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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

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION RESEARCH AND POLICY INSTITUTE

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

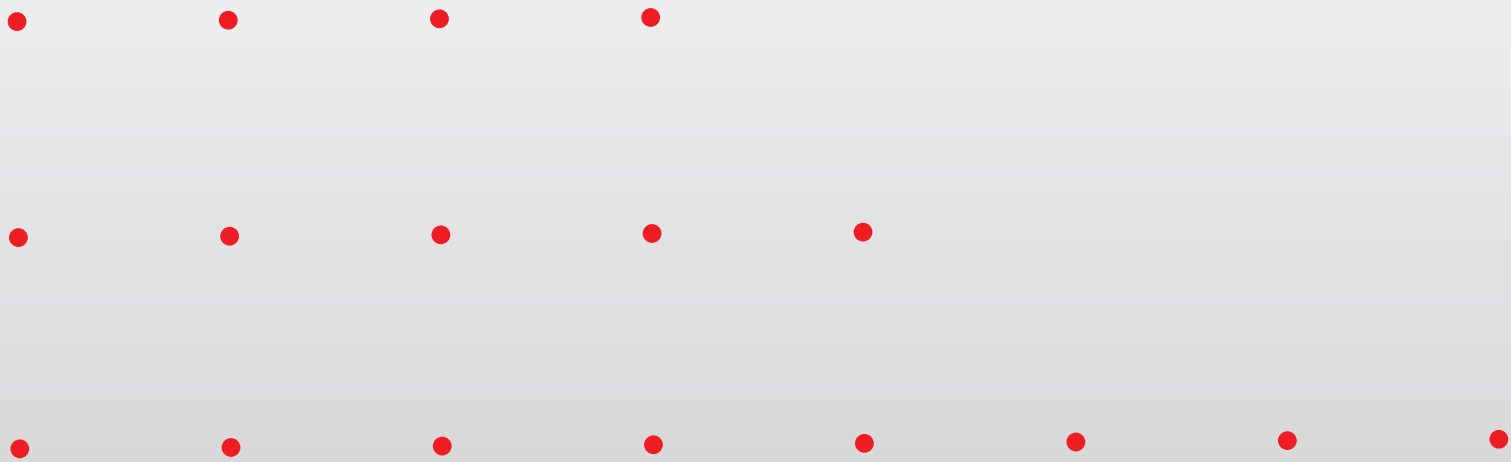
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Women's  Aid

Community  
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Ireland

## Content warning

In 'facing the reality' regarding the content of pornography, who is consuming it and what impact it is having, we provide a warning 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.



# Introduction and Context<sup>1</sup>

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This study by The SERP Institute was commissioned by Women’s Aid and funded by Community Foundation Ireland to gain a better understanding of how pornography is creating a conducive context for the perpetration of violence against women and girls. This reflects a growing societal consensus that the widespread availability and consumption of mainstream online pornography is fuelling this violence.

Pornography has typically been defined as sexually explicit content, images or videos, whose primary purpose is to sexually arouse. This study, however, moves beyond this definition of pornography as merely featuring ‘sexually explicit content’ to demonstrate that much of what features in mainstream pornography *in fact constitutes sexual violence*. 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. At the same time, it is vital to understand that pornography is also a multi-billion-euro global industry with incredible reach and influence.

This critique of pornography is not derived from a position that favours the censorship of erotic 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. Contributors to this study posited that to be genuinely ‘sex-positive’ is to be ‘porn-critical’ – if our goal as a society is to promote positive, healthy, mutually pleasurable sexual relationships then we must reject the violent, ‘pornified’ version of ‘sex’ that the trade has effectively forced

upon us. Therefore, contrary to the silencing of censorship, this study demonstrates the pressing need to have a frank conversation about pornography consumption and its wider impacts on Irish society.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that as this is an Executive summary only, all sources, references and further details, including methods employed, can be found in the full *Facing Reality* study report – please visit [www.serp.ie](http://www.serp.ie) for more.

# 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 to counter any negative impacts. It is intended to provide the evidence base to inform the policy and advocacy measures required to 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; and consultations with key informants, both domestic and international, to draw on their professional insights on this issue.

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 warranted given the dearth of evidence in Ireland. 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 available evidence on this issue.

