

# Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy Consultation 2020

## Response by the Reward Foundation

### Introduction

The Reward Foundation is a relationships and sex education charity based in Scotland (Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation SC044948, [www.rewardfoundation.org](http://www.rewardfoundation.org)). We specialise in improving public understanding of the impact of pornography use on mental and physical health. Our training course for professionals on [‘Pornography and sexual dysfunctions’](#) is accredited by the Royal College of General Practitioners.

No one predicted the pandemic, but use of internet pornography, including by men, children and young people bored at home, rose dramatically during the past year. This was aided by free access to the otherwise paid-for premium sites of the largest pornography provider Pornhub. Domestic violence charities have reported a staggering rise in complaints of domestic violence as a result. Easy access to internet pornography sites has undoubtedly been a contributing factor. Pornography use has many effects and this is why a medical as well as a social science or psychological approach is essential to tackle this source of public health risk.

It is clear from the extensive research that there is a link between domestic abuse, general violence against women and pornography use. There are, no doubt, many contributing factors to this link, but the evidence around how compulsive use of internet pornography can affect the brain and the decision-making faculties of a compulsive user over time is something that we have to take seriously.

In this consultation response we examine a range of activities around the consumption of pornography which is currently legal, and suggest that this consumption is contributing in a material and quantifiable way to a wide range of criminal activities where women and children are the principal victims.

If the Home Office research team wants a short introductory blog, the [Porn Harms’ Fact Sheet](#) created by John Foubert in 2019 is a good place to start. It sets out 50 different ways pornography can be a source of issues for consumers. Nearly all of them will impact on women and children.

### Research on pornography

Over the past decade a substantial academic literature has developed which indicates clear relationships between the consumption of pornography, particularly violent pornography, and the behaviour of men towards women and children. Pornography use, both in legal and illegal forms, can act as an underlying activity leading to crimes such as the consumption of Child Sexual Abuse Imagery (CSAM). It can also increase the likelihood and severity of rape, domestic violence, sexual assault, sharing of personal intimate images without consent, cyber-flashing, sexual harassment and online harassment.

[78% of the pornography consumed in the UK](#) is watched by men, though the number of women viewing is slowly rising here, as it is in every country in the world. The male market is relatively saturated and now women are being targeted by the marketing and normalisation of pornography as ‘harmless’ entertainment. Two decades ago, before the creation of industrial-scale internet pornography, only a very small portion of the UK population were pornography users, so pornography’s impact on society was much more limited. Over 7 million people in the UK use pornography each day, from a population of 65 million. In 2020 pornography sites were the 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> most visited sites for [UK internet users](#). Pornography is mostly free and available on the device in your pocket. It is negatively influencing the behaviour of most men and is systematically

making pornography-using women more accepting of sexual aggression and other aspects of criminal behaviour, in direct opposition to the current of #metoo.

Evidence of associations between pornography consumption and violence is increasing. Some of the most compelling evidence is found in the medical research. In 2018, based on the weight of that evidence, the World Health Organization introduced a new category of disorder, [Compulsive Sexual Behaviour Disorder](#), to its International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). Research shows that over [80% of the people seeking treatment for compulsive sexual behaviour disorder](#) have reported an inability to control their use of pornography, despite negative consequences. Those include negative effects on relationships, on work and on sexual offending.

[Researchers at the University of Cambridge](#) found changes to brain structure and function in compulsive pornography users. Their brains responded to images of pornography in the same way as cocaine addicts' brains do to cocaine. Addiction-related brain changes impair the ability of a user to put the brakes on impulsive behaviour. For some compulsive pornography users that means an inability to control violent outbursts. It can contribute to domestic violence and other crimes against women and children.

There are cases of men who have been found guilty of violence against women where pornography consumption was implicated. There are over a hundred peer-reviewed [research papers](#) linking pornography use to sexual offending, sexual aggression and abuse. Yet on pornography recovery websites male users report that when they quit pornography and their brains eventually heal, their compassion for women returns. At the same time many mental health issues like social anxiety and depression, and physical health problems such as sexual dysfunction, reduce or disappear. Such is the power of our bodies and brains to heal, if we 'take the glass out of the wound'.

In recent years the Police have reported a huge increase in cases of non-fatal strangulation, one of the more popular themes found in pornography today. The large 2019 [Sunday Times](#) survey showed how porn is changing the way we have sex in the UK. See Gen Z re BDSM and rough sex. Twice as many women as men say that rough sex and BDSM is something they prefer to watch. And if they watch it in pornography, they tend to mirror this behaviour in real life. If women are asking to be strangled to achieve a bigger sexual high, what impact might this have on a legal defence of consent? This is a part of the normalisation of pornography use by women. The more women use pornography, the more they adopt behaviours and sexual practices depicted in what they are consuming, even if this is to their own detriment.

