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UK

CENTRE TO END ALL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

An evidence-based response to:

Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Call for Evidence

by Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation (CEASE UK)

www.ceaseuk.org || contact@ceaseuk.org || Registered Charitable Incorporated Organisation

(1182515)

This document sets out CEASE UK's (Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation) response to the Home Office call for evidence for its Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) open consultation. As CEASE's work focuses on combatting the exploitation inherent within the commercial sex industry, including prostitution, pornography, and their links to human trafficking,¹ this submission will focus on the impact that both **porn consumption and the wider industry** have on VAWG.

This issue is one of contention, and there are many opposing perspectives in this area of work. For clarity, it is CEASE's position that pornography is fundamentally a form, and facilitator, of VAWG. Consequently, this submission will present evidence to support these points within the context of this consultation, i.e. why a) pornography should be considered a form of VAWG; and b) why pornography should be considered a facilitator of VAWG more widely. In light of these points, the submission will propose realistic next steps that we urge the Home Office to consider taking to combat VAWG within this context.

Pornography as a form of violence against women and girls

Pornography is *inherently* a form of VAWG in that the dynamic it portrays between men and women is one rooted in power imbalance, where the female body is objectified as something unto which violence can be enacted within the context of sex. This position is supported by myriad literature.² For the purposes of this submission we will focus on quantifiable instances of physical violence and degradation that take place within the context of porn, to demonstrate that *at the very least*, pornography should be recognised as a form of media that relies heavily on portraying abuse.

A 2010 study entitled '*Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update*' found that: "*Of the 304 scenes analysed, 88.2% contained physical aggression, principally spanking, gagging, and slapping, while 48.7% of scenes*

¹ See www.ceaseuk.org

² For example, see MacKinnon, Catharine. (1993). *Only Words*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. Retrieved February 19, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjk2xs7>; MacKinnon, Catharine. 2004. "Pornography as Trafficking." *Michigan Journal of International Law* 26: 993–1012; Dworkin, Andrea. 1985. "Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality." *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 8: 1–29

*contained verbal aggression, primarily name-calling. Perpetrators of aggression were usually male, whereas targets of aggression were overwhelmingly female.”*³

Expanding upon this: *On the whole, the pornographic scenes analysed in this study were aggressive; only 10.2% (n = 31) of scenes did not contain an aggressive act. Across all scenes, a total of 3,375 verbally and physically aggressive acts were observed. Of these, 632 were coded as instances of verbal aggression and 2,743 were coded as instances of physical aggression. On average, scenes had 11.52 acts of either verbal or physical aggression (SD = 15.04) and ranged from none to 128.*⁴

Crucially, this study found those who were aggressed against were overwhelmingly female: *“Women were significantly more likely to be spanked, choked, and gagged than men. Aggregately speaking across the sample spectrum, women were verbally insulted or referred to in derogatory terms 534 times, whereas men experienced similar verbal assaults in only 65 instances. Women were spanked on 953 occasions, visibly gagged 756 times, experienced an open-hand slap 361 times, had their hair pulled or yanked on 267 separate occasions, and were choked 180 times. Men, however, were spanked only 26 times, experienced an open-hand slap in 47 instances, and for all other aggressive acts, were aggressed against fewer than 10 times”.*⁵

A meta-analysis carried out in 2020 of various different “expressions” of violence found that,⁶ as regards “torture and murder” in pornography videos from 1986 to 2015, the oldest study found torture in 2% of aggression scenes, and other studies found torture in 0% to 1% of their sample. A total of 5 studies examined attempted or actual murder. For VHS, frequencies ranged from up to 3% of scenes, to 5% of violent acts, and 16% of aggression scenes.⁷

Additionally, when it examined the prevalence of rape across 10 studies, up to 8% of VHS and DVD scenes depicted rape; although one study found the percentage to be closer to 31%. Cowan et al found that rape occurred in 51% of videos within their sample, and Garcia and

³ Bridges, A., Wosnitzer, R., Scharrer, E., Sun, C., & Liberman, R. (2010). Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update. *Violence Against Women*, 16, 1065 - 1085.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Carrotte ER, Davis AC, Lim MS Sexual Behaviors and Violence in Pornography: Systematic Review and Narrative Synthesis of Video Content Analyses *J Med Internet Res* 2020;22(5):e16702 URL: <https://www.jmir.org/2020/5/e16702> DOI: 10.2196/16702 PMID: 32406863 PMCID: 7256746

