuries that they suffer from this violent, aggressive, sex that they're being subjected to, and I think it's probably one of the most unspoken about parts of women's healthcare in general practice, in gynaecology... because [of] the 'sex work is work' thing, because the whole 'porn is cool' thing, everybody's voice is chilled... but I'm intimately familiar with the female pelvic floor. I don't know how many I see every day. I'm in a very privileged position to help women in that situation... you know, it's faecal incontinence. It's one thing having urine incontinence, and it's awful, but faecal incontinence or flatus incontinence, it's just so awful for women... for people to compare men having sex with men, their pelvic configuration is obviously completely different. They've so much more support there because there's no birth canal, there's no outlet there. So, they don't have the same injuries that we have."* Dr Madeleine Ní Dhálaigh

This echoes recent concerns voiced by experts in the UK, colorectal surgeons who have experienced first-hand the detrimental health impacts of anal sex that are specifically experienced by women and girls (Gana and Hunt, 2022). They link the rise in the popularity of heterosexual anal sex to pornography, noting that among 16–24-year-olds the practice has risen from 12.5% to 28.5% over a few decades, with up to one quarter of women reporting that they have been pressured into anal sex on at least one occasion. The authors highlight the harms of anal sex that are particular to female bodies, but that women and girls are largely unaware of:

'Anal sex... is also associated with specific health concerns. The absence of vaginal secretions, increased traumatic abrasions, and less common use of condoms increase the risk of sexually transmitted disease and anal malignancy. Anal pain, bleeding, and fissures also occur as a result of anal intercourse. Increased rates of faecal incontinence and anal sphincter injury have been reported in women who have anal intercourse. Women are at a higher risk of incontinence than men because of their different anatomy and the effects of hormones, pregnancy, and childbirth on the pelvic floor. Women have less robust anal sphincters and lower anal canal pressures than men, and damage caused by anal penetration is therefore more consequential. The pain and bleeding women report after anal sex is indicative of trauma, and risks may be increased if anal sex is coerced.'<sup>228</sup>

Concerned health professionals have also begun to highlight the significant risks and harms associated with strangulation as a sexual practice made popular by pornography – see Box 1 below.

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228 Gana, T., and Hunt, L., 2022. 'Young Women and Anal Sex. In *The British Medical Journal*. 2022; 378.

## Box 1: In Focus

# The Stranglehold of Pornography

A stark but very pertinent example of pornography's insidious influence on our intimate lives is the practice of strangling women and girls during sex.

Non-fatal strangulation appears to be increasingly ubiquitous – with more than one half up to two thirds of women who participated in studies in the UK and USA reporting that they have been strangled during sex.<sup>229</sup> One third of participants in the US study had been strangled during their most recent sexual encounter.<sup>230</sup> More than one third of men under 40 surveyed in the UK said that they had 'choked' (strangled) someone during sex.<sup>231</sup>

This practice is colloquially known as 'choking' within the pornography trade and mainstream media; but can be more accurately described as strangulation in that it typically involves the placing of hands, arms, legs or a ligature on or around the neck and applying pressure (whereas choking more accurately refers to something *inside* the throat that is blocking airflow). Strangulation results in restriction of oxygen intake and blood flow to the brain. It is often used as a tactic of control and abuse. Terms such as 'choking' or 'breath play' are used by the pornography trade to obfuscate the reality of 'strangulation porn'.<sup>232</sup>

Experts have highlighted how 'non-fatal strangulation' can result in very serious physical and psychological health consequences (Bichard *et al*, 2022). While the practice may ultimately be 'non-fatal', this does not mean that it is not potentially life-threatening during its exercise. Neurological consequences include: 'loss of consciousness, indicating at least mild acquired brain injury, stroke, seizures, motor and speech disorders, and paralysis. Psychological outcomes included PTSD, depression, suicidality, and dissociation.'<sup>233</sup> Consciousness can be lost within four to ten seconds of arterial pressure, followed by seizure within six to eight seconds.<sup>234</sup> These authors posit that strangulation may be the second most common cause of stroke in women under 40.<sup>235</sup>

In their analysis, Bichard *et al* (2022) demonstrate that 'strangulation – even for seconds – can cause 'lifechanging damages to the mind, and the brain'; highlighting how this practice is a 'pornographic trope'.<sup>236</sup> They question whether 'consent' to strangulation in the context of a sexual encounter can truly be 'informed' when, firstly, strangulation has been normalised to the extent that those experiencing it are entirely uninformed about its real risks, including brain damage and death, and secondly, the physical effects of strangulation remove one's capacity to withdraw consent, as the authors explain:

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229 Of the 82 women who participated in the UK research, 45 had experienced non-consensual strangulation, choking or pressure on their neck from a partner or ex-partner, see: We Can't Consent To This, 2021. '*I thought this was normal*' – *The Normalisation of Violence Against Women in Sex* (last accessed 27/09/24); while nearly two-thirds of female college students in the US reported being choked (strangled) during sex, see Orenstein, P., 2024. '*The Troubling Trend in Teenage Sex*', *The New York Times*, (last accessed 27/09/24).

230 *The New York Times*; *ibid*.

231 BBC Scotland/Radio 5 Live, *Rough sex survey with men – 14th February 2020* (last accessed 27/09/24).

232 CEASE, 2024. *Profits Before People: How the Pornography Industry is Normalising and Monetising Sexual Violence*. UK: CEASE.

233 Bichard, H., Byrne, C., Saville, CWN., and Coetzer, R., 2022. 'The Neuropsychological Outcomes of Non-fatal Strangulation in Domestic and Sexual Violence: A Systematic Review'. In *Neuropsychological Rehabilitation*, 32(6):1164-1192.

234 *Ibid*.

235 *Ibid*.

236 *Ibid*.

‘The potential onset of dyspraxia, amnesia, and unconsciousness itself (in as little as four seconds) [as a result of strangulation] are disabling: the very organ that is needed to withdraw consent is compromised by the activity to which that consent applies. The term ‘consenting kink’ is therefore a potentially fatal misnomer.’<sup>237</sup>

Reminiscent of the links between pornography and torture asserted by other scholars (see 1.3); Bichard *et al* (2022) proceed to argue that while waterboarding has been internationally outlawed as a form of torture, only the airway is blocked in this practice; whereas strangulation is more lethal because as well as impacting one’s ability to breathe, it is also cutting off blood flow to and from the brain. On this basis they assert: ‘There is something societally flawed about banning the waterboarding of terrorists, whilst ignoring the intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2010) of those millions of women around the world who are regular victims of strangulation.’<sup>238</sup>

The authors also highlight the inevitability of the ‘non-fatal’ becoming fatal in some cases, and the associated use of the ‘rough sex’ defence by perpetrators – noting the collation by a UK advocacy group of ‘250 cases of women fatally strangled by men during sexual intercourse, in which the legal defence teams argued that the victim consented, that therefore the death was accidental, and consequently the assailant not guilty of murder.’<sup>239</sup>

In her investigation for the New York Times, Peggy Orenstein highlights the extent to which strangulation during sex is an increasingly common practice among young people in particular, normalised through their exposure to pornography.<sup>240</sup> She cites recent US research which found that 25% of women who had experienced strangulation were between the ages of 12 and 17 when it first happened. In repeated surveys, the number of women reporting ‘extreme effects from strangulation (neck swelling, loss of consciousness, losing control of urinary function) has crept up’ indicating that young women’s sexual partners are pressing on their necks harder and for longer. She describes some of the most frightening effects:

‘most [young women] say that their partners never or only sometimes asked before grabbing their necks. For many, there had been moments when they couldn’t breathe or speak, compromising the ability to withdraw consent, if they’d given it. No wonder that, in a separate study... choking was among the most frequently listed sex acts young women said had scared them, reporting that it sometimes made them worry whether they’d survive.’<sup>241</sup>

The author cites examples of young people trying to find a ‘safe’ way to be strangled (there is no such thing); young men being seen as weak or submissive to women (‘a simp’) if they do not want to strangle their sexual partners; and young women being labelled ‘vanilla’ for not wanting to submit to strangulation.

There is little question among scholars and key informants that we have arrived at this place because of the extent to which pornography has seeped into our culture and our intimate lives, teaching children and young people in particular that these harmful and potentially life-threatening practices are what ‘normal sex’ should involve. The ‘pornification’ of

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237 *Ibid.*

238 *Ibid.*

239 *Ibid.*

240 *The New York Times; op cit.*

241 *Ibid.*

popular culture<sup>242</sup> is highly influential and evident across society – from the #chokeher hashtag<sup>243</sup> and #chokemedaddy memes on mainstream social media platforms,<sup>244</sup> to chart-topping popular songs featuring lyrics that celebrate or joke about ‘choking’ – such as those by Irish hip-hop trio Kneecap or American singer Jack Harlow, who raps: “I’m vanilla, baby, I’ll choke you, but I ain’t no killer, baby...”<sup>245</sup>

The real-world implications of this are stark, as one of this study’s key informants highlights:

*“...when it comes to young people and sexual violence within relationships... I wholeheartedly think that pornography has groomed and is grooming generations of children. And if you have grown up watching violent pornography [and from that you have learned] that girls expect and enjoy violent sex, [if] that’s the only thing you have watched and consumed and been told, what else are you going to believe?... it’s going to be a real problem for the judicial system when they have 21-year-old blokes there saying, ‘but everybody strangles their girlfriends, it’s just what you do.’ So, it’s going to be really tricky because they’ve committed a crime...but they’ve also been groomed by the porn industry to do that.”* Gemma Kelly, CEASE, UK

In fact, this issue is already being played out in judicial systems internationally and locally. In late 2023, Ireland’s Minister for Justice introduced a standalone offence of non-fatal strangulation or non-fatal suffocation with a maximum sentence of up to ten years, and a standalone offence of non-fatal strangulation or non-fatal suffocation causing serious harm with a maximum sentence of up to life imprisonment; offences described as ‘often indicators of further, potentially lethal violence against a woman.’<sup>246</sup> The need for these new offences is clearly a reflection of their increasing prevalence, and the move was welcomed by Women’s Aid<sup>247</sup> given women’s experiences of strangulation in the context of domestic violence and coercive control. Several months later, the first charge under this new non-fatal strangulation offence was brought against a man in Dublin who is also accused of rape and recording intimate images of his victim without her consent.<sup>248</sup> Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, a new standalone offence of non-fatal strangulation or asphyxiation resulted in 26 people being charged with this offence in the first month of its operation alone.<sup>249</sup> Its introduction was accompanied by training for police officers, alongside specialist resources<sup>250</sup> and a dedicated public awareness raising campaign.<sup>251</sup>

Societally, it seems that we have reached a point where new legislation must now be created in an effort to combat and deter pornography-inspired, and potentially lethal, gender-based violence.

