
Submission to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Internet Pornography and Violence Against Young Women and Girls in Canada

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada is the national association of evangelical Christians in Canada. Believing in the fundamental dignity of each person, and called to care for those who are vulnerable, we have engaged for many years on issues of sexual exploitation, including pornography. In recent years, our work on human trafficking and prostitution has led us to examine the role pornography plays in fueling sexual exploitation. A wealth of research and evidence points to a number of serious public health effects, including links to sexual violence and aggression.

We are grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Committee's study on violence against young women and girls. It is vital to consider how the proliferation, ease of access and nature of online pornography is influencing the sexual behaviours and attitudes of youth, and in turn, how this contributes to rape culture and sexual violence against girls. Our culture is steeped in hyper-sexualized media and messaging, and we must consider what those messages are, what they teach, and how this contributes to violence and exploitation.

Pornography today has moved well beyond what most of us imagine when we think of pornography. In the context of this study, the concern is that the mainstream of pornography depicts aggressive, violent, and dehumanizing sexual activity.¹ It is steeped in misogyny, and centred around the domination and humiliation of women. It is violent, degrading, and for the female participants, profoundly body-punishing.

A peer reviewed study of the top-watched, top-selling scenes in pornography found that 90% of them had some form of emotional, physical or sexual violence against women.² As Dr. Gail Dines says, pornography is about "making hate" to women.³

And never before has it been so readily accessible, to children or to adults. The internet feeds it into our homes, and to our mobile devices 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in ever more violent and degrading forms. Pornography is much more difficult to avoid than it is to access.

Children are exposed to pornography at increasingly younger ages. The average age of exposure to online pornography is between 10-12 years of age. But many are exposed much younger. Nine out of ten 8-16 year olds have viewed pornography online, most while doing homework.⁴

¹ Dines, Gail Dr./Culture Reframed, 2015, Pornography: A Public Health Crisis – US Capitol Hill Symposium, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7A62CdYyNSE>

² Bridges, AJ, Wosnitzer, R, Scharrer, E, Sun, C, Liberman, R (2010), Aggression and Sexual Behaviour in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update, *Violence Against Women* 16(10):1065-85.

³ Dines, Gail (2015)

⁴ http://www.familysafemedia.com/pornography_statistics.html

How is this impacting attitudes and behaviours?

Internet pornography is a powerful teacher of beliefs and behaviours, for several key reasons. Images are potent carriers of meaning, and unlike text, visual information is absorbed quickly and more readily understood to be 'truth.' Learning is deeper in the presence of arousal, and we learn more quickly and more deeply if we are rewarded for the behaviour, or if we observe others being rewarded. Pornography offers all of these elements.⁵

But what pornography teaches about relationships and sexuality is dishonest, inaccurate and harmful. Pornography teaches that sex is detached from intimacy, love, mutuality or respect. It teaches that it is recreational, impersonal and adversarial. Much of what is available at the click of a mouse teaches that violence in sex is normal and desirable.⁶

It teaches sexual entitlement and a kind of sexual narcissism; the idea that sex is not about mutuality, but rather is a one-way street in which one person's pleasure is attained at the expense of someone else's pleasure, reluctance, pain, or humiliation.

Pornography also influences behaviours and attitudes toward women.⁷ By legitimizing and normalizing extreme forms of objectification, it teaches that female bodies are primarily sexual entertainment for males, and that a woman's core value is rooted in how desirable she is.

As Dr. Bill Marshall states, this "may be pornography's most insidious influence ... Pornography depictions of the sexuality of women and children distort the truth about desires of women and children, and legitimize men's sense of entitlement, and use of force, violence and degrading acts by the male actors."⁸

A [recent meta-analysis of international studies](#) concluded that pornography consumption is associated with an increased likelihood of committing acts of verbal or physical sexual aggression, regardless of age.⁹

It is troubling then that generations of boys are getting their sex education primarily from internet pornography, beginning at very young ages when they do not have the ability to think critically about or deconstruct what they see in pornography. Might a boy whose expectations are shaped by pornography experience increased frustration with real life partners who say no, or have reduced awareness or consideration of the unwillingness of potential partners? Research indicates the earlier

⁵ Layden, Mary Anne, PhD, *Pornography and Violence: A New Look at Research*.

⁶ Layden, Mary Anne, PhD, (2014) CESE Summit: *Long Term Consequences of Pornography Use: Overview of the Research*, <https://vimeo.com/111104070>

⁷ Ibid, at 7.