# Findings

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## 1. Understanding what pornography is

The content of popular, mainstream pornography takes many forms and includes the following:

- **Violence against women and girls:** Overt violence against women is prolific in mainstream pornography, which has evolved in a matter of decades from a niche trade to a global industry delivering increasingly extreme and violent content to keep consumers returning for more. Routine acts in pornography include slapping and spitting on women, pulling their hair and ejaculating on their bodies and in their faces. Increasingly common are acts that can cause additional pain and harm to women, including anal sex, various forms of double penetration of different orifices by more than one man, gagging women, typically with a penis, strangling women, usually with a hand or hands around the neck, and ATM (slang for ass-to-mouth penetration). A seminal content analysis of over 300 scenes from popular pornographic videos found that almost nine in ten scenes contained physical aggression, while almost half contained verbal aggression. Women are the targets of 94% of aggressive acts, while over 95% of targets were shown to respond neutrally or with pleasure to the aggression they experienced.
- **Youth:** ‘Teen’ is a hugely popular category in mainstream pornography, and video titles featuring female teenagers are three times more likely to indicate aggression than titles featuring adult women. Teens in the same study were five times more likely than adult ‘performers’ to appear in videos featuring forceful anal penetration (with intent to cause pain), with some video titles indicating teenagers being ‘fucked hard’ and ‘destroyed’. 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.
- **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. ‘When Mom’s Mad, Dad Goes To His Daughter’ and ‘Daddy keeps fucking daughter till she likes it’ were just some of the examples of many thousands of incest-related videos found on the most popular sites. There is also ample evidence of content featuring the sexual abuse of prepubescent and early adolescent children that can be easily found on these same platforms. One investigation concluded that it was possible to find hundreds of videos featuring CSAM (child sexual abuse material) on just one mainstream site within the space of 30 minutes.
- **Image-based sexual abuse:** Content filmed and/or shared without consent is an increasingly common feature of mainstream pornography. In one study, almost 3000 videos were detected over a six-month period whose titles indicated image-based sexual abuse – the non-consensual creation and/or distribution of sexual images. This included material such as ‘upskirting’, and voyeurism, including hidden/‘spy cams’. 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.



- **Pimping and sex trafficking:** There is evidence globally of the trafficking and pimping of women and girls for the purpose of pornography production. Prominent recent cases in the United States and France reveal the extent to which young and often vulnerable women are pressured, coerced or forced into being filmed for the purposes of pornography by organised networks of pimps and traffickers, with video evidence of them being sexually violated and exploited continuing to remain online long after legal action has been taken against their original exploiters.

## Pornography is real

Far from being a fantasy or a mere ‘performance’, pornography is experienced as very real by those who are filmed for its purposes. Given the levels of physical and sexual violence present in mainstream content, 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 still broadly the same, 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. 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, free from pressure, coercion, force or the threat of force.

## Pornography as filmed prostitution

Pornography is widely recognised as a lucrative sector of the global commercial sex trade in which the bodies of primarily women and girls are monetised for profit, just as in prostitution. With the growth of ‘camming’ and online ‘fan’ platforms, pornography is also increasingly being understood as ‘filmed prostitution’ – 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. 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.

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 one recent study of persons filmed for pornography, 84% had been raped, the majority on multiple occasions, with the perpetrators variously identified as sex buyers, partners, pimps, pornography fans or followers, and pornography producers, actors, and directors. Fifty-five percent were physically beaten during filming. The majority of the same sample reported experiencing serious physical injuries, including head injuries, exposure to sexually transmitted infections, suicide attempts and severe symptoms of PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder), all as a result of their involvement in the making of pornography.

Research has further explored how pornography production, as a form of prostitution, can cause specific and additional harms for women that are particularly egregious. 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 more physically extreme sex acts, including double penetration by more than one man at a time, and for long periods of filming that may stretch over many hours. Furthermore, the continuing existence of the images and videos made in pornography can cause huge distress to the women involved, who fear being exposed to family, friends and employers, but also because multiple permanent records exist of times when they felt particularly vulnerable or in pain, degraded or violated.