242 Alario, 2021; *op cit*.

243 CEASE, 2024; *op cit*.

244 The New York Times; *op cit*.

245 Jack Harlow, *Lovin on me*, lyrics via Google.

246 Gov.ie Press Release, 2023. *New Criminal Offences and Tougher Sentences Take Effect from 1 November 2023*. Gov.ie (last accessed 27/09/24).

247 Women’s Aid, 2022b; *op cit*.

248 Tuite, T., 2024. ‘Man Accused of New Strangulation Offence, Rape and Recording Intimate Images of Woman in Dublin.’ *Journal.ie* (last accessed 27/09/24); Tuite, T., 2024. ‘Trial Order for Man Accused of Rape, Strangulation, and Recording Intimate Videos of a Woman.’ *Journal.ie* (last accessed 27/09/24).

249 McCambridge J., 2024. ‘Police Charge 26 in First Month Since Non-Fatal Strangulation Law Introduced.’ *Irish Examiner* (last accessed 27/09/24).

250 PSNI, 2023. *Non-Fatal Strangulation* (last accessed 27/09/24).

251 Department of Justice Northern Ireland, 2023. *Non-Fatal Strangulation TV Campaign Gets Underway* (last accessed 27/09/24); see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWMH4oap7Cc> (last accessed 27/09/24).



Finally in terms of health harms, it was noted that academic research on pornography conducted by adults typically requires stringent protocols to be put in place before ethical approval is granted, and this often includes measures to protect researchers' mental health. Similarly, it is often recommended that moderators reviewing all manner of harmful content, including pornographic content, on large social media platforms are provided with mental health supports. These measures clearly acknowledge the harms that repeated exposure to problematic content online, including mainstream pornography, can cause to adults. Alario describes developing PTSD as a result of her doctoral research in which she undertook a content analysis of pornography.<sup>252</sup>

In this regard, a number of key informants highlighted the incongruity of placing robust safeguards and supports in place for adults exposed to pornography in a controlled way, while at the same time permitting children and young people unfettered access to the same content that has been previously determined to be detrimental to adults' health.

### 3.5 Escalation pathways to abuse

Experts are divided on the question of whether 'porn addiction' is a genuine form of addiction.<sup>253</sup> Pornography does however appear to have some addictive qualities in terms of its impact on the brain and how, for some, consumption can escalate over time.

A number of mechanisms by which men's viewing behaviours may escalate have been suggested by Whisnant (2010), including through repeated exposure, leading to desensitisation – content that at first seemed shocking to the viewer becomes normalised after multiple exposures.<sup>254</sup> This is echoed by expert Dr Max Waltman, who noted in the

UK Inquiry that one of the factors potentially contributing to the scale and nature of violence in mainstream pornography is that:

*"...research shows that consumers quickly become de-sensitised to the materials that show less violence and require more and more extreme and aggressive materials to be aroused."*<sup>255</sup>

Professor Gail Dines describes in her book *Pornland* the production and distribution of 'pseudo-child-pornography', which uses computer-generated images of children or real young women over 18, who are 'childified' to look much younger. She notes that this content, usually described as 'teen porn', is consumed by millions of men every day, creating an increased demand for child sexual abuse material (CSAM), which is in turn met by pornographers and other abusers.<sup>256</sup>

Several of this study's key informants highlighted how the 'escalation pathways' through pornography consumption have led some men, who previously had no sexual interest in children, to seek out more 'taboo' content, which eventually leads to them accessing CSAM online and in some cases to sexually abusing children in-person, as one informant described:

*"...research is showing that men who have shown no [previous] interest in children whatsoever... to offenders who have sexually abused children saying that never in their lifetime up until that point [of habitually consuming pornography] had they ever thought that they would find themselves downloading CSAM [child sexual abuse material] and thinking about perpetrating against kids... And [we are] seeing a massive rise in teenagers also accessing CSAM."* Gemma Kelly

252 See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACN8Ai44og0> (last accessed 07/10/24).

253 Jacobs *et al*, 2021; *op cit*.

254 Whisnant, R., 2010. From Jekyll to Hyde: The Grooming of Male Pornography Consumers. In Boyle, K., (Ed.), *Everyday Pornography*. London: Routledge, 114-133.

255 Statement given in evidence by Dr Max Waltman to the Inquiry into the pornography trade conducted by the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Commercial Sexual Exploitation – see All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*, p. 14.

256 Dines, G., 2010. *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. Boston: Beacon Press.

This is further supported by evidence from police and practitioners in the UK, who have also noted the increasing trend of men ‘crossing the line’ – acquiring a sexual interest in children as a result of their heavy pornography use, often via the bridge of the very popular genre ‘teen porn’. One UK practitioner who undertakes preventative work with men who perpetrate sexual offences against children described what he is observing in his current practice:

*“Mainstream pornography sites are changing the thresholds of what is normal... What we are seeing on a daily basis is the conflation of easy access to hardcore and deviant pornography and an interest in child molestation. The link is unambiguous.”<sup>257</sup>*

Even more startling, is that similar patterns of offending behaviour have been observed amongst children and young people themselves. According to UK experts, pornography is ‘driving UK teens’ to consume and share child sexual abuse material online.<sup>258</sup> CEASE in the UK report that: ‘The sharp rise in peer-on-peer sexual harassment and abuse in our schools and universities is linked to children’s easy access to online pornography.’<sup>259</sup> Increases in violent sexual assaults on UK university campuses have been linked to pornography consumption by students from an early age, with strangulation often a feature of assault complaints.<sup>260</sup>

This connection is further borne out by recent research undertaken by England’s Children’s Commissioner of cases of child-on-child sexual abuse. Her analysis of hundreds of reported cases found references to specific acts of sexual violence commonly seen in

pornography in half of the police interviews undertaken following these reports. Such acts included slapping, choking and strangulation. The Commissioner concluded that pornography consumption is indeed a factor in the perpetration of child-on-child sexual abuse and that accessing violent pornography can play a role in children’s own sexually harmful behaviour towards another child or children.<sup>261</sup>

In Ireland this same finding is supported by frontline experts. A report on online harms commissioned by Ireland’s Coimisiún na Meán<sup>262</sup> refers to the Children’s Commissioner for England’s research and notes that: ‘The Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) and Children at Risk in Ireland (CARI) have endorsed the findings of a study which found that sexual violence commonly seen in pornography was also found in half of police interview transcripts for sex abuse cases committed by a child against another child...’<sup>263</sup> CARI further confirmed that the findings of the Commissioner’s research tally with their experience at the frontline regarding the link between pornography consumption and sexually harmful behaviour in children, noting:

*“In our experience when children under 12 are exposed to pornography, they act out what they have seen online on other children, which is extremely concerning. The findings confirm the high correlation between pornography and peer or sibling abuse.”<sup>264</sup>*

To frame this in stark terms, in both the UK and Ireland pornography has now been determined to be ‘a routine factor’ in sexual offending by children,<sup>265</sup> very often against other children. As outlined above, this is being

257 Mike Sheath of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, cited in Grant, H., 2020. ‘How Extreme Porn Has Become A Gateway Drug Into Child Abuse.’ *The Guardian* (last accessed 07/10/24).

258 Grant, H., 2023. ‘Pornography Driving UK Teens Towards Child Abuse Material, Say Experts.’ *The Guardian* (last accessed 07/10/24).

259 CEASE, 2021; *op cit*, p. 10.

260 Fazackerley, A., 2023. ‘Hardcore Porn, Choking and Rape: UK Universities Left to Tackle Rising Tide of Sexual Assaults.’ *The Guardian* (last accessed 07/10/24).

261 Children’s Commissioner (England), 2023b. *Evidence on Pornography’s Influence on Harmful Sexual Behaviour Among Children*. London: Children’s Commissioner; see also Milmo, D., 2023. ‘Violent Porn Acts Occurring in Sexual Abuse Between Under-18s, Report Finds.’ *The Guardian* (last accessed 07/01/24).

262 Coimisiún na Meán is the regulator of broadcasting and online media in Ireland.

263 PA Consulting, 2023. *Video-Sharing Platform Services Online Harms Evidence Review: Provided to Inform Coimisiún na Meán’s Approach to VSPS Regulation*. London: PA Consulting, p. 17.

264 O’Keeffe, C., 2023. ‘Shocking link between viewing of porn and child-on-child abuse.’ *Irish Examiner* (last accessed 07/10/24).