⁸ Marshall, W.L. (2000). Revisiting the use of pornography by sexual offenders: Implications for theory and practice. *The Journal of Sexual Aggression*, p.6.

⁹ Wright, P, Tokunaga, R, Kraus, A, (2016) A Meta-Analysis of Pornography Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies, *Journal of Communication*, 66:183-205.

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boys are exposed to pornography, the more likely they are to engage in non-consensual sex as adults.¹⁰

Pornography blurs the lines of consent in dangerous ways. In pornography, female performers rarely reject sexual advances, no matter how aggressive or insulting. Further, if she is reluctant or does say no, the encounter proceeds any way, and she is depicted as ultimately enjoying it. This perpetuates the idea prevalent on campuses and in bars that no means yes, or maybe, or “work harder to convince me and overcome my resistance.” The message is that no matter how much a woman protests, in the end it’s what she really wants.

We find stories like those out of Western University¹¹, or Dalhousie University¹² shocking, and rightfully so. But we need to ask what role pornography plays in these displays ‘rape culture.’ Could it be that kids are absorbing the behaviour they see in pornography, where it is commonplace to see sexual assault and non-consensual, aggressive sex involving multiple male perpetrators and one female?

Studies of men who regularly use pornography show increased belief in rape myths, such as the victim enjoyed the rape, that she “got what she wanted,” that rape victims don’t suffer very much, that women regularly make false accusations of rape, etc.¹³

Pornography consumers are more likely to:

- hold a callous and adversarial view of sex;
- be more accepting of sexual violence;
- see women as sexual objects;
- use physical or verbal coercion, or drugs or alcohol to coerce women to have sex.¹⁴

A growing number of studies indicate that regular use of pornography, even pornography that does not include sexual violence, changes users’ beliefs about rape and sexual violence.¹⁵

The impact is particularly evident in children exposed to pornography before age 18. Research indicates they engage in riskier behaviour, such as more sexual partners, at younger ages, are more likely to use drugs or alcohol during sexual encounters, and less likely to use contraception. They are more likely to hold less progressive gender role attitudes. Boys are more likely to perpetrate sexual harassment and see women as objects.¹⁶

¹⁰ Layden, Mary Anne, (2014) <https://vimeo.com/111104070>

¹¹ http://www.westerngazette.ca/news/no-means-written-on-student-house-near-king-s/article_a7092012-783f-11e6-b707-33e3282ccee9.html

¹² <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/dalhousie-suspends-13-dentistry-students-from-clinic-amid-facebook-scandal-1.2889635>

¹³ Check & Guloien (1989). The effects of repeated exposure to sexually violent pornography, nonviolent dehumanizing pornography, and erotica. In D. Zillman & J. Bryant (Eds.), Pornography: Research Advances and Policy Considerations (pp. 159-184).

¹⁴ Layden, Mary Anne (2014)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

Girls exposed to pornography are absorbing the same messages as boys about what is normal and desirable in sexual relationships. Girls who watch pornography are more likely to accept sexual harassment and to be victims of non-consensual sex.¹⁷

Our hyper-sexualized culture teaches girls from a young age that what matters most is how attractive or desirable they are. To adapt to this reality, girls learn to treat their bodies as things that exist to please others. Psychological researchers have identified self-objectification as a “key process whereby girls learn to think of and treat their bodies as objects of others desires.”¹⁸ A quick look at any social media site or app provides ample evidence of this phenomenon.

Pornography’s influence is insidious, and it is shaping what both boys and girls expect and accept in relationships - what behaviour is expected of them, and what they should expect from partners.

It is important then that any strategy to address and reduce violence against young women and girls include an examination of how the proliferation and ease of access of violent online pornography is contributing to the nature and frequency of violence experienced by girls.

Recommendations:

1. Parliament should initiate a study of the public health impacts of internet pornography
2. Parliament should consider requiring internet service providers to block pornography content at the server level, as is done in the UK.¹⁹
3. Parliament should consider requiring pornography sites to introduce age verification, as is being considered in the UK.²⁰

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¹⁷ Layden, Mary Anne, (2014)

¹⁸ Frederickson, B.L., Roberts, T.-A (1997). Objectification Theory: Toward understanding women’s lived experience and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 173-206.

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-23401076>

²⁰ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/538426/2016-06-06_Age_verification_impact_assessment_1_.pdf