## **Pornography as domestic abuse**

Evidence demonstrates that image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) – taking or creating naked or sexual images or videos without the subject’s consent (including ‘deepfakes’), and/or sharing or threatening to share this material, usually online, without the subject’s consent – is most commonly perpetrated against women by a current or former male intimate partner. Sharing or threatening to share this material is increasingly recognised as a tactic used by abusers as part of a wider pattern of coercive control. IBSA survivors in one study described the trauma and other devastating impacts on their lives of discovering that explicit material in which they featured 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. IBSA of this nature was 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.

The evidence 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 then suffering hugely negative consequences if such content is shared without their consent. 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.

IBSA in this context constitutes both a devastating tool of intimate partner 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 abuse, coercive control, image-based sexual abuse, sexual violence and even sexual exploitation – transecting in women and girls’ lives on and offline, inspired by and in turn inspiring the very nature of mainstream pornography.

## **Pornography as sexual violence**

Based on the content of mainstream pornography outlined in this study, and the extent to which consent to being filmed for its production is so often constrained or absent, there is little doubt that much of what is depicted onscreen constitutes sexual violence. Scholars have argued that as pornography has become 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’*. The significant popularity of searches on pornography sites for recordings of high-profile rape cases featured in the media further supports the case that the content of pornography essentially constitutes filmed sexual violence.

It is also argued that the way in which pornography has seeped into our wider culture is creating a ‘pornified society’ in which male domination of and violence against women and girls have been normalised, eroticised and passed off as ‘what sex is’. This in turn has led scholars to assert that because women in pornography are so often shown responding neutrally or with pleasure to violent and degrading sexual practices, consumers are increasingly led to believe that such practices are normal and acceptable – an idea that serves to perpetuate rape culture. Given this deeper

understanding of the content of mainstream, 'everyday' pornography as outlined in this study, 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.

## **Pornography as a learning context**

The most common form of pornography in the mainstream setting is 'gonzo porn'. 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, including choking, gagging and slapping.

Given the visceral experience this affords the consumer, it becomes easier to understand how effectively mainstream pornography is shaping our sexual scripts, and the sexual scripts of children and young people in particular. Sexual script theory 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.

There is mounting evidence that pornography consumers are relying on pornographic sexual scripts to shape their real-world sexual experiences – pornography, in all its violence, has become a template for actual sexual behaviour. Building on this analysis, scholars have determined that pornography is promoting sexual scripts that position aggression, coercion and lack of consent in sexual interactions as normal practice, that aggression enhances women's sexual pleasure, and that young women and girls under 18 are legitimate targets for sexual violence. They conclude that in moulding sexual scripts, pornography is succeeding in distorting or even breaking the boundary between sex and sexual violence.

Pornography has been determined to be a powerful learning context, providing a set of 'lessons' to the consumer that influences their future sexual behaviour. 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' pornography, when consumed for the purpose of masturbation the content viewed, including aggressive and sexually violent content, becomes powerfully eroticised.

## **2. Pornography consumption**

### **Adults**

The extent to which consuming pornography is now a common practice and increasingly normalised cannot be underestimated, but with notable gendered differences in frequency, motivations and impacts of consumption. Taking just one example, in the UK half of the male adult population accessed one of the world's most popular pornography sites in September 2020 alone, versus just 16% of adult females. Amongst younger users, 75% of males aged 18-24 visited this same site in September 2020 versus 33% of females in the same age group.

Ireland lacks nationally representative surveys on the issue of pornography consumption among adults. One self-selecting survey of over 1000 adult men undertaken in 2022 found that the vast majority are consuming pornography, with one fifth of men under the age of 55 using



pornography at least once a day, and 70% under the age of 45 using pornography at least once a week. Several popular pornography sites regularly feature in the top twenty of Ireland's most visited websites per month, ranking closely alongside sites that would be considered household names, such as Netflix and Amazon.

## Children and young people

In the UK, 64% of young people aged 16-21 had seen online pornography. 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. In Ireland, 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. 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. In a survey of nearly 2000 students in one Irish university, 53.3% of male students and 23.1% of female students reported that they were aged 10-13 when they first viewed pornography.

## Access to pornography and motivations for consumption

Key informants noted that while adults are more likely to access pornography directly via the dedicated pornography sites, children and young people come to pornographic content via more varied routes, and through mainstream social media platforms in particular.

Adults' most common motivations for consuming pornography include for sexual pleasure, 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. Men are more likely than women to use pornography for all of these reasons except for sexual curiosity and self-exploration.