⁷ *ibid*

Milano found rape in 20% of videos in their sample.⁸ Further, this is likely to be unrepresentative in any case, with one study (not included in the meta-analysis) finding that *“it is easy to access internet rape videos if specifically searching for such content”*, and that when actively searching for such material *“it is important to note that certain authors (eg, Palys) were able to seek out violent genres of pornography, suggesting that more violent pornography is readily accessible”*.⁹

Regarding the gender dynamic of these findings, it was reported that: *“When studies explored rape by gender, most studies found that perpetrators of rape were typically men while victims were typically women. Specifically, Cowan et al found that 90% of VHS instances involving a man raping a woman”*.¹⁰

Pornography producers themselves acknowledge that violence and degradation comprise a large part of the industry. As DeKersedy explains here:¹¹

Consider Rob Zicari (stage name Rob Black). He once owned Extreme Associates, a company that produced violent porn so graphic that many in the industry ostracized him. In 2009, after a six-year legal battle, he and his wife Janet Romano (who directed porn under the name Lizzey Borden) were sentenced by US federal authorities to one year and a day in prison for distributing obscene materials. Black recently granted an interview with journalist Richard Abowitz (2013) who asked him:

‘If I understand, you are saying the things the industry marginalized you for filming before going to jail, mixing violence and sex, that approach is routinely filmed now?’ Black answered: Yes. Not only some: that is what the industry is today. The industry is Extreme Associates. The industry is what I did. By they pushed it even further. They pushed it to the point where you can’t defend it. Because what I did was fantasy. I was able to preach it as a movie. It is a guy in a costume. Now you have companies that do it in the guise of BDSM. You put a girl on a dog chain and chain her to a wall and them keep her there for two days

⁸ ibid

⁹ Gossett, J. L., & Byrne, S. (2002). “Click Here”: A Content Analysis of Internet Rape Sites. *Gender & Society*, 16(5), 689–709. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124302236992>

¹⁰ n6

¹¹ DeKeseredy, W. (2015). Critical Criminological Understandings of Adult Pornography and Woman Abuse: New Progressive Directions in Research and Theory. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 4(4), 4-21. doi:10.5204/ijcjsd.v4i4.184

and take a cattle prod and electrocute her and do all this under the guise of a documentary. You are taking the element of the movie out. Now, you are doing torture. You are taking the fantasy out. Now all of the sudden it's let's do this under the guise of BDSM. (Black in Abowitz 2013: 1)

What is clear is that aggression, violence, and abuse is extremely prevalent within porn, and it is overwhelmingly meted out by men, against women. The unregulated basis of the porn industry has also resulted in an increase in child sexual abuse material¹² (referred to here as 'CSAM', but more colloquially known as "child porn"), due to a confluence of legal safeguarding rollbacks, and a causative link between viewing pornography more generally, and a consequential desire to view CSAM.

Dealing with the rollback of legal safeguards first: this is best understood within the context of the United States, for two reasons. Firstly, traffic to one of the world's most popular porn sites – Pornhub – was led overwhelmingly by the US.¹³ Secondly, the US has already been home to a legal battle regarding the regulation of the industry as a whole.

The intricacies of this legal rollback are best explained by quoting wholesale the research undertaken by sociologist Dr Gail Dines, who explains that:¹⁴

The case revolves around U.S. Code Title 18 Section 2257, which requires porn producers to keep stringent records on the ages of performers and allows federal agents to inspect them at any time.

The penalties for failing to do so are harsh, including large fines and up to five years imprisonment for a first offense. In the most famous case, the company that produced the "Girls Gone Wild" video series was fined US\$2.1 million for 2257 violations. Although there have been few prosecutions, the potential penalties provide an important deterrent.

¹² For example, see DeGarmo, J, Child Pornography—A Multi-Million Dollar Industry (2016) < <https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/child-pornography-multi-million-dollar-industry-bbab/>> accessed 19 February 2021

¹³ See Pornhub: The 2019 Year in Review < <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2019-year-in-review>> accessed 19 February 2021

¹⁴ Dines, G, Levy, D, (2018) 'Child pornography may make a comeback after court ruling guts regulations protecting minors' < <https://theconversation.com/child-pornography-may-make-a-comeback-after-court-ruling-guts-regulations-protecting-minors-101763>> accessed 19 February 2021

Over time, the Justice Department expanded the definition of producers subject to the regulations to include “secondary producers,” which includes internet distribution, and set out detailed guidelines for how the records should be organized and indexed.

Judge Michael Baylson of the U.S. 3rd Circuit of Appeals ruled that most of 2257’s record keeping requirements were unconstitutional on First and Fourth Amendment grounds. The ruling allows primary producers to fulfill age verification obligations by using a form developed by the Free Speech Coalition, the industry association that brought the lawsuit against 2257. In the most far-reaching and troublesome change, the decision completely exempts major distributors (termed secondary producers), from any record-keeping requirements.