265 Gallagher, C., and Carolan, M., 2023. ‘Porn, Phones and Crime: Extreme Pornography is Now Routine Factor in Child Sex Offender Cases.’ *The Irish Times* (last accessed 07/10/24).

documented by child protection experts and police, but also increasingly in the courts by judges and legal professionals.

In a 2021 case in Ireland, barrister Brendan Grehan SC called this issue “an epidemic in its own right of young boys accessing pornography and then acting it out in inappropriate ways”. At the time he was defending a boy who was 12 when he raped his eight-year-old cousin.<sup>266</sup> A probation service report linked the offending to the boy’s exposure to pornography on his mobile phone from an early age. In 2023, Judge Catherine Staines highlighted the role pornography played in a violent sexual assault perpetrated by a 13-year-old boy against a woman he followed at night, noting: “It is shocking that this [pornography] is available to vulnerable, impressionable young people”. The boy had been accessing pornography on his phone for two years prior to the offence.<sup>267</sup> Retired judge Michael White, former head of the Central Criminal Court, has also highlighted the role pornography plays in sexual offences committed by children, noting that the courts may only be seeing ‘the tip of the iceberg’ when it comes to such cases.<sup>268</sup> It is also difficult to ignore the central role that pornography played in the life of ‘Boy A’, one of two 13-year-old boys found guilty of the murder of 14-year-old Ana Kriégel in Dublin in 2018.<sup>269</sup>

Finally, numerous experts have highlighted the potential role that pornography consumption is playing in driving the increase in the overall proportion of sexual offences that are being committed by persons under 18. According to police data, children are now the largest group of perpetrators of alleged sexual abuse against children in England and Wales – 52% of alleged sexual offenders in England and Wales are minors, with the overwhelming

majority being boys. This is up from one third a decade ago, and according to police the increase is linked to the availability of violent pornography.<sup>270</sup> The UK’s National Police Chiefs’ Council child protection lead explained:

*“This is predominantly a gender-based crime of boys committing offences against girls... I think that is being exacerbated by the accessibility of violent pornography and the ease with which violent pornography is accessible to boys and, therefore, a perception that is [normal] behaviour, and that person can carry out that behaviour that they are seeing online in the most violent way against other peers as well.”<sup>271</sup>*

Barnardo’s UK has made similar observations:

*“We work with boys who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour and who have found themselves in the criminal justice system for re-enacting behaviours they have seen in porn: hitting, slapping, kicking, punching. The majority of children referred to us have regularly been exposed to pornography... Boys will tell us: ‘Girls might say no, but they aren’t really saying no, by the end they will love it.’ We ask where they get this idea and they say it’s porn. It is a picture of confusion – they don’t know what ordinary sexual behaviour is.”<sup>272</sup>*

While data on the role of pornography in child-on-child sexual abuse in Ireland are limited to what is being observed in the courts, as outlined above, it is notable the sexual offending by minors is currently on the increase in Ireland, with the Garda Youth Diversion Programme (GYDP) noting that a total of 439 sexual offences by juveniles was recorded in 2022 – an annual increase of 29%.<sup>273</sup>

266 *Ibid.*

267 Roche, B., 2023. ‘Judge Warns Over Children’s Access to Pornography as Teenager Sentenced for Attack on Woman Walking Alone.’ *The Irish Times* (last accessed 07/10/24).

268 *The Irish Times*; *op cit.*

269 O’Connell, J., 2019. ‘Ana Kriégel Murder: What it Taught Us About Bullying, Porn and Boys.’ *The Irish Times* (last accessed 07/10/24).

270 Dodd, V., 2024. ‘Children Now Biggest Perpetrators of Sexual Abuse Against Children.’ *The Guardian* (last accessed 07/10/24).

271 *Ibid.*

272 Grant, H., 2020. ‘Online Incest Porn is Normalising Child Abuse, Say Charities.’ *The Guardian* (last accessed 07/10/24).

273 Garda Youth Division Bureau, 2023. *Annual Report of the Committee Appointed to Monitor the Effectiveness of the Diversion Programme 2022*. Dublin: Garda Youth Division Bureau; see also: McCárthaigh, S., 2024. ‘Juvenile Crime Levels Up With Sharp Increases in Theft, Robbery, Fraud and Sexual Offences.’ *Breakingnews.ie* (last accessed 07/10/24).

*“It [Pornhub] is monetizing video compilations with titles like ‘Screaming Teen’, ‘Degraded Teen’ and ‘Extreme Choking’. Look at a choking video and it may suggest also searching for ‘She Can’t Breathe’. It should be possible to be sex positive and Pornhub negative.”*

Nicolas Kristof, *New York Times*<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Kristof, N., 2020. [‘The Children of Pornhub’](#). *New York Times* (last accessed 06/10/24).



## 4. The pornography trade's business model

Any analysis of pornography must hold front and centre that it is a gargantuan global business, a significant part of the larger international commercial sex trade, and that its ultimate goal is profit. Despite what its marketers may have the world believe, the pornography trade does not exist to provide 'sexual liberation', nor to 'teach people about sex', nor to bring 'fun' to people's lives [ref PH insights 2023]. It exists primarily to make money and to do so it has finely honed its business model to maximise profit at every turn.

### 4.1 Market dominance

Estimates vary, but the pornography trade is said to be worth at least \$97 billion globally (approximately €90 billion).<sup>275</sup> By comparison Netflix makes approximately \$11.7 billion.<sup>276</sup> Within the trade, the pornography companies who make the majority of the profits in fact represent a small minority of monopolistic corporations – in other words there are an enormous number of pornography websites but only a comparatively small number of corporate structures own most of them. The 'big players' in the mainstream market include Aylo (formerly Mindgeek) a Canadian conglomerate who own sites such as Pornhub, currently the world's most popular pornography site,<sup>277</sup> and YouPorn; WGCZ Holding, a Czech company who owns the world's second and fourth most popular sites – Xvideos and Xnxx, and Hammy Media Ltd, based in Cyprus, who own XHamster, the third most popular pornography site as of July

2024.<sup>278</sup> These corporate structures tend to have many offshoots – for example Aylo owns over 100 sites and production companies and is reported to be worth \$1.5 billion (€1.4 billion) alone.<sup>279</sup>

It is estimated that 12% of all active websites on the internet, about 25 million, are pornographic, while one quarter of all search engine queries are related to pornography, or about 68 million queries per day.<sup>280</sup> As of July 2024, Pornhub is the 16th most visited website in the world overall, ranking ahead of household names such as Netflix and LinkedIn (17th and 18th), while Xvideos is the 24th most visited site globally.<sup>281</sup> Traffic to these sites is enormous – for example in 2019 Pornhub received over 42 billion visits and 39 billion searches – which equates to 80,000 searches every minute.<sup>282</sup> Pornography sites are said to have received more web traffic in 2020 than Twitter, Instagram, Netflix, Zoom, Pinterest, and LinkedIn combined,<sup>283</sup> no doubt driven in part by the number of people at home and online during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns.

In addition to its dominance in the online world, the wider cultural impact of this incredible reach into people's lives across the world should not be underestimated. A recent large-scale survey of adults found that Pornhub had had the third greatest social impact on society of all tech companies in the 21st century, after Facebook and Google, but ahead of Microsoft, Apple and Amazon.<sup>284</sup> Interestingly, in the same survey Pornhub was also voted the tech company that has had the most negative impact on society.<sup>285</sup> The extensive cultural impact of pornography was echoed by this key informant:

275 NBC News, 2015. 'Things Are Looking Up in America's Porn Industry'. *NBC News* (last accessed 24/07/24).

276 CEASE, 2021; *op cit*.

277 As of July 2024, see: <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/adult/> (last accessed 28/07/24).

278 Woods, B, 2016. 'The (Almost) Invisible Men and Women Behind the World's Largest Porn Sites'. *The Next Web* (last accessed 24/07/24).

279 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*.

280 Abalo Rodríguez I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024; *op cit*.

281 As of July 2024, see: <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/> (last accessed 28/07/24).

282 CEASE, 2021; *op cit*.

283 *Ibid*.

284 Diggity, M., 2020. 'The Tech Companies That Have Had the Biggest Impact on Society in the 21st Century'. Diggity Marketing (last accessed 07/10/24).

285 *Ibid*. – over half of respondents (56%) named Pornhub as the tech company which had had the most negative impact on society in the 21st century.



*“...even if your child doesn’t even have a smartphone or access to [online, and] even if they’re the one child that hasn’t been exposed to porn ever, they’re still growing up in a culture where the majority has. And now you don’t even have to be exposed to porn to know some of the expectations. Like, some of the very specific expectations, specifically around strangulation or spanking or anal sex, you don’t even have to be exposed to porn to just have absorbed that through your peer group and through the culture that’s developed in secondary schools.”* Eoghan Cleary

## 4.2 The model in operation

The most popular pornography sites are typically ‘tube’ style sites that are free to access and operate in very similar ways to YouTube, offering a virtually limitless supply of videos, often via themed channels. These sites host user-generated content and/or facilitate user-to-user interactions – allowing visitors to self-upload content and comment on or react to videos uploaded by other users.