Recent [research](#) on non-fatal strangulation by Dr Bichard, a clinician at the North Wales Brain Injury Service, is alarming. She describes "a range of injuries caused by non-fatal strangulation that can include cardiac arrest, stroke, miscarriage, incontinence, speech disorders, seizures, paralysis, and other forms of long-term brain injury." Dr Bichard goes on to say that "the injuries caused by non-fatal strangulation may not be visible to the naked eye, or may only become evident hours or days after the attack, meaning that they are far less obvious than injuries like wounds or broken bones, and so may be missed during a police investigation."

### **Research on pornography's impact on the behaviour of boys**

Our children and young people are the most vulnerable to internet addiction of all kinds, due to the malleable nature of their brains at this critical adolescent stage of development. This is the period of life when most mental health conditions and addictions develop. We have to focus on prevention as well as helping those who have already become snared by pornography use, so that going forward, they will not act out sexual violence on those around them.

In England and Wales, between 2012 and 2016 there was a [78% rise in child-on-child sexual abuse](#) cases reported to the police.

In Scotland between 2012 and 2016, there was 34% rise in such offences, prompting the Solicitor General to set up an Expert Group to investigate the causes. In their report published in January 2020 called [Harmful Sexual Behaviour by Children and Young People](#), the Expert Group state “Exposure to pornography is increasingly being identified as a contributory factor in the emergence of Harmful Sexual Behaviour”.

In Ireland in 2020, two young teenage men were convicted of the murder of 14-year-old Ana Kriegel. They had vast amounts of violent pornography on their smartphones. Is there a link? The Police believed so.

The vast majority of such cases are perpetrated by boys on girls within the family. Given that incest or so-called ‘faux incest’ is one of the most popular and fastest growing genres of pornography available, is it any wonder that children exposed to such material might naively try to copy it? Unfettered access to online pornography is shaping the minds of our children and young people and preparing them for adulthood with sexual tastes shaped by the most violent, coercive and risky forms of sexual activity.

For example, there is [research](#) for adolescent boys that showed an “intentional exposure to violent x-rated material over time predicted an almost 6-fold increase in the odds of self-reported sexually aggressive behaviour.” Also, there is [research](#) indicating a notable spike in first perpetration of sexual violence appearing at age 16 years.

Australian research by [McKibben et al](#) in 2017 on harmful sexual behavior carried out by children and young people found that it accounts for about half of all child sexual abuse perpetration. The research identified three opportunities for prevention based on interviews with the young perpetrators, which involved acting on behalf of children and young people to: *reform their sexuality education; redress their victimization experiences; and help their management of pornography.*

### **Neuroscience research on pornography**

Understanding internet pornography as a behavioural addiction is crucial to finding a way of dealing with the current rise in domestic violence, both in terms of prevention and care for those addicted.

The severity of the medical implications of internet addiction, be it to pornography, gambling or gaming to name a few, have resulted in a new field of research called behavioural addiction. Neuroscience researchers have identified brain changes and responses in people with internet addictions, including pornography addiction, that are similar to those of substance addicts.

Advances in neuroscience have allowed us to understand that the brain is plastic and changes in response to the environment. Our environment has changed dramatically since the advent of broadband, 4G technology and smartphones around 2008, particularly our cultural environment. In 2019, 85% of the pornography consumed in the UK was viewed on a [phone or tablet](#). Easy access to limitless amounts of free, hard-themed internet pornography has changed consumer’s brains and behaviour.

There is evidence that when heavy users quit pornography, the brain can recover important functions over time that were lost during addictive use of it. Critically, the part of the brain that inhibits violent and impulsive outbursts is impaired when a person has an addiction but can heal and function again after a period of time, after they quit. Tens of thousands of men on pornography recovery websites have documented that over the months after they quit pornography use, their natural compassion and attraction to women returns.

Critically, addiction-related brain changes eventually impair the ability of a user to [put the brakes on impulsive behaviour](#). For some pornography addicts that means an inability to control violent outbursts. Violent outbursts are at the core of much domestic violence.

Internet pornography as a behavioural addiction is a relatively new phenomenon. In the late 1990's the "[Persuasive Design Technology Lab](#)" was founded at Stanford University. It used the best research in neuroscience and psychology to create technology and apps that would change a user's brain and behaviour without their awareness. It triggers unconscious cravings in the brain of the user to keep them coming back for more, leading to addiction for some. The apps and websites are supposedly free, but in reality, users are the product. It is our attention and personal data that is being sold to advertisers for that so called 'free' content. Pornography companies are the biggest harvesters of that personal data.

Addictive behaviours of any kind, including to internet pornography, affects a person's ability to control their emotions, motivation and above all, the ability to inhibit antisocial behaviour such as coercion and sexual abuse.

### **Pornography industry playbook to deflect attention from harms**

This section is intended to provide background on the way the pornography industry has worked hard to deflect the interest of policy makers and governments from the harms their products can lead to for women and children.

The multibillion-dollar pornography industry has financial reasons for keeping the public and politicians in the dark about the links between their product and health risks. We know this from the way they are building on the tactics used successfully by Big Tobacco in the 1950s and 60s to cause doubt in the mind of the public about the links between smoking and lung cancer. At that time research was emerging of the link between the two.