While the production and distribution of child pornography remain illegal, the law is toothless without record keeping. The requirement provides the only way to verify and track performers’ ages and serves as a major incentive for businesses across the complex supply chain to monitor content.

In short, the record-keeping obligations of producers are now effectively an exercise in “good faith” maintenance. This should be read in context with the fact that the “child porn market” is one of the fastest growing in the world, with nearly 500,000 images being reviewed *per week* by the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, with the US remaining one of the largest producers of such content.¹⁵ Further, there is also a distinct gender dynamic to the production of CSAM. Reviewing of such material found that:

Child sexual abuse images and videos found online involve both boys and girls from 0-18 years old. In their assessment of reports to their tipline, the Canadian Centre for Child Protection found that children under 12 years old were depicted in 78.30% of the images and videos assessed by their team, and 63.40% of those children were under 8 years of age. Among that same material, they found that 80.42% of the children were girls, while 19.58% were boys.¹⁶

Clearly, the abuse of any child is abhorrent regardless of sex, but it would be remiss to ignore the clear pattern that is emerging within the context of CSAM. This material can also

¹⁵ See <https://www.thorn.org/child-pornography-and-abuse-statistics/>

¹⁶ *ibid*

subsequently end up on mainstream porn sites such as Pornhub, with a recent news report highlighting that a missing 16-year old girl was found because 58 videos of her rape and exploitation were uploaded onto the site.¹⁷ And with the rollback of section 2257, it leaves hosting sites such as Pornhub – and their parent company Mindgeek – free of culpability despite profiting from such material.

Regarding the second point – that viewing non-CSAM material may lead to the viewing and/or production of CSAM material – this has been recognised by leading charities such as Lucy Faithfull, with anti-CSA expert Michael Sheath stating:¹⁸

“Mainstream pornography sites are changing the thresholds of what is normal and I think it’s dangerous. Of course most people can watch extreme porn and walk away but I don’t see those people. 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.”

For the reasons outlined above, we submit that the Home Office should view pornography – and the porn industry more widely – as something that is driven by, and profits from, promoting sexual and physical violence against women, girls, and children. This is irrespective of whether one is of the position that porn is *inherently* a form of VAWG; the evidence demonstrates that the material produced overwhelmingly contains instances of explicit acts of violence and aggression, and we urge the Government to view it as such.

Pornography as a facilitator of violence against women and girls

Moving to the second element of CEASE’s submission, we emphasise that not only should the Government view pornography as something that portrays VAWG, but further, it should be viewed as something that *facilitates* VAWG.

¹⁷ Shared, ‘Mother Finds 58 Porn Videos Of Teen Daughter Who Was Missing For A Year On Pornhub’ < <https://life.shared.com/58-porn-videos-of-florida-teen-girl-missing-for-a-year-found-on-pornhub-other-websites-by-mother>> accessed 19 February 2021

¹⁸ Grant, H, ‘How extreme porn has become a gateway drug into child abuse’ (The Guardian) < <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/15/how-extreme-porn-has-become-a-gateway-drug-into-child-abuse>> accessed 19 February 2021

First and foremost, there is myriad literature highlighting the links between pornography consumption and subsequent (and consequent) change in attitudes of the viewers in terms of sexual “tastes”. For example, Zillmann found that:¹⁹

“The effects of video pornography on young adults’ perception of sexuality, as well as dispositions toward sexual behavior (including coercive action to attain sexual access), are well documented..”

Pornography consumption manifests in attitudes that are more supportive of, and sympathetic towards, violence against women,²⁰ as well as an increase in the likelihood of the consumers to victimise women.²¹

Hald et al found that: *“The result of the present meta-analysis shows a significant overall relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes supporting violence against women in non-experimental studies. This relationship was found to be significantly stronger for violent pornography than for nonviolent pornography, although both types of pornography showed significant positive associations with attitudes supporting violence against women.”*²²

Shope found that: *[t]he paucity of research on the effects of pornography on battered women is disturbing in light of the research findings linking pornography to sexually aggressive behavior, especially among angered men*²³

¹⁹ Zillmann, D. (2000). Influence of Unrestrained Access to Erotica on Adolescents’ and Young Adults’ Dispositions Toward Sexuality. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 27, 2: 41–44. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10904205>

²⁰ Hald, G. M., Malamuth, N. M., & Yuen, C. (2010). Pornography and Attitudes Supporting Violence Against Women: Revisiting the Relationship in Nonexperimental Studies. *Aggression and Behavior* 36, 1: 14–20. [doi:10.1002/ab.20328](https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20328); Berkel, L. A., Vandiver, B. J., and Bahner, A. D. (2004). [Gender Role Attitudes, Religion, and Spirituality as Predictors of Domestic Violence Attitudes in White College Students](https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20328). *Journal of College Student Development* 45(2):119–131.

