

CATWA Submission

NSW Parliament | Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health



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Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia

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Who we are

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA) is the Australian branch of CATW International, a Non-Governmental Organisation that has Category II consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. It works locally and internationally to end all forms of sexual exploitation of women, especially in relation to issues of prostitution and trafficking in women.

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About this submission

This submission from the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia focuses on the area of our organisation's expertise: women and girls' sexual exploitation. This includes the trafficking in women for prostitution, pornography, mail order bride selling, incest and rape. While there are other forms of trafficking, women are disproportionately targeted by traffickers, making up around two thirds of all reported victims of all forms of trafficking (UNODC, 2021), and sexual exploitation is the most commonly identified form of trafficking in persons (UNODC, 2021). This is especially important in the Australian context, as Australia is 'primarily a destination country for women and girls subjected to sex trafficking', according to the US Department of State (US Dept. of State, 2015).

Key recommendations

- We recommend that the New South Wales Parliament acknowledge that:
 - Women and girls are overwhelmingly the victims of pornography's harms and in Australia and globally that the sex trade is highly gendered.
 - Pornography is highly sexist and racist, with women and girls of colour are disproportionately impacted.
 - Pornography has harmful impacts for women and girls, both individually and collectively.
- We recommend that the New South Wales Parliament recognise that pornography both produces and reproduces men's sexual entitlement and demand of women's bodies for sale.
- We recommend that the New South Wales Parliament acknowledge that the dominant form pornography today contains frequent and extreme violence against women.
- We recommend that the New South Wales Parliament recognise mainstream pornography as a 'conducive context' to gender-based violence and gender inequality.
- We recommend that the New South Wales Parliament acknowledge that an industry centrally reliant on the gendered, sexualised and racialised inequality of women and girls, pornography should not be tolerated in a global society based on human rights and equality.

Who is impacted

We begin this submission deeply alarmed that this Parliamentary Inquiry's Terms of Reference fail to mention the group most impacted by harmful pornography: women and girls. To understand the way pornography is harmful to women, not just individual women – but to all women, as a class – it is critical to understand the messages pornography creates and circulates about women.

As noted in the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032, 'Pornography often depicts physical and verbal aggression towards women, male dominance and female submission, and non-consensual behaviours'. One of the ways it produces and reproduces female submission and male dominance is through normalising the view that women's and girls'

bodies must be for sale in order to satisfy the male demand for sex, and the view that men must have a right to live their sexuality with another person (European Parliament, 2023).

The scale of the pornography industry

Pornography is not a disembodied text or solely a form of men's consumption, it is a documentation of what is done to someone (Boyle 2010). Not just representation, or a harmless fantasy, pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry with very real practices of racism and violence against women (Dworkin 1993; Jeffreys 2008). Although the pornography industry's shift into online spaces compounded existing uncertainty and clandestine revenue reporting, it is widely agreed the global earnings of the pornography market exceed US\$100 billion per year (Anciaux 2020; DeKeseredy 2018b; Tangmanee 2019).

The industry's expansive scale is also well-evidenced in pornography's consumption levels. In 2018, one of the most comprehensive studies on pornography consumption found an average of 91.5% of men had consumed pornography within the last month (Solano et al. 2020). When measured across time, men's consumption rates were consistently found to be between 91% and 99% (Solano et al. 2020). While this study was significant in capturing a wider age range (18–73 years) than previous studies, it is also widely accepted that more than 90% of young people (aged 9–24 years) have consumed online pornography at some point (de Heer, Prior, and Fejervary 2020).

These levels of online consumption are largely driven by websites of two conglomerates: Aylo (formerly MindGeek) and WGCZ Holdings. Their websites including of XVideos, Xnxx, Pornhub and Xhamster consistently rank in top 20 most visited websites in the world, and Xvideos (and often Xnxx) frequently in the top ten (SimilarWeb, 2022). With over 3.3 billion visitors every month, Xvideos records higher traffic levels than Netflix, Amazon, Reddit, TikTok, Zoom and WhatsApp (SimilarWeb, 2022).