In order to maintain high profit levels, key representatives of the American tobacco industry developed a public relations campaign, known as "the playbook" to counter the message of the independent research that was emerging of the links between smoking and lung cancer so as to cause doubt in the minds of the public. "If the experts can't agree, why should we bother to change our habits?" was the message such a tactic was designed to promote. They also paid millions of dollars to certain researchers to find evidence that something other than tobacco was the cause of lung cancer.

The strategy was very effective for tobacco. It took another 20 years before the links were clearly established in the minds of the public and policy makers. In the meantime, millions suffered from the various health impacts of addiction to cigarettes and other tobacco products.

That playbook has been used successfully by many more multibillion dollar companies as has been well explained in the recent documentary series "[How They Made Us Doubt Everything](#)" on BBC Sounds. That same playbook is being used by the [internet pornography industry](#) too.

Pornography is also such a politically sensitive subject and a largely private activity that it stops many people discussing it publicly. For others it is embarrassing or taboo. This plays well into the hands of a company like MindGeek that owns around 90% of the largest pornography websites.

Whenever the subject 'is' raised in the media, pornography industry shills (that is, people who publicly promote another's cause in a misleading way) ignore, deny or seek to dismiss the compelling medical evidence of the mental and physical harms that pornography causes.

This is not a job that citizens alone can do alone. They are up against the sharpest minds and deepest pockets in a multibillion-dollar industry whose aim is keep users returning to their products. This is why the government has to act now in order to protect our people, especially young people, from the well documented harms that compulsive use of internet pornography can cause. Unless we address this matter head on, we can only expect to see a further rise in sexual abuse and domestic violence towards children and adults.

## **Policies to reduce the harm caused to women and children by pornography**

The Reward Foundation has been active in promoting the concept of age verification for pornography as a legal tool to minimise potential harm to younger people. See this [2-minute video](#) on age verification that sets out many of the key issues in a very succinct way. We were sorely disappointed that Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act (DEA) was not enacted by the government in 2019.

Our organisation ran the world's first international online conference on age verification for pornography in June 2020. We hosted 160 delegates from 29 countries. What we learned at this conference on the importance, tools and best approaches to making age verification for pornography a reality is set out in the [Age Verification Conference Report](#). Since the conference the Reward Foundation has been active in advising people in Canada and South Africa on age verification. It is such a pity the UK is missing out on being a pioneer in this crucial area of social legislation.

It is not too late for the UK government to finally implement this Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 as an interim measure. It will take several years to have the Online Harms Bill go through all the stages of development. Any gaps, such as social media, missed by the DEA, could be covered in the new bill. The ongoing mental and physical harms to young people with easy access to hardcore material will come back to haunt this country and its poorly resourced mental health services for children and young people. Further, until there is appropriate legislation, there is no regulator to control the viewing of "extreme" pornography in the UK, even though such material is illegal. The British Board of Film Classification has the capacity to take on all aspects of the regulator's role.

Another powerful tool with potential for reducing the harm to women and children from pornography use is the concept of health warnings within the pornography websites. The Reward Foundation launched this concept at the Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation conference in Washington D.C. in 2018. The [state of Utah](#) in the USA has become the first legal jurisdiction to enact such a system. Utah has opted for a text-based label. We recommend video warnings, as they are wholly in keeping with the format of material you consumers are about to see. The system of IP addresses used by the Internet allows a government to legislate for its health warnings to be applied just within the United Kingdom.

For the 2018 Coalition to End Sexual Exploitation conference the Reward Foundation worked with graphic design students at Edinburgh College of Art to create exemplar videos, each 20 to 30 seconds long. These were intended to be legally mandated to sit at the start of a legal pornography viewing session, offering the consumer a health warning. The six best videos created by the class are compiled in this [2½ minute video](#). The brief in this student exercise was to focus on the impact of pornography on the viewers sexual health, particularly for men. It would be equally valid to mandate creating videos that focus on the potential of pornography to incite male violence against women and children. Consumers could be given different health warnings at the start of each individual pornography viewing session. In this way men could be targeted with messages that can directly address their behaviour towards women and children. Beyond the need for legislation, and the availability of a regulator who could also commission the videos, which will already be required for age verification and to control extreme pornography, there should be no other costs to the UK tax payer. The cost would fall on the commercial pornography suppliers. The process can be fully automated on the commercial pornography companies' websites. The cost of doing this would be quite small and it would be simply a price they would have to pay for access to the UK consumer market.

**Support**

If the Strategy Consultation team wants to discuss any of the issues raised in this response, please contact Mary Sharpe, Advocate , Chief Executive Officer ([mary@rewardfoundation.org](mailto:mary@rewardfoundation.org), mobile 07717 437 727) or Dr Darryl Mead, Chair ([darryl@rewardfoundation.org](mailto:darryl@rewardfoundation.org), mobile 07506 475 204).

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