But this concept of self or user-generated content must be treated with a great deal of caution when it comes to pornography platforms. In truth the ‘user’ in this context is whoever uploads the video and/or manages the particular channel where it is uploaded. This may be one of the people featured in the video, but it can just as easily be any third party – essentially a pimp or a trafficker – who is profiting from uploading the video via revenue from onsite advertising. As highlighted previously in 1.1, there is no way for consumers to know for certain whether the individuals featured in these so-called ‘user-generated’ videos have full or indeed any control over the filming or uploading of the explicit videos in which they appear. Some sites require ‘performer’ verification or consent before content can be uploaded, but again as

the ‘Girls Do Porn’ cases highlights (see 1.1), there is no way of knowing for sure whether such ‘consent’ has been freely given or is the result of pressure, coercion or manipulation by exploiters.

An analysis of the pornography trade’s business model conducted by CEASE in the UK is illuminating, demonstrating its simplicity – advertising and subscriptions to ‘premium’ content generate income, so the sites work hard to:

- Attract the maximum number of users, whoever they are, making access to the site as easy and ‘frictionless’ as possible
- Host the maximum number of video uploads, whatever the content, allowing the process of uploading to also be as frictionless as possible<sup>286</sup>
- Maximise user engagement, keeping consumers on the site for as long as possible to maximise their exposure to adverts, often by promoting extreme content.<sup>287</sup>

According to CEASE, the model:

‘involves gathering, storing, processing and analyzing billions of data points in order to maximise revenue from advertising and subscriptions. Because this relies on economies of scale, porn sites are incentivised to make access as easy as possible... and to minimise moderation. Their sophisticated algorithms are designed to “mousetrap” users, surveying and manipulating their preferences and presenting them with ever more extreme content in order to keep them engaged.’<sup>288</sup>

As described in Section 3 above, pornography users can become desensitised to material that previously gave them sexual pleasure, and with habitual use tend to seek out more novel or extreme material in order to achieve the same level of arousal. The pornography trade takes

<sup>286</sup> The UK Inquiry also notes the importance of search engine optimisation for pornography platforms – the more content that is uploaded to the sites, the more Google searches will provide results, the more traffic is therefore driven to the sites – see: All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*.

<sup>287</sup> CEASE, 2021; *op cit*.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

full advantage of this tendency by using its extensive and carefully designed recommender systems to push consumers towards precisely such content. This was highlighted by one key informant as a grave concern:

***“...and exacerbating all of this is the recommender system. Because the recommender system is trained for one thing and one thing only and that is engagement. And there is a level of knowledge around what increases engagement and what emotions increase engagement...heightened and often negative emotions increase engagement. And one of the most shocking things I think I’ve heard over the last few years... you may start out [consuming mainstream pornography] with no sexual interest in a child at all... [But] because the way the algorithm is working and it’s sort of pushing... you have to up the ante all the time, and it’s causing people to go down these rabbit holes... it could be animals, it could be children... it just blows my mind because we are exacerbating a problem to such a degree... this recommender system, which is shoving [consumers] down these rabbit holes so you’re seeing more and more and more extreme [content]... [Platforms are] so untransparent about the recommender system. They are using it for profit, and it is having this awful societal impact.”*** Alex Cooney

Indeed, the way in which content is arranged and presented to consumers on pornography websites in general – for example, clearly showing users the ‘most viewed’ or most popular videos, constantly making new video suggestions to users that often ‘up the stakes’ in terms of edginess, and allowing users to comment on others’ content – functions to normalise and rationalise users’ interest in the content found on these sites, even as it becomes more violent or extreme.<sup>289</sup> When

consumers see how popular and widely viewed the type of content they prefer is, they lower their levels of discomfort in continuing to consume and further explore their preferences. Given what is now known about the nature of mainstream pornographic content (as outlined in Section 1), the above process can best be described as a mass and highly lucrative exercise in the normalisation and eroticisation of sexual violence.

Scholars have described how markets seeking to maximise profit do not stop at simply meeting their customers’ desires, rather they seek to create or promote new desires – encouraging their customers to linger longer in the marketplace and ‘spend more.’<sup>290</sup> As outlined above, this is precisely how pornography platforms work – using all of the marketing, psychological and technological tricks at their disposal to ensure that consumers stay longer on their sites, consume more content, and try out new genres. These tactics, which are used to maximise online platforms’ profits, are in turn shaping and manipulating consumers’ sexual scripts, with hugely negative real-world consequences, as Section 3 has highlighted.

Given that their business model relies on securing as many visitors as possible and maximising their engagement at all times, it is hardly surprising that pornography platforms have overwhelmingly failed to self-regulate,<sup>291</sup> when any such restrictions on users or content will ultimately hurt their bottom line.<sup>292</sup> Of course, this also means that the platforms have no real commercial interest in preventing children from accessing their sites, as ‘new customers’ are highly sought after. As discussed in Section 2, young children often stumble across pornography unintentionally. However, the mainstream sites’ sophisticated algorithms have the ability to ‘turn curious clickers into dedicated consumers’,<sup>293</sup> particularly given that children’s still-developing brains make

289 *Ibid.*

290 Jyrkinen, M. 2012. *McSexualisation of Bodies, Sex and Sexualities*. In Coy, M., (Ed.), *Prostitution, Harm and Gender Inequality*, 13–32. Aldershot: Ashgate.

291 CEASE, 2021; *op cit*; Vera-Gray *et al*, 2021; *op cit*.

292 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023; *op cit*.

293 Johnson, J., 2011. In Tankard Reist, M., and Bray, A., (Eds.), *Big Porn Inc: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornography Industry*. Australia: Spinifex, p.153.

them especially susceptible to pornography’s potentially addictive tendencies.<sup>294</sup> This works very much in the trade’s favour – as Professor Gail Dines notes ‘the younger you get them, the longer you’ve got them’<sup>295</sup> as customers, recalling that early age of first pornography use is associated with higher consumption subsequently (see 3.3).

It would appear that describing online pornography as ‘adult sites’ or ‘adult content’ is a useful misnomer that allows the pornography trade to hide behind the fact that it actively tries to attract children to its platforms. This includes a disturbing use of children’s loves and interests to draw them in. It has been alleged that the pornography industry has studied the most common keystroke errors made by children in their online searches in order to use these mistakes to direct children to pornography sites.<sup>296</sup> It is also suggested that videos on Pornhub have been tagged with popular children’s shows such as ‘Dora The Explorer’ or ‘Paw Patrol’ even if they contain no such content, making it easier for children searching for their favourite characters to be directed to the site.<sup>297</sup> In an attempt to verify this information for the purpose of this study, the lead author was instead directed to actual ‘Paw Patrol’ themed pornography on Pornhub.

In its own ‘insights’ blog, Pornhub boasts about the most popular video game searches that bring consumers to this type of content on its site – most popular in 2023 were Fortnite, Overwatch, Minecraft and Pokémon – games loved primarily by millions of children around the world.<sup>298</sup> A further example of Pornhub’s aggressive marketing to children is the sharing of Pornhub logoed memes.<sup>299</sup> In December 2019, Pornhub tweeted a meme of the popular Disney character, ‘Baby Yoda’ with a reflection of Pornhub’s logo in its eyes and a caption reading, “10 seconds after my parents leave the house.”<sup>300</sup> These kinds of actions make Pornhub

owner Aylo’s protestations that they do not want minors to access their sites ring very hollow.

One key informant outlined the role of age verification or ‘age-gating’ in preventing children and young people under 18 from accessing harmful content online, including pornography. She noted that if it were really true that pornography companies did not want minors on their platforms, they would have introduced such measures a long time ago. At the same time State measures to compel them to do so remain weak:

*“...it blows my mind... [that] a 10-year-old [can access] Pornhub and say they’re 18 and have access to all the free content that’s available... one part of the solution does have to be technological, as in we simply must put those age gates in. We know self-declaration [of real age] doesn’t work... [Pornography companies are] saying you don’t want [children on your sites]. I understand you don’t want them. But why then are you making it so easy for them to access?... So, I will never believe them because they could literally put in age gates... they could change that tomorrow by that decision... Either there is a third-party solution... [or that] you can’t even sign up for a free account without a credit card.”*

*“[All platforms must] ensure you have robust technological solutions in place to ensure that children are protected from ‘adult content’ on your service... in this first iteration of the Online Safety Code, they’ve played it cautious... They [Coimisiún na Meán] do specify age verification must happen, but there’s no timelines... to my mind we need that, [it] should have been done yesterday... Where does it sit? Who’s responsible? What does it look like?... But I*

294 CEASE, 2021; *op cit*.

295 Pattison M., 2014. ‘Research Details Pornography’s Harmful Effects to Women, Society’ *NCR Online* (last accessed 08/10/24).

296 CEASE, 2021; *op cit*.

297 Vescovi, P.J., 2020. ‘How Pornhub Goes After Your Children.’ *Exodus Cry* (last accessed 08/10/24).

298 See: <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2023-year-in-review#video-games> (last accessed 08/10/24).