Violence against women in pornography

Online pornography has not only normalised the consumption of pornography for men (especially young men) it has simultaneously normalised and mainstreamed violent and extreme content (DeKeseredy, 2015). The shift from the traditional studio model of pornography to the online industry was marked through the rise and dominance of 'gonzo' pornography. Gonzo pornography is noted for being absent of any plot and 'scene after scene' of acts of degradation and violence against women (Dines, 2010; Saunders, 2018). This violence and abuse has become so embedded in mainstream pornography that some scholars are now calling this an era of 'extreme post-gonzo'. This term not only references gonzo pornography's violence, but now also, gonzo's normalisation and saturation of the pornography market – whereby women's sexualised and racialised abuse is *the selling point* of mainstream pornography (emphasis in Saunders, 2020; Tyler, 2010). This abuse commonly entails acts such as painful anal penetration, choking, gagging women to the point of

tears and vomiting, 'ass-to-mouth', spitting and urinating on women (DeKeseredy and Hall-Sanchez, 2017; Dines, 2010).

As one of the largest studies of mainstream online pornography found sexual violence is a 'normative sexual script' on the websites driving this industry (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). This includes finding that the most popular websites, such as Pornhub and Xnxx, were featuring criminal acts such as rape, coercion and incest – and featuring these acts in ways that mock, minimise and belittle the possibility of harm. These themes of rape, incest and coercion were also found in the video titles on the homepages of the five most accessed pornography sites in Australia. Titles found in February 2023 included:

- 'Step mom teaches step daughter and step son how to fuck'
- 'Young slave get punished [sic] with baseball bat'
- 'Stepdad and stepdaughter. Risky cum in her mouth.'
- 'I like to sit on my stepson's legs to feel his dick while we play video games'
- 'Sweet brunette teen vacation sex – perfect girlfriend'
- 'Pervy step parents watch bro cum inside his stepsis'
- 'It feels so right to fuck my step sisters tight pussy'
- 'Teaching my stepdaughter please a man'
- 'Public anal creampie' (eSafety Commissioner, 2023)

While these titles may seem extreme, it is critical to note that these are not niche categories; these feature on the most popular and profitable websites of the mainstream industry (DeKeseredy 2018a; Dines 2010).

Racist and sexist stereotypes and pornography's harms

Gender stereotypes are noted a key driver of violence against women and girls (OurWatch, 2021, Commonwealth of Australia, 2022) and the stereotypes that fetishise, eroticise and sexualise women are considered a central feature in contributing to a rape culture that normalises racist sexual violence (Kuo 2017). As such, globally there are shifts to regulate advertising and media industries to ensure they cannot perpetuate the sexist stereotypes that contribute to a culture that normalises gender inequality and violence against women. Yet rarely is the pornography industry held to the same standard.

Pornography is not only violent it also produces and circulates unrealistic, racist and infantilised images of women (Collins 2002; Sarikakis and Shaukat 2007). The pornography industry's practices of racism and sexism are not coded or subtle but explicit, violent and based on highly sexualised and racist stereotypes (Collins 2002; MacKinnon 1991). Black women in pornography are constructed deviant, hypersexual and animal-like and Asian women are often passive, servile and childlike possessions for white colonial consumption. These racist stereotypes are blatantly sold to consumers via titles such as 'Coco Gets Interracial Facial', 'My So Asian' and 'House Bitch Enjoyed by Her White Masters' (DeKeseredy, 2015; Miles, 2021). There are also entire genres dedicated to 'hijab pornography' and 'refugee porn' (Mirzaei et al., 2021).

Pornography also harms women through its construction of women's (hetero)sexuality. The construction of women's sexuality in pornography sells a message in society that women want violence and degradation enacted upon them – that they enjoy these things. By showing sexual inequality (ranging from passivity to coercion and even force) as what women desire – the basis of their sexuality – pornography can be seen to legitimise discrimination, degradation and abuse of women (Eaton 2007; Russo 1998).

These sexual scripts of violence, abuse and degradation are also having a very real impact on young women's sexuality and sexual relationships. Recent studies have found pornography to be a primary source for young Australians to learn about sexual strangulation (Douglas et al., 2024). With frontline sexual assault services noting clients are both reporting much higher rates of non-fatal strangulation, as well as pornography playing a role in the sexual assaults that clients experienced within intimate partner relationships (Campo., 2024). An Our Watch's survey of young people also found that young men who watch pornography on a regular basis were "more likely than others to believe that women should learn to obey men, and that things tend to be better when men are in charge" (Campo., 2024; Our Watch, 2020). In these ways, pornography must be considered a socialising force that creates and maintains women's second-class status (MacKinnon 1987).

Societal impacts of the stereotypes and harms of the pornography industry

Through normalising pornography, in all its manifestations, the sex industry has become embedded in society. Often referred to as pornographication, pornification and porn(o)-chic, the cultural normalisation of pornography has resulted in the mainstreaming of sexual content, whereby the boundary between popular media culture and pornography is increasingly blurred (Attwood 2002; Boyle 2010; McNair 2002). This mainstreaming of pornography has been observed in various practices and products in popular culture; from trends in technology, music, fashion, beauty, and even children's merchandise (c.f. Jeffreys 2014; Tyler and Quek 2016).