In terms of gender differences, scholars have noted a tendency for men to increase the frequency of their pornography consumption

over time, while for women the tendency is to reduce it. For the majority of men, their primary motivation for pornography consumption is masturbation, while for women it is to learn about 'sex'. Several of this study's key informants confirmed these gendered differences in motivations for viewing, particularly with regard to teenagers.

Given that the largest group of pornography consumers are heterosexual males, 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 more research is therefore required in this area.

In respect of younger children, the evidence shows that rather than intentional consumption, initial exposure to pornography is often accidental or something children 'stumble' upon. However, children aged 14 and over were more likely than their younger peers to seek out pornography intentionally, citing reasons including curiosity and wanting to 'learn' about sex. 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 encounter.

The evidence demonstrates 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.

### 3. The implications of pornography consumption

#### Attitudes

Amongst men, higher pornography consumption has been found to be associated with views and attitudes towards women that amount to ‘hostile sexism’. A detailed review of studies on men’s attitudes and behaviours found a significant positive association between the consumption of violent pornography and attitudes supporting violence against women. Viewing pornography is also associated with a lower willingness to intervene as a bystander in an incident of sexual assault.

Migrant women and women of colour are overrepresented in the sex trade the world over, and pornography is no exception. Multiple studies demonstrate the extent to which mainstream pornographic content promotes racist attitudes and stereotypes. Pornography frequently fetishises Black women, depicting them as animalistic and hypersexual, deserving to be ‘conquered’, especially by white men. Asian women featured in pornography are stereotypically depicted as ‘passive, submissive, or eager to please’, but at the same time are found to suffer from greater aggression during filming than women from other ethnic and racial backgrounds.

#### Behaviours

There is 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.

A comprehensive review of the literature concluded that pornography use contributes to a *conducive context* that allows harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours to exist against women and girls. The review authors determined that there is an ‘influential relationship’ between consumption of pornography and these attitudes and

behaviours, and that this is especially true for the use of violent pornography.

A meta-analysis of studies on the effects of pornography consumption, encompassing a total of over 12,000 participants, concluded that exposure to pornography increases one’s risk of committing sexual offences. These findings are further consolidated by another meta-analysis, which determined that pornography consumption is *associated* with sexual aggression.

Studies on sexual aggression reveal that a failure to view women as ‘fully human’ is a driving factor for sexual offending. 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. 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.

#### Impacts on children and young people

Just as with adults, pornography has been implicated in shaping the sexual scripts of children and young people. There is ample evidence that the pornography trade targets children and young people as consumers. 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 children to perpetrate or submit to sexual violence.

In one review of research spanning 20 years, pornography was found to be related to a higher likelihood to engage in and experience sexual aggression. The relationship between pornography use and sexual aggression was found to be stronger for boys, while that between pornography use and sexual victimisation was demonstrated mainly for girls. A longitudinal study of over 1500 young

people aged 10-21 predicted the probability of a young person committing a first act of sexual violence, which included sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape. 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.

## **Physical, mental and sexual health harms**

Amongst young people in Ireland, pornography use was found to be strongly associated with greater use of negative strategies in coping with stress, including drinking alcohol and taking drugs. Males in the same study who use pornography were found to have poorer wellbeing than non-users, were less satisfied with their lives, reported more depressive symptoms and poorer self-image. Numerous studies have also noted that pornography negatively impacts on consumers' mental health by promoting unobtainable body ideals. Boys and men in particular report that pornography causes them to question their ability to sexually 'perform'. Recent research has determined that levels of erectile dysfunction in young men (aged 35 and under) are concerningly high and significantly associated with problematic pornography consumption.

Young people who use pornography are significantly less likely to engage in regular condom use during sex, including anal sex, than those who do not use pornography. Girls in one large-scale UK study highlighted experiencing pressure to perform acts boys had viewed in pornography, including acts that the girls found aggressive, painful and degrading. Key informants highlighted similar experiences among girls in Ireland.

Medical experts have attributed 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. The experts highlight the harms of anal sex that are particular to female bodies, noting that women and girls are largely unaware of the fact that anal sex is a riskier practice for women than men. 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.