299 CEASE, 2021; *op cit*.

300 See: Vescovi, P.J., 2020; *op cit*.

*think that first Online Safety Code should say all and any service that is used by children or a service that is designed only for adults... must have enabled effective age gates by June 2025. I don't care what the date is, but it needs to be [in the] short term... the recommender system does need to be addressed, a hundred percent, but first of all, let's make it virtually impossible for a child to access this content in the first place... I think by creating effective age gates on the surface web you really do shift something. You shift something fundamental..."* Alex Cooney

### 4.3 New market frontiers

The global pornography trade is usually swift to take advantage of ever-evolving technology, particularly with respect to machine-learning. While rigorous research on this issue is in its infancy, evidence is emerging of the production and distribution of growing volumes of 'AI generated' and 'deepfake' pornography, with women and girls as the primary targets. Dedicated 'nudify' apps have even been designed just for this purpose – they use AI to 'undress' women in photos – in fact many such tools only work on female bodies and produce highly realistic results. Women and girls' original clothed images are typically being lifted from their social media, 'nudified' and then redistributed without their knowledge or consent.<sup>301</sup> Campaigners have argued that naked 'deepfakes' are more accurately described as 'sexually explicit digital forgeries' and have raised significant concerns about their proliferation:

*"I have seen boys request fake nudes of their teachers and mothers online. The ease of access of this technology means men and boys can see anyone they desire naked and I worry about the entitlement over women's bodies that could spill over into our physical world."*<sup>302</sup>

No woman or girl whose image is accessible online is immune from being targeted by exploiters using this technology – from high profile celebrities such as Taylor Swift<sup>303</sup> and Scarlett Johansson<sup>304</sup> to a group of Spanish schoolgirls whose male classmates aged between 12 and 14 'nudified' clothed images of the girls taken from the girls' own social media and then recirculated them widely online.<sup>305</sup> Deepfake videos are also on the rise and increasingly able to pass as real as the technology rapidly advances. It is estimated that there were close to 100,000 deepfake videos online in 2023, 98% of which are pornographic, with 99% of the targets women.<sup>306</sup> A global rise in the use of AI to generate child sexual abuse material (CSAM) has been identified, with material of increasing severity also on the increase.<sup>307</sup> In the Irish context, a significant increase in computer-generated CSAM has been reported – one-in-ten CSAM reports to hotline.ie in 2023 were found to contain computer-generated material in various forms, with such content rapidly becoming ever more realistic.<sup>308</sup>

It is clear that technology plays a central role here in plumbing these new depths in terms of sexual violence against women and girls – many of these deepfake tools have been created to target, objectify, humiliate and violate women and girls by design,<sup>309</sup> at the same time further reinforcing the sense of male sexual entitlement made highly

301 Murphy, M., 2023. 'Nudify Apps That Use AI to Undress Women in Photos Are Soaring in Popularity.' *Time* (last accessed 08/10/24).

302 Jess Davies, women's safety campaigner cited in Lavinia, E., 2024. 'I've seen boys request fake nudes of their teachers and mothers: How Nudify Apps are Violating Women and Girls in the UK.' *Glamour* (last accessed 08/10/24).

303 Rahman-Jones, I., 2024. 'Taylor Swift Deepfakes Spark Calls in Congress for New Legislation.' *BBC News* (last accessed 08/10/24); Aguilar, S., 2024. 'AI Deepfakes Affect Us All – But Not in the Same Ways.' *Daily Orange* (last accessed 08/10/24).

304 Homeland Security (USA), (undated). *Increasing Threat of Deepfake Identities*. USA: Homeland Security.

305 Hedgecoe, G., 2023. 'AI-generated Naked Child Images Shock Spanish Town of Almendralejo.' *BBC News* (last accessed 08/10/24).

306 Security Hero, 2023. *2023 State of Deepfakes: Realities, Threats, and Impact*. Security Hero (last accessed 08/10/24).

307 Internet Watch Foundation, 2024. *What Has Changed in the AI CSAM Landscape?* IWF (last accessed 08/01/24).

308 Hotline.ie, 2024; *op cit*; see also Conneely, A., 2024; *op cit*.

309 Murphy, M., 2023; *op cit*; Duboust, O., Duthois, T., Ashe, M., and Nilsson-Julien, E., 2023. 'Violating and Dehumanising': How AI Deepfakes are Being Used to Target Women.' *Euro News* (last accessed 08/10/24).



pervasive by pornography – if the image or video of the woman or girl you want to see naked/engaged in sex acts is not available to you now, you can simply create it, with increasing levels of realism. Unsurprisingly, this has led commentators to describe deepfake technology as a new tool for misogyny.<sup>310</sup> Also not unexpected is that fact that exploiters have already moved to monetise this phenomenon – an international network of so-called ‘AI pimps’ has been discovered ‘harvesting’ images of real women without their consent and creating ‘virtual influencers’ which are used to sell subscriptions to paid-for pornography. The same investigation revealed hundreds of ‘instructional’ videos online explaining how to create AI influencers, including how to use the latest tech tools to fashion oneself as an ‘AI pimp’.<sup>311</sup>

The line between pornography-informed sexual violence against women and girls in the real-world versus the virtual world is becoming increasingly blurred – perhaps best illustrated by the recent case of a reported ‘virtual gang rape’ of a girl under 16 in the hyperreal, immersive world of the metaverse,<sup>312</sup> and another reported rape of a woman who undertakes research on the metaverse.<sup>313</sup> It has been suggested that the potential to replace humans with AI generated ‘characters’ in pornography will mean less women and girls are harmed during its production, but it also means that the violence and misogyny ingrained in current pornography, and already shaping consumers’ sexual scripts, can be taken to new and more extreme levels against these virtual personas. With the increasing realism the technology affords, all of the detrimental impacts for consumers outlined in Section 3 above will likely be amplified, and then played out in the real world, as they are now. And as the metaverse gang rape case demonstrates, virtual sexual violence against women and girls is sexual violence nonetheless, carrying with it its own harms and resulting trauma.<sup>314</sup>

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310 Narvali, AM., Skorburg, JA., and Goldenberg, MJ., 2023. ‘Cyberbullying Girls with Pornographic Deepfakes is a Form of Misogyny.’ *The Conversation* (last accessed 08/10/24).

311 Nguyen, K., and Workman, M., 2024. ‘AI Pimps and Their Fake Influencers are Mass-Harvesting Women’s Videos to Peddle Porn.’ *ABC News* (last accessed 08/10/24).

312 Sales, NJ., 2024. ‘A Girl was Allegedly Raped in the Metaverse. Is This the Beginning of a Dark New Future?’ *The Guardian* (last accessed 08/10/24).

313 Openheim, M., 2022. ‘Woman Reveals Nightmare of Being Gang Raped in Virtual Reality.’ *The Independent UK* (last accessed 08/10/24).

314 *Ibid.*



## 5. Measures to tackle the harm

As discussed above, the jury is no longer out on pornography – there is a consensus among the experts that pornography is a key driving force in the perpetration of violence against women and girls by men and boys.

It is clear, based on a wealth of evidence that pornography consumption fuels misogyny. We cannot even begin to prevent or tackle sexual violence unless we are prepared to accept and then address the contributory role of pornography consumption in fuelling this violence.

This study explored with key informants potential strategies to stem the tide of pornography that has swept into our homes and our lives, creating powerful individual, cultural and societal impacts.

### 5.1 International approaches

North America has led the way with the **civil rights approach** to tackling the pornography trade, ever since feminist academics Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon developed the first antipornography civil rights ordinances in the 1980s.<sup>315</sup> These were designed to frame pornography as a violation of women's civil rights and to allow women harmed by pornography to seek damages through lawsuits in civil courts. While the ordinances were passed at local level in certain US cities, they were ultimately struck down by the courts on the grounds that they violated 'freedom of speech' – an argument still levelled in favour of pornography today. However, this foundational work helped to pave the way for more recent class action lawsuits against individual pornography producers (see 1.1 above on the cases against 'Girls Do Porn' and Mindgeek for example). While not addressing the pornography trade as a whole,

they are seeking to hold some of the largest pornography providers accountable for the harms experienced by those filmed for its purposes.

French advocates are currently taking a **human rights and gender equality approach**, linked to Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.' Several State-supported reports have framed women's experiences of being filmed for pornography as torture, while also acknowledging how the very existence of pornography is highly detrimental to the advancement of gender equality in society. A report on pornography by the High Council of Equality Between Women and Men in France (a government-appointed watchdog) released in 2023 states that:

'...in millions of videos, women, caricatured with the worst sexist and racist stereotypes, are humiliated, objectified, dehumanised, assaulted, tortured, subjected to treatment that is contrary both to human dignity and French law... The women are real, the sexual acts and the violence is real, the suffering is often perfectly visible and at the same time eroticised... pornography is a 'school for sexual violence.'<sup>316</sup>

In a legal analysis, the report states that much of the violence contained in pornography already contravenes French law and should be investigated on this basis, applying existing legislation. The report also calls for some existing laws to be changed to prosecute pornography makers and to provide powers to remove content so that those who have been filmed can be better protected.<sup>317</sup> This approach is part of a wider, growing analysis of pornography as a gendered form of torture, as defined for example by Farley *et al* (2023) and the current United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls who has called for international human rights standards

315 See for example: William Mitchell Law Review, 1985. 'Appendix: The Mackinnon/Dworkin Pornography Ordinance.' In *William Mitchell Law Review*, 11:1, Article 5; MacKinnon, CA., 1992. *Pornography, Civil Rights and Speech*. In Itzin, C., (Ed.), *Pornography: Women Violence and Civil Liberties, A Radical View* (p. 456-513). New York: Oxford University Press.

316 See: Chrisafis, A., 2023; *op cit* – reporting on this French study: Haut Conseil à l'Égalité Entre Les Femmes et Les Hommes, 2023; *op cit*.

