



31 January 2025

Submission:

Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health

Summary

Australian Feminists for Women's Rights (AF4WR) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this NSW Parliamentary Inquiry. We are a feminist group of the broad political left (i.e. not specifically aligned to any party), whose object is research-based advocacy on women's sex-based rights.

In this submission we will briefly address most of the Terms of Reference and make five recommendations for Parliament to consider. Many other groups and individuals have made valuable contributions to this inquiry already and have provided a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data and evidence about the alarming and growing impact of pornography in society. Rather than add to these contributions, we aim to highlight the key points we agree with and apply a feminist lens or analysis. We also make further arguments on the important role of political and social leadership in addressing these harms.

Use of the term 'harmful'

First, we are puzzled at the inclusion of the adjective "harmful". There is no evidence of the existence of "harmless" pornography. Pornography is by definition sexually explicit visual material designed to produce a reaction of sexual arousal in the viewer: generating that reaction (and usually making money from doing so) is its sole purpose. In addition, feminist research over several decades has demonstrated that pornography has at its core the objectification of women and girls. More recent research on pornography shows that far from becoming *less* harmful, it is becoming more so: more and more violent, with increasingly extreme violence (including torture and killing) against women and girls (and some boys) being eroticised (see for example *Pornland* by Gail Dines, 2010).

Moreover, pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry fuelled by what are euphemistically called "market forces" (see for example *Big Porn, Inc.* by Melinda Tankard Reist; Dines also discussed this aspect). As we know, the demand in "market forces" is manipulated through advertising and online material. As has been identified