## 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>2</sup> One third of participants in the US study had been strangled during their most recent sexual encounter.<sup>3</sup> More than one third of men under 40 surveyed in the UK said that they had 'choked' (strangled) someone during sex.<sup>4</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>5</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>6</sup> Consciousness can be lost within four to ten seconds of arterial pressure, followed by seizure within six to eight seconds.<sup>7</sup> These authors posit that strangulation may be the second most common cause of stroke in women under 40.<sup>8</sup>

2 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* [https://wecantconsenttothis.uk/i-thought-it-was-normal-research#\\_ftn2](https://wecantconsenttothis.uk/i-thought-it-was-normal-research#_ftn2) (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* <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/12/opinion/choking-teen-sex-brain-damage.html> (last accessed 27/09/24)

3 *The New York Times*, *ibid*.

4 BBC Scotland/Radio 5 Live, Rough sex survey with men – 14th February 2020; see: <https://storyendingnever.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/consensual-violent-sex-in-the-uk-stats-feb-2020.pdf> (last accessed 27/09/24)

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

6 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.

7 *Ibid*.

8 *Ibid*.

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>9</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:

*‘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>10</sup>*

Reminiscent of the links between pornography and torture asserted by other scholars; 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>11</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>12</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>13</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:

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9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 *The New York Times; op cit.*



*‘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>14</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 popular culture<sup>15</sup> is highly influential and evident across society – from the #chokeher hashtag<sup>16</sup> and #chokemedaddy memes on mainstream social media platforms,<sup>17</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>18</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

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Alario, M., 2021. *Sexual Politics of Pornography. Sex, Inequality, Violence.* Madrid: Cátedra.

<sup>16</sup> CEASE, 2024; *op cit.*

<sup>17</sup> *The New York Times*; *op cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Jack Harlow, *Lovin on me*, lyrics via Google.

lethal violence against a woman.<sup>19</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>20</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>21</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>22</sup> Its introduction was accompanied by training for police officers, alongside specialist resources<sup>23</sup> and a dedicated public awareness raising campaign.<sup>24</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.

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24 Department of Justice Northern Ireland, 2023. *Non-Fatal Strangulation TV Campaign Gets Underway* <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/news/non-fatal-strangulation-tv-campaign-gets-underway> (last accessed 27/09/24); see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWMH4oap7Cc>

## Escalation pathways to abuse

Experts are divided on the question of whether ‘porn addiction’ is a genuine form of addiction. Pornography does however have 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, including through repeated exposure, leading to desensitisation – content that at first seemed shocking to the viewer becomes normalised after multiple exposures.

Several 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. 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’.

Even more startling is that similar patterns of offending behaviour have been observed amongst children and young people. One analysis of hundreds of child-on-child sexual abuse cases in the UK found references to specific acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography in half of the police interviews undertaken following reports. Such acts included slapping, choking and strangulation. In both the UK and Ireland, pornography consumption has been determined to be a ‘routine factor’ in sexual offending by children, against both adult women and other children.

## 4. The pornography trade’s business model

### Market dominance

Any analysis of pornography must hold front and centre that it is a gargantuan global business and that its ultimate goal is profit. Online pornography exists primarily to make money and to do so it has finely honed its business model to maximise profit at every turn. The trade is said to be worth at least \$97 billion globally (approximately €90 billion). There are an enormous number of pornography websites but only a comparatively small number of ‘big player’ corporate structures own the majority of them.

### The model in operation

The most popular pornography sites are typically ‘tube’ style sites that are free to access and operate in 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/react to videos uploaded by other users. However, the term ‘user’ in this context must be treated with a great deal of caution as this can be any third party, including those who stand to profit from uploading videos via revenue from onsite advertising.

The tube sites rely on advertising and subscriptions to ‘premium’ content to generate income. Thus, the sites work hard to attract the maximum number of users; make access to the site as ‘frictionless’ as possible; host the maximum number of video uploads regardless of content; and maximise user engagement, keeping consumers on the site for as long as possible, often by promoting extreme content in the process. As previously demonstrated, 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 to achieve

the same level of arousal. The pornography trade takes full advantage of this by using its extensive and carefully designed recommender systems to push consumers towards precisely such content.