317 *Ibid*.

relating to torture to be applied to both prostitution and pornography.<sup>318</sup>

Professor Gail Dines has pioneered the **public health approach** to addressing pornography – highlighting the myriad of harms caused by allowing ‘the porn industry to hijack the sexual and emotional well-being of our culture.’<sup>319</sup>

In identifying pornography consumption as ‘the public health crisis of the digital age’, this approach seeks to both intervene in and ultimately prevent the damage being done by pornography to the ‘social, emotional and physical health of individuals, families and communities.’<sup>320</sup> Targeted **education programmes** to address the impacts of pornography, tailored for parents, young people and a range of professionals form the cornerstone of this approach.<sup>321</sup> Professor Dines founded the organisation Culture Reframed to ‘shift the culture from one that sees pornography consumption as a private issue to one that values and promotes a sexuality rooted in gender equality, dignity, autonomy, and consent.’<sup>322</sup>

The above approaches have a number of features broadly in common, which can be summarised as follows:

- **Discuss:** Addressing the harms of pornography first requires us to face the reality of the extent to which pornography is now engrained in our culture and influencing the dynamics of our sexual relationships, including by normalising male sexual violence. More open and frank conversations about this reality are required before any real change can occur. This includes older generations gaining a better understanding of the nature of contemporary mainstream pornography and encouraging them to see it through their children’s eyes, as well as adults confronting the impact of consumption on their own lives and relationships, as this key informant explains:

*“...what keeps people from acknowledging what they somewhere in their own heart know to be true [regarding the negative nature of pornography] is a fear. It’s a fear of social condemnation, being called a prude, or more likely, it’s a fear of having to critically self-reflect, right? And that’s true for both men and women, if we’re going to talk about straight relationships. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve talked to women after I would give a talk and it was clear what really was scaring them was they didn’t really want to ask their husband or their boyfriend what they were using. It was a fear that if they confront this issue, they will have to look at their own relationship, and they will have to challenge their own partner... These days porn is normalised – so men might just say, ‘yeah, I use porn, no fucking big deal’, but once you get past that bravado there’s a huge fear of who they are sexually... So, you’ve got women afraid of confronting partners, you’ve got men afraid of confronting themselves, and then you have this whole liberal ethos that says you’re not even supposed to care in the first place. And that’s what shuts down the conversation.”*

Professor Robert Jensen, University of Texas at Austin (Emeritus)

According to this key informant we have reached a ‘tipping point’ in terms of awareness of pornography and wider harms online which must now be confronted:

*“I just became very much aware of how porn was impacting both male and female students as soon as I became a teacher... that was seven years ago... And they [young people] just have never had a voice in it. I mean, I’ve been chatting about it for seven years, but it’s really only in the last year that anyone has started to listen. But then things have really started to move in the last year, I think, not just*

318 Farley et al, 2023; *op cit*; United Nations, Human Rights Council, 2024; *op cit*.

319 Dines, G., 2016. ‘Why Porn is a Public Health Issue.’ *Public Health Post* (last accessed 08/10/24).

320 *Ibid*.

321 See Culture Reframed <https://culturereframed.org/> (last accessed 08/10/24).

322 Dines, G., 2016; *op cit*.

*in Ireland, but globally. There just seems to be a tipping point on the horizon of awareness of not just porn, but social media, sexualisation...our psychological reliance on social media...that's based on sexualisation really of all genders, and then porn as an extreme version of that sexualised social media that young people are living in."* Eoghan Cleary

- **Educate:** Educating children, parents, professionals and society in general about the harmful nature and impacts of pornography is clearly essential. Ideally, this education should be provided as early as possible, in age and development-appropriate ways, given the very young ages at which some children first encounter pornography. It is important that educational interventions on this issue are not 'niche', but incorporated into mainstream education in schools in ways that allows children and young people to comfortably discuss pornography consumption, how it impacts their own lives, and the related challenges they may be facing. One key informant highlighted the importance of such education and how it should be addressed at various points right across the curriculum – in subjects such as biology, sex education, social and political education etc. – given the extent to which pornography impacts on so many aspects of young people's lives:

*"...if you're educating young people... on the harms of the industry... if you're presenting these to people from a young age, in an age-appropriate way, actually you get in there at the beginning... it should form part of the sex education curriculum in terms of how you teach people about it because it affects your sexuality and your sexual development... biologically, physically, it shapes the way that you have sexual responses to things. So why shouldn't it be included in biology classes?... again, if you get to it from an early age where it's probably more a sort of sociological lesson – it's [teaching] that actually women don't exist to fulfil every sexual desire of every*

*man. You know, women are their own people... But if you're trying to teach these issues of [gender] equality from a young age, actually it inculcates those ideas so that when or if boys go on to be exposed to porn...they're thinking, 'hang on a minute, this jars with my understanding of what relationships between men and women should be.' Whereas actually if you only get to it after that, you have to undo all of the exposure to porn. You have to teach them... what the relationship should look like in terms of the healthy dynamic... I think it [teaching on pornography and its impacts] needs to be filtered through the education system."* Tom Farr

The real need for high quality education in this area was also emphasised by another key informant:

*"I think there's a couple of things that have to happen when it comes to education. We have to as teachers, as government ministers and parliamentarians and parents and concerned adults, we have to accept that children are watching pornography. That's just the first step. We have to accept that. And if we can accept that then we can start looking at how we educate our children about it. And we take the power out of the hands of...the pornography industry who are educating our children [about sex] – we have to do that [through] education. So, that means proper relationship and sex education in schools that's not taught by the home ec teacher or the geography teacher... that's not fair on the teacher, on the students, on anybody. So, we need an overhaul in how it's taught. We need to make sure that if schools are outsourcing that material that it's being outsourced from credible, informed organisations... So that needs to happen. And then I am loathe to put extra pressure on parents, but parents need to talk to their kids about this stuff. [They] need to educate themselves, and then they need to talk to their children."* Gemma Kelly



- **Bust:** Tackling the business model is key to addressing the hold that the pornography trade has over our lives. While it is generally accepted that the industry cannot be shut down overnight, there are many measures that can be taken to either reduce its customer base or to hold it accountable – both of which ultimately hit the industry where it hurts the most – in its bottom line. These include but are not limited to legal and technological solutions such as geo-blocking of pornography sites, filtering content, initiating robust age verification, having to actively ‘opt-in’ with internet service providers in order to be able to access pornographic content, criminalising the production and distribution of violent or degrading pornography, enforcing legislation criminalising the supply of pornography to children etc. It is notable that the majority of key informants referenced age gating/age verification measures as a ‘no brainer’ first step, with several informants also supporting the idea that, at the very least, children’s homes should be ‘porn free zones’:

**“...in every country in the world we have not been able to keep up with tech, we haven’t been able to keep up with the internet... we need to do something about it. So, we need regulation of an industry that thus far has done self-regulation, [and now we see] the harms of letting an industry like the porn industry and big tech self-regulate. So, now we have to rein them back in. We need age verification. Really simple... age verification so we can stop children accessing hardcore violent pornography. That’s a really easy first step. It’s not that difficult. It’s not that crazy a notion. So, let’s do that.”** Gemma Kelly

**“...what would it mean to talk about porn-free households, about being proud of ‘oh, we have a porn-free household’?...”**

***my vision would be people that are proudly declaring ‘we’ve decided to have a porn-free house.’ You know, like you have organic veg or ‘We’re going pesticide-free!’”*** Dr Meagan Tyler, La Trobe University

Other related strategies in this vein might include the development of a wider societal consensus on measures such as limiting online, device and specific platform/social media access to children under a certain age and making all online platforms accessed by children safe by default.

It should be noted here that some tensions may exist between the ‘Educate’ and the ‘Bust’ approaches in that the former is somewhat accepting of the onslaught of pornography in our lives, while the latter seeks to stop/prevent the harms that result from the production of and exposure to pornography before it even happens. It must be borne in mind that educating consumers does nothing to prevent the many serious harms experienced by those filmed for the purpose of pornography (see 1.3). It is therefore likely that both strategies will be necessary in tandem.

Key informants and other experts have questioned whether it will ever be possible to regulate the pornography industry out of existence, but many argue that we must at least try to push it out of the mainstream and back into the ‘niche’ from whence it came. Wholesale measures such as blocking pornography platforms in specific jurisdictions have been tried – for example in individual US States and in Germany<sup>323</sup> – but more evidence is needed to determine the efficacy of these efforts. Some will argue that there is always a ‘work around’ to measures such as geo-blocking or age verification, such as the use of a VPN (virtual private network). This same argument is often used to deter efforts to address prostitution advertising websites.<sup>324</sup> But that misses the point – only the more

323 According to media reports from November 2023, three pornography site operators lost lawsuits in Germany against the Commission for Youth Media Protection, which banned websites due to ‘freely accessible pornographic content without ensuring that children and young people do not have access to it.’ The websites were Pornhub, Youporn, and Mydirtyhobby – see: Naprys, E., 2023. [‘German Authorities Want to Ban Adult Sites at the ISP Level.’](#) *Cyber News* (last accessed 08/10/24).

324 As evidenced in The SERP Institute’s own work on this issue – see for example: Breslin, R., and O’Connor, M., 2024. *Commercial Sexual Exploitation: The Impact of Technology – Insights from the Irish Sex Trade*. Dublin: The SERP Institute.

determined consumers with the knowledge to do so will follow this route, and the trade will lose many of its ‘customers’, including young children, immediately. Advocates note that while a ‘total shutdown’ is unlikely, everything that can be done to ‘put sand in the gears’ of the industry, by making it harder for it to do business and make money, is a positive step forward.

Some advocacy efforts internationally are solely focused on limiting children’s access to pornography – the ‘Think of the children!’ approach, which has its roots in conservative quarters. This approach risks denying or minimising the serious harms to women involved in pornography production and women in society more broadly, including male violence, that are fuelled by pornography. It also neglects the fact that these girls and boys will turn 18 one day, and the risks to both from the influence of pornography will not disappear on that date. On the other hand, from a pragmatic perspective, adopting an approach that foregrounds children makes sense – the harms of pornography to children in particular are more widely understood and accepted, and as one key informant noted, greater change is possible amongst children and young people, versus adults who have been consuming online pornography for 15+ years by now. There are some quite simple measures, such as age-gating as described above, that can be taken to protect children from consuming violent pornography in the same way we try to protect them from other potentially harmful practices such as consuming alcohol, illegal drugs and gambling.