²¹ DeKeseredy, W. (2015). Critical Criminological Understandings of Adult Pornography and Woman Abuse: New Progressive Directions in Research and Theory. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 4(4), 4-21. [doi:10.5204/ijcsd.v4i4.184](https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcsd.v4i4.184); Simmons, C. A., Lehmann, P., & Collier-Tenison, S. (2008). Linking male use of the sex industry to controlling behaviors in violent relationships: An exploratory analysis. *Violence Against Women*, 14(4), 406-417. [doi:10.1177/1077801208315066](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801208315066); Shope, J. H. (2004), When words are not enough: The search for the effect of pornography on abused women. *Violence Against Women*, 10(1), 56-72. [doi:10.1177/1077801203256003](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801203256003)

²² Hald, Gert & Malamuth, Neil & Yuen, Carlin. (2010). Pornography and Attitudes Supporting Violence Against Women: Revisiting the Relationship in Nonexperimental Studies. *Aggressive behavior*. 36. 14-20. [10.1002/ab.20328](https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20328).

²³ Shope, Janet. (2004). When Words Are Not Enough: The Search for the Effect of Pornography on Abused Women. *Violence Against Women*. 10. 56-72. [10.1177/1077801203256003](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801203256003).

This more abstract “change in attitudes” towards VAWG sadly manifests in tangible abuse too. For example, DeKersedy et al found that:

“...using face-to-face interviews with 43 rural southeast Ohio women who were abused during the period while they wanted to or were trying to end a relationship with a husband or live-in partner, or where such a relationship had already ended, [DeKersedy et al] found that 65 per cent of these women’s estranged partners viewed pornography and 30 per cent of the sample stated that porn was involved in their sexual abuse.”²⁴

Further:

The bulk of the empirical work done so far involved feminist scholars gathering data from rape crisis center workers who conducted face-to-face and phone interviews with sexual and physical assault survivors, and from abused woman who sought support from battered women’s services (Bergen and Bogle 2000; Shope 2004; Simmons, Lehmann, and Collier-Tennison 2008). Collectively, this research reveals a strong association between men’s porn consumption and female victimization. For example, Shope found that abuser use of porn doubled the risk of a physically assaulted woman being sexually assault.”²⁵

These abusive attitudes almost manifest in more insidious ways. In a study done by the British Medical Journal examining the reasons for increasing normalisation of anal sex amongst teenagers:²⁶

Anal heterosex often appeared to be painful, risky and coercive, particularly for women. Interviewees frequently cited pornography as the ‘explanation’ for anal sex...(but) Other key elements included competition between men; the claim ‘people must like it if they do it’ (made alongside the seemingly contradictory expectation that it will be painful for women); and, crucially, normalisation of coercion and ‘accidental’ penetration..”

Similarly:

“... narratives suggested that mutuality and consent for anal sex were not always a priority for them. Interviewees often spoke casually about penetration where women were likely to be hurt

²⁴ n11

²⁵ ibid

²⁶ Marston C, Lewis R. Anal heterosex among young people and implications for health promotion: a qualitative study in the UK. *BMJ Open* 2014;4:e004996. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2014- 004996

or coerced (“you can rip ’em if you try and force anal sex”; “you just keep going till they get fed up and let you do it anyway”), suggesting that not only do they expect coercion to be part of anal sex, but that many of them accept or at least do not explicitly challenge it”.²⁷

It’s clear from this study that consent is not a priority, coercion is seen as a challenge and pain is expected. Research undertaken by campaign group *We Can’t Consent to This* collected first-hand accounts of women who had been subjected to male violence within the context of sexual relationships, with participants reporting:²⁸

It terrifies me that thanks to porn so many men think that violence against women is acceptable in the bedroom and I'm scared of meeting someone like that again in the future.

And:

The only thread I can think of that links them all is how normal violent pornography has become. I have talked to lots of my friends who have sex with men and they agree this is becoming common, and it's very frightening.

And:

At the time I wanted him so badly as a life partner that I didn't want to make too big a deal of it [strangulation] all. I did not want to face up to the fact that he had learned this in porn and then become dependent on it for his orgasm. I regarded him as a good man who had been ruined by his porn addiction. I am certain that he would never have thought of putting his hands round a woman's throat if he had not seen it in porn.