Given that their business model relies on securing as many visitors as possible and maximising their engagement, it is hardly surprising that pornography platforms have failed to self-regulate, when any such restrictions on users or content will ultimately hurt their bottom line. 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. Evidence demonstrates that the pornography trade actively tries to attract children to its platforms. This includes a disturbing use of children’s loves and interests to draw them in – *Dora the Explorer*, *Paw Patrol*, *Minecraft* and *Pokémon*-themed pornography are just some of the many examples of the pornography trade’s recruitment strategies.

## New market frontiers

The global pornography trade is usually swift to take advantage of ever-evolving technology, particularly with respect to machine-learning. While research on this is in its infancy, evidence is emerging of the production 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, and many such tools only work on female bodies, producing highly realistic results. Women and girls’ original clothed images are being lifted from their social media, ‘nudified’ and then redistributed without their knowledge or consent. Deepfake videos are also on the rise and increasingly able to pass as real. 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.

Many of these deepfake tools have been created to target, objectify, humiliate and violate women and girls by design, at the same

time further reinforcing the sense of male sexual entitlement made highly 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, you can simply create it. 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.

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 can be taken to new and more extreme levels against these virtual personas.

## 5. Measures to tackle the harm

As this study has highlighted, 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. The 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.

### International approaches

These include the civil rights-based approach pioneered in North America, the human rights and gender equality-based approach currently being pursued in France, and public health and education-based approaches being applied across various jurisdictions. All of these were found to have common elements summarised as:

- **Discuss** – requiring us to confront and have frank conversations about the extent to which pornography is now engrained in our culture and shaping our sexual relationships
- **Educate** – constructively informing children, parents, professionals and society in general about the harmful nature and impacts of pornography
- **Bust** – tackling the pornography trade’s business model as a key way to addressing the hold it has over our lives.

In terms of education, it was noted as important that 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 them, and the related challenges they may be facing.

In terms of busting the business model, 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 hold it accountable. 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 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.’

## The Irish context

Based on the learning above, these steps are suggested to inform the development of a **multi-stakeholder platform for action** in Ireland 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 lead in one of these areas
- **A multi-agency, multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral approach:** Deep concern about the impact of pornography stretches 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 and more. It will be important to engage these diverse stakeholders in the development of the platform for action. In terms of the State, a coordinated cross-Government response is also required, with particular obligations to address the matter for the Departments of Health, Justice, Children and Education and 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. Survivors will also require a range of specialist supports to help them to overcome the trauma they have experienced, including routes to secure legal redress and 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 illuminating the real-world impacts 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’. 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 and how our current laws are being contravened and what additional law reform is required

- **Domestic and international mechanisms:**

From a policy development and legislative perspective the following 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:

- the Third National Strategy tackling Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
- Coimisiún na Meán, particularly with regard to the powers of the Online Safety Commissioner and the new Online Safety Code
- the Children’s Ombudsman
- the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
- the United Nations, particularly given that its Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls has recently identified pornography as a specific form of gendered harm
- 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 be given to the appropriate mechanisms required to engage and garner the political will for action in Ireland – for example a ‘white paper’, a government taskforce/Oireachtas committee or similar, to identify actions to mitigate the harms of pornography to Irish citizens and society

- **Education and awareness raising:**

Educating children and young people on the impacts and harms of pornography is 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 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 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, including from lived experience.

## Addressing research and evidence gaps

Four recommendations for research are made to address the significant evidence gaps on this issue in Ireland:

1. A multi-method study is required to better understand the ‘where, when, why, how and how often’ of pornography consumption among adults and young people in Ireland and to explore in greater depth whether and how consumption affects their attitudes and behaviours, their sexual development, their relationships, 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 regard to the links between pornography consumption and domestic and sexual violence, a focused multi-method study is needed to investigate reported/documented 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.
3. The intersection of pornography with IBSA is complex and requires further study to understand how this manifests in women and girls’ lives. This would investigate the prevalence, nature and impacts of IBSA, its links with other forms of GBV, and the role of 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 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, it is 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.

## Reframing consent

This study finds 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 a number of dedicated programmes. 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.

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 such as ejaculation in the mouth, anal sex, double penetration and ATM.

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, 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.

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. 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. An approach such as this will undoubtedly be of great benefit to both young men and young women in their quest for positive sexual relationships both now and into the future.



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