Several key informants noted with frustration that it could not be clearer that no child should have access to the harmful content contained on mainstream pornography platforms and yet little is being done to prevent this. They discussed how this lack of action is likely in violation of children’s rights:

***“The rights of the child is such a huge thing. But online, every day, they’re completely undermined and diminished. You know, the right to privacy, the right to a safe***

***environment, the right to [protection from harm]...”*** Dr Richard Hogan

***“...I think it is quite powerful to talk about children’s rights. Again, putting the child [at the] centre. And when you look at the rights articulated in that [the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child], it is quite interesting because they are the right to privacy...the right to participate, the right to true and accurate information, the right to be safe and protected from harm, the right not to be exploited. If you just think [of] those one, two, three, four, five [rights], and then you think of what’s actually happening [to children online]. Every single one of those things is being undermined daily. So, if we’re looking for this end result of children thriving, we have to come at it with this very child-centred, child rights-focused approach... of course we should want children to thrive in the digital world [but there are] things that will need to change [for them to do so].*** Alex Cooney

In also noting how apparent it is that children should not be able to access sexually violent material online, one key informant, Gemma Kelly of CEASE, highlighted how pornography is sometimes subsumed or indeed obscured by wider conversations about children’s access to ‘harmful content’ online, such as that which promotes self-harm or suicide. While it is critical that children should never be exposed to such harms, not all of this content has an enormous global industry behind it that seeks to profit from recruiting children as ‘customers’. She argues that what is different about the pornography trade is that it is a specific industry that could be rigorously regulated, if the political will exists, in a way that is not possible with regard to some other forms or sources of harm online.

A further note of caution highlighted by key informants relates to the direct involvement of dedicated pornography platforms and their representatives in making positive change – informants warned that when such interests have ‘a seat at the table’ alongside government



and civil society, attempts to curb the trade are far more likely to fail – akin to trying to reduce lung cancer in the population by following the guidance of tobacco companies. This situation was noted recently in Australia, where efforts to introduce age verification being undertaken in consultation with stakeholders, including the pornography trade, failed.<sup>325</sup> The Australian Government instead suggested ‘working with the industry’ to develop a new code to educate parents on how to access filtering software. This is a notorious pornography trade sleight of hand – to consistently try to shift responsibility for managing/policing the content they host onto the shoulders of others, including parents, schools, Big tech (including smartphone manufacturers), and even young people themselves.

Having said that, key informants also noted that because of the extent to which children and young people come to pornography via mainstream social media platforms, it is essential to have these companies at the table in all discussions to combat the harms. It was argued that these companies need to be held accountable for hosting pornographic content that is so easily accessible to those under 18, and to work towards prevention. It was further suggested that this work must also include addressing the extensive harms of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), which is so often proliferated via mainstream social media. Companies must work in a victim-centred way to ensure that they remove all such harmful content as swiftly as possible, but also take proactive measures to prevent such content from appearing on their platforms in the first instance.

## 5.2 The Irish context

Based on the learning above, a number of next steps are proposed that are of particular relevance in the Irish context. These are suggested to inform the development of a **multi-stakeholder platform for action** to

tackle the harms of pornography, and in particular the conducive context the trade has created for the perpetration of violence against women and girls.

- **Discuss – Educate – Bust:** It is likely that a combined strategy containing all of these elements will be necessary, but some stakeholders may wish to contribute or even lead in one of these areas
- **A multi-agency, multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral approach:** Deep concern about the impact of pornography stretches right across the fabric of civil society, from those supporting victims and survivors of gender-based violence, to health and social care professionals, the legal profession, those engaged in child safeguarding, educators, parents, children and young people themselves and many more. It will be important to engage as many diverse stakeholders as possible in the development of the platform for action, who may wish to contribute or lead according to their particular areas of expertise. In terms of a State response, a number of key informants noted that because pornography consumption is an issue that crosses so many boundaries in people’s lives, a coordinated cross-Government response is also required, with particular obligations to address the matter for the Departments of Health, Justice, Children and Education in particular, in addition to Coimisiún na Meán
- **Survivor voice and supports:** The voices and lived experiences of survivors of the pornography trade are likely to be crucial to any civil society efforts to address pornography, but survivors will require adequate supports to help them elevate their voices. There is learning here from the platforms that have been developed for and by survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking.<sup>326</sup> Diverse experiences reflecting the far-reaching consequences

<sup>325</sup> Taylor, J., 2023. ‘Australia Will Not Force Adult Websites to Bring in Age Verification Due to Privacy and Security Concerns.’ *The Guardian* (last accessed 08/10/24).

<sup>326</sup> Breslin, R., and Canning, M., 2023; *op cit*.

of exploitation in the production and distribution of pornography should be included in this work. At the same time it is vital that survivors are provided with a range of specialist, ongoing supports to help them to overcome the trauma they have experienced, including routes to secure legal redress, and dedicated supports to have pornographic content online in which they feature permanently removed

- **Others with lived experience:** Space should also be made for the inclusion of the voices of those women and girls who have experienced different and overlapping forms of gender-based violence – domestic/intimate partner abuse, coercive control, IBSA, sexual violence – in which pornography was a causal or contributory factor. Their voices and experiences would be instrumental in further illuminating the real-world impacts and consequences of the proliferation of violent pornography
- **Current legislative tools and future reform:** Current legislation on pornography in Ireland is primarily focused on minors – prohibiting the production and distribution of CSAM, but also outlawing ‘causing a child to watch sexual activity’.<sup>327</sup> This is clearly not being enforced in the context of online pornography, while legislation that relates to harm to adults, including those filmed for the purpose of pornography is lacking. A legal analysis is therefore required to determine whether the violent pornography being produced and subsequently streamed into our homes and lives is already contravening any of our existing legislation, as it pertains to both adults and children, and how these laws are currently being applied. From there it will be possible to determine gaps in legislation and what additional reform is required
- **Domestic and international mechanisms:** From a policy development and legislative perspective these have an important role to play in terms of highlighting and leveraging Ireland’s obligations to tackle the harms of pornography, as well as learning from what is/is not working in other jurisdictions. Such mechanisms include but are not limited to:
  - The Third National Strategy on tackling Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence – which references the need to address pornography in both of its Implementation Plans<sup>328</sup>
  - Coimisiún na Meán, and particularly its obligations with regard to the powers of the Online Safety Commissioner and the new Online Safety Code,<sup>329</sup> which at present a) does not apply directly to dedicated pornography platforms,<sup>330</sup> b) requires ‘effective age assurance’ measures for users of video-sharing platforms containing content which may impair the development of minors,<sup>331</sup> downgraded from ‘robust’ measures in a previous iteration of the Code and with no requirements or deadlines in terms of the introduction of such measures and c) is currently very weak on measures to address online misogyny and cyberviolence against women and girls, including IBSA
  - The Children’s Ombudsman and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, who have a role to play in the protection of the rights and welfare of Irish children and all Irish citizens respectively, noting that one of the equivalent mechanisms for children in England, the Children’s Commissioner, has played a pivotal role in highlighting

327 Irish Legal Blog, (undated). ‘Child Pornography.’ *Irish Legal Blog* (last accessed 08/10/24).

328 Government of Ireland, 2022. *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence Implementation Plan* (in particular Actions 1.1.4 and 1.3.7) and Department of Justice, 2024. *Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence 2024 Implementation Plan* (in particular Action 1.1.5 and also the Actions relating to the updating and delivery of the SPHE curriculum and enhancing online safety – 1.3.1-1.3.3 and 1.6.1).

329 Coimisiún na Meán, 2024. *Draft Online Safety Code*. Dublin: Coimisiún na Meán.

330 Coimisiún na Meán, 2024. ‘Coimisiún na Meán Designates Video-Sharing Platform Services.’ *Coimisiún na Meán* (last accessed 08/10/24).

331 Coimisiún na Meán, 2024. *Draft Online Safety Code; op cit*.

the serious harms of pornography to children and young people and making key recommendations for policy and legislative change

- The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, who has identified pornography as a specific form of gendered harm and made a series of recommendation to mitigate this harm, invoking international legislation and related obligations
- The *UK Online Safety Act, 2023*, which makes specific provisions for age verification
- The *EU Digital Services Act, 2022*, particularly as it relates to addressing ‘cyber violence’ against women and harms to minors online
- The EU Directive on Combating Violence Against Women, 2024, which includes a focus on ‘gender-based cyber violence’

Consideration should also be given to the appropriate mechanisms required to engage and garner the political will for action in Ireland – for example the potential need for a ‘white paper’, a government taskforce/Oireachtas committee or similar, to identify actions to mitigate the harms of pornography to Irish citizens and society

Any analysis of Ireland’s obligations and policy levers should include an international dimension and where possible be undertaken in collaboration with allies across of range of jurisdictions, with partners across Europe in particular having the potential to add value and strength in numbers for the advocacy that will be necessary at an EU level

- **Education and awareness raising:** Educating children and young people on the impacts and harms of pornography is clearly needed, building on the work already started with the revised SPHE curricula, but devoting more time,

resourcing and teacher training to delivering this learning, and starting even earlier in children’s schooling in an age-appropriate way. This would be complemented and enhanced by wider and well evidence-based public awareness raising and education campaigns on the same issues to inform parents and the public at large of the harms and how they can be prevented. All such education should be delivered in the wider context of promoting positive, healthy, and mutually pleasurable intimate/sexual relationships and reducing the potential for these vital relationships to be negatively shaped by pornography