And:

The rise of hate porn, male dominant porn, and degrading porn is obscene. It is where boys first experience sex, and it is where they initially learn [...] Looking at the majority of porn available, it would be safe to say that boys would see all of the above [BDSM, practices like choking, restraining, hitting, spitting and verbal abuse] as normal ways to have sex. They would wrongly learn that all women enjoy what is being depicted in porn, and that is where the problem lies. Boys then grow into men, and they seldom learn anything different. Their

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ See: <https://wecantconsenttothis.uk/our-stories>

sexual behaviour stays with them into adulthood, without them knowing/learning anything different.

Sadly, it is clear that pornography has encouraged a shift in behaviour and attitudes where violence and abuse has been normalised, and is in fact *expected* to be a normal aspect of sexual relationships (by the perpetrators). The evidence demonstrates that pornography is fundamentally contributing to the normalisation of male violence against women and girls, and consequently, in the final section of this submission CEASE proposes next steps that can be taken to combat this.

Proposed further steps

First and foremost, it is imperative that the Home Office, and wider Government, recognise pornography as a contributor to and facilitator of VAWG. Without taking this first step to address how pornography is viewed *normatively*, any subsequent framework – legislative or otherwise – will not be based upon the correct evidence-base. This in effect addresses the first step that can, and should, be taken by the Government in getting to grips with this problem.

CEASE urges the Government to work with educators to address the prevalence of pornography as an informal “sex education tool”. This presents certain challenges, such as how to formulate such material in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner. While the parameters of what this educational engagement might look like is beyond the scope of this submission, we submit that the *need* for such a framework is a *fait accompli*. Research demonstrates that children as young as seven are now accessing mainstream, hardcore pornography, with no understanding as to what it is they are actually viewing, leaving them vulnerable to long-term psychological, emotional, and cognitive trauma.²⁹

The fact that this will likely only become worse as technology and its accessibility becomes more ubiquitous should be all the encouragement the Government needs to take a critical analysis approach in reviewing the impact pornography invariably has within Relationships, Health, and Sex Education. The Department for Education, and subsequently educators, cannot afford to take a *laissez-faire* approach to pornography given how prevalent it now is amongst young adults, or fundamentally affirm porn use by saying “as long as it is consensual, there is no problem”. As the above submission outlines, pornography is replete

²⁹ See <https://www.bbfcc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>

within violence and abuse, and any scheme of education must consider how online porn shapes our ideas about sex, gender, and sexuality in a way that contradicts our cultural values of mutuality, equality, and non-violence. It should be incumbent upon educators and the Government to engage critically with this wide evidence-base, and to tackle – in an age-appropriate manner – ways that this impacts other aspects of relationship and health development.

The second tangible step that the Government must take is placing pornography sites – such as the aforementioned Pornhub – into Category One within the new Online Harms Bill regulatory framework.³⁰ This Category is reserved for sites that host “*legal but harmful content and activity accessed by adults on their services*”, notwithstanding that much of the material on these sites is neither legal nor accessed solely by adults.

Further, the Government must implement a form of identity verification for content production to these sites. So-called “revenge porn” (Image-Based Sexual Abuse), where images and videos of individuals who have not given their consent to appear in such footage, is on the rise (between April 2019 – April 2020 there was a 98% increase in reported cases),³¹ as well as other illegal material such as CSAM. This has much to do with porn sites’ failed safeguarding methods, which rely on reactive approaches like the use of moderators. Moderation cannot work partly because of the sheer volume of uploads, but also because it is impossible to objectively identify illegal, non-consensual and CSEA material. Introducing a simple identification verification scheme that requires the explicit consent (and age confirmation) of all involved parties, is vital to stem the torrent of illegal and harmful content finding its way onto commercial porn sites and into rapid distribution across the web.

To conclude, CEASE submits that the Government should work from an evidence-base that has been established and developed for over 40 years. Pornography must be recognised as both an example and facilitator of male violence against women and girls. To ignore the links

³⁰ See

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/944310/Online_Harms_White_Paper_Full_Government_Response_to_the_consultation_CP_354_CCS001_CCS1220695430-001__V2.pdf

³¹ UK Safer Internet Centre, ‘Revenge porn pandemic: Rise in reports shows no sign of slowing even as lockdown eases’ (2020) < <https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/blog/revenge-porn-pandemic-rise-reports-shows-no-sign-slowing-even-lockdown-eases> > accessed 19 February 2021

between the two would be a dereliction of duty on the part of the Government, and must not be allowed to happen.

Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation

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