The normalisation and glamourisation of pornography has also resulted in an exponential growth in the cosmetic surgery industry. For example, the 'pornified body', as an ideal for women, has become mainstreamed through Brazilian waxes, breast implants, weight-loss drugs, make-up, hair products, Botox, and cosmetic surgery for women's genitals. (Bray, 2014). Indeed, labiaplasty – based on a pornographic norm of female performers vaginas, and often used to enhance men's sexual pleasure, frequently involving the stitching of women's torn or stretched vaginas (from childbirth), the "repair" of the hymen, liposuction and lifting of vaginal lips, clipping of elongated or asymmetrical inner lips, and injecting fat (taken from the inner thigh) into vaginal lips (Jeffreys, 2014) – is now one of the fastest growing cosmetic procedures for young women and girls in Australia (Dhir, 2024; Tyler and McVey, forthcoming). As Reem Alsalem, United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, recently observed:

As men and boys feel a greater sense of entitlement due to consuming pornography, girls feel compelled to submit, and many women and girls feel conditioned to remodel their bodies

surgically to bring them into line with the profit-driven pornography aesthetic. Young women are groomed into sexual self-exploitation. [The] “Pornified” visual landscape indoctrinates girls and women into a patriarchal mindset that the only way to be visible – in fact valuable – is to be sexually desired, “hot” and “pornified”. (UNHRC., 2024, pp.8-9)

Critically, the harm of pornographication is not that it mainstreams sex, but that it mainstreams a particular kind of sex that eroticises women’s inequality (Tyler and Quek 2016).

Links between pornography and other forms of sexual exploitation and trafficking

For decades, those opposing the harms of the sex industry have rejected false demarcations between pornography and other elements of the sex trade (Spector 2006, Tyler 2015). It has been through understanding pornography as a form of prostitution that debates on the harms of pornography have been able to go beyond a focus on the experience of consumers to understanding the lived-experience of harm and violence women suffer in the production of pornography (Tyler, 2015). In recent years, through rapid technological advances that facilitate the easy buying, selling and trading of women and girls online, as well as the rise of online forms of pornography-prostitution (including mainstream platforms such as OnlyFans) there has been an increasing blurring of different types of sex industry (Tyler & Coy, 2022). Many of the websites of the online sex trade, such as those related to pornography, webcamming, real-time streaming and ‘sugar dating’ sites prey on women’s financial insecurity, using women’s economic disadvantage to coerce the production of sexual – and often sexually violent – content (Burgos and Del Pino, 2021).

Through new technologies this coerced and forced content is often a part of the rise in user-generated content - common to sites such as Only Fans, Pornhub, and Xnxx. Indeed, despite the widely reported levels of violence against women and children in pornography, websites continue to report increasing numbers of women joining their site as content creators (Pornhub 2019, 2020; Wei 2022). In 2021, Pornhub reported, their most viewed ‘verified amateur’ model had over 330 million video views (Pornhub, 2021). This has critical implications for young women globally, including in Australia. With analyses of both mainstream pornography sites such as Pornhub, as well independent Australian sites, shown to similarly be selling a social obligation – and even moral duty – for women to sexually subordinate themselves through self-produced content creation (McVey, et al., 2022; 2024).

Many of these websites are also directly or indirectly linked to the trafficking of women and girls. For example, in 2023 Aylo paid US\$1.8 million dollars to resolve a charge of engaging in unlawful monetary transactions involving sex trafficking (Marcello, 2023), and in 2024 OnlyFans was investigated for over 120 police complaints, including hosting non-consensual content and featuring filmed rape (So, Marshall and Szep, 2024). As discussed as a part of a recent meeting between UN delegates and anti-trafficking advocates in New York: “The only way to effectively end sex trafficking is to take on the phenomenon of the sale and purchase of sex as a whole” (Gennarini, 2023).

In closing, we recommend that the New South Wales Parliament recognise mainstream pornography as a 'conducive context' to gender-based violence and gender inequality. Pornography is a violation of women and girls' rights and freedoms, in both the direct violence it produces against women and girls' bodies as well as the indirect violence it perpetrates against women's status in society. As an industry centrally reliant on the gendered, sexualised and racialised inequality of women and girls, pornography should not be tolerated in a global society based on human rights and equality.

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