- **Tech know-how:** There is a need to fight tech with tech – in addition to legal advice, the multi-stakeholder platform would greatly benefit from including stakeholders with a strong knowledge of the technology used by and required to combat pornography
- **Male allies:** Male allies are an essential part of any strategy to combat the normalisation of a culture shaped by violent, misogynistic pornography. Men need to hear from other men who are willing to speak openly about the harms of pornography. One key informant recommended that this should include men who have ‘desisted’ or stopped consuming pornography – she described them as a potentially ‘hidden but passionate population’ who want to talk about their struggles and how they overcame them, with the help of peer support:

*“...we need to know more about why men do this [consume pornography]. And I almost wonder if part of that [is the] loneliness of masculinity and alienation of just...masculine norms of heterosexuality feed into pornography... is [there] any room for rehabilitation there and whether or not there could be a desistance narrative with pornography consumption... why do men stop and what are their motivations?... The only big consistent thing [in the*

*evidence] was the importance of peer support in terms of whether or not they were able to consistently stop consuming pornography.” Dr Meagan Tyler*

This was echoed by another key informant who highlighted the potential benefits for men and women of men confronting and speaking out about their own pornography consumption, providing they have the right kind of support:

*“And that’s why there is a really important role for men, mostly in first person testimony, to say ‘here’s what happened to me when I got in an addictive-like relationship to porn’. And once you realise men who use it habitually are not that different from men who use it more casually, right, then you realise that can help maybe deal with the fears of women to some degree [to confront their partner’s pornography consumption] when they realise men’s own lives are improved when they can finally get free of it... [But] If you try to quit by yourself, you’ll fail. If you don’t talk to other men, if you’re so ashamed and afraid that your attempts to quit using porn are all personal and you never connect with other people, you’ll fail because you’ll always come back to it. And so that’s it. You don’t deal with social fear or deep interpersonal fear by yourself. Nobody does. Almost nobody gets healthy by themselves.” Professor Robert Jensen*

### 5.3 Addressing research and evidence gaps

As previously noted, there are evidence gaps in Ireland regarding the prevalence and nature of pornography consumption and its impacts on the lives, wellbeing and personal relationships of both adults and children and young people. Four recommendations for research are made on this basis:

1. A multi-method study is warranted to better understand the ‘where, when, why, how and how often’ of pornography consumption among both adults and

young people in Ireland and then to explore in greater depth whether and how consumption affects their attitudes and behaviours, their sexual development, their relationships with their peers, their understanding of sexual consent and their intimate relationships/sexual encounters more specifically. This study should include a representative sample of LGBTQ+ people given the dearth of current research on their experiences.

2. With particular regard to the links between pornography consumption and domestic and sexual violence, a more focused multi-method study is also needed to investigate reported/documentated cases of intimate partner abuse and sexual violence against women and children to assess whether and how pornography consumption played a role in the perpetrator’s actions and/or in which practices common in pornography have been observed. This would include cases that have been reported to the authorities or disclosed to specialist domestic and sexual violence support services, and would greatly enhance our understanding of the links between pornography and gender-based violence in Ireland.
3. The intersection of pornography with image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) is complex and requires further study to understand how this manifests in women and girls’ lives, particularly in the Irish context. This would investigate the prevalence, nature and impacts of IBSA in all its forms (including the use of deepfakes and AI), its links with other forms of GBV, and the role of the legislation and other measures to combat and prevent the resulting harms. This study should place a particular focus on the experiences of marginalised women and girls and the ways in which multiple forms of discrimination, including racism, ableism and ageism can intensify their experiences of such abuse.



4. A targeted study is needed to better understand pornography in the broader context of commercial sexual exploitation, which would include research with women in prostitution in Ireland, documenting their experiences and the implications of being filmed for prostitution and pornography production and responding to the demands of sex buyers/‘fans’/ pornography consumers in this context.

In the case of the above recommendations, similar studies have been undertaken internationally, whose approaches could be adapted and then enhanced for the Irish context. It is also important that these studies adopt an approach that takes account of the wider analysis of pornography as a core component of the highly gendered global commercial sex trade.

## 5.4 Reframing consent

In addition to the strategies outlined above, it is argued that a wider and deeper conversation is needed on the issue of sexual consent in the context of a pornography-saturated culture. Educating young people about consent has made great strides in Ireland in recent years thanks to dedicated programmes such as We-Consent.<sup>332</sup>

However, this progress is being undermined by the fact that boys’ sexual expectations of girls are being moulded by pornography, while at the same time girls’ have been groomed by pornography to submit to acts that they do not want and do not enjoy.

One key informant reflected on how teaching young people about consent is clearly being destabilised by pornography:

***“...where is all of the work we’re doing on consent impacting their [young people’s] conditioning by the porn industry? And I’d say it isn’t really... It doesn’t matter how many conversations we have with them about consent. If you’re conditioning***

***yourself psychologically with porn for ten years before your first sexual encounter, you’ll know one thing, but you’ll physically require the other.”*** Eoghan Cleary

In shaping boys’ sexual scripts, pornography has taught boys that women and therefore girls have limitless sexual appetites, a high tolerance for pain, sometimes say ‘no’ when they mean ‘yes’, and enjoy ‘aggressive sex’, including hairpulling, spanking, choking, strangling and ‘uncommon and/or degrading’ activities<sup>333</sup> such as ejaculation in the mouth, anal sex, double penetration and ATM.

Scholars have argued that in pornography men desire and act, while women merely consent, and that this paradigm of so-called ‘consent’ presented in pornography maintains men as active subjects, with their own desires, while women are presented as mere passive bodies, desired objects, without desire, but also without the capacity or right to set their own boundaries.<sup>334</sup>

A strong emphasis on securing consent on its own, that ignores or fails to contextualise the pervasive influence of pornography, may have given boys a false sense of security – a feeling that they can do whatever they like to a girl simply because she is ‘consenting’. As highlighted by a number of key informants above, this situation risks boys ending up in the criminal justice system simply for enacting what they believed to be ‘normal’, based on their learning from pornography.

In turn, girls have learned from pornography that all of the above sexual activities should be ‘normal’ for them, and that their role is to fulfil their male partner’s desires and demands, including to engage in sex acts that they find painful, risky, humiliating or indeed wholly dangerous, such as strangulation. It is clear that acquiescing to unwanted, unpleasurable sexual acts cannot be equated with meaningful sexual consent.

332 See: Dublin Rape Crisis Centre [We-Consent](#) (last accessed 08/10/24).

333 Bridges *et al*, 2010; *op cit*.

334 Abalo Rodríguez, I., and Alario Gavilán, M., 2024; *op cit*.



The sexual scripts provided for girls by the pornography industry have groomed them to the extent that their true sexual consent may have been rendered meaningless. Beyond teaching boys and girls to secure consent, we must ask – consent to what? And is this genuine and meaningful consent to acts that girls actually want, enjoy and find pleasurable? It may be necessary to expand or even ‘re-wire’ our framework for sexual consent to include mutuality, to allow for more nuance, and to incorporate a greater understanding of young people’s diverse personal preferences, their sexual likes and dislikes. Put in very simple terms, boys and young men need to be taught to move away from pornographic sexual scripts, learn what, in general terms, girls and young women do and not enjoy in sexual encounters, but also be encouraged and indeed given the ‘permission’ to care enough to find out.

This key informant described the benefits for young people of gaining a deeper understanding of genuine sexual consent beyond that which has been framed or distorted by pornography:

*“[Young people found the class on true consent] the most impactful and the most liberating. They said they came out of that class just feeling a weight lifted off... they said that it was so valuable for them... for [girls] to hear the boys talk about what they would like from a sexual encounter... it just freed up all of the fears that [they] had about being around guys from then on... and for the guys to hear from the girls that actually they don’t want any of the stuff that the guys assumed was expected of them, and that it was really important to figure out with the person that you’re*

*with what you were interested in, what you wanted... I think the huge relief for the boys is that... nobody’s spoken to them about sex before, and they have been trained or conditioned by the narrative in porn. And... it’s just at odds with how they feel about what they want... But they just don’t know what they want because they’ve never had a chance to explore it with anybody, because porn has dictated that for them... The conversations that I have with [the students] in the room absolutely have an impact because it’s what they’ve been wanting somebody to tell them... So, it’s just absolutely a no-brainer [that] as soon as somebody introduced them to the idea of [true] consent and what it might feel like, and the difference between compliance and coercion and force and consent, they’re on it immediately.”* Eoghan Cleary

An approach such as this will help to undermine the role that pornography is currently playing in fuelling violence against women and girls, and will undoubtedly be of great benefit to both young men and young women in their quest for positive, healthy sexual relationships both now and into the future.

*‘...[I]magine a time, fifty years from now if need be or more, when we will all look back with horror and dismay on that period of history when women were reduced to their sexual and excretory organs for the entertainment of men, and sold for profit... this will look like a phenomenon so at odds with human dignity and justice that it will be almost unimaginable. When women are so highly valued and pornography such a thing of the past, we will hardly be able to believe it ever existed at all.’*

Catherine Itzin, 1992<sup>335</sup>

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335 This was scholar Catherine Itzin’s vision over 30 years ago, written long before the ubiquitous influence of mainstream online pornography on society today. Itzin, C., 1992. Introduction: Facts, Fiction and Faction. In Itzin, C., (Ed.), *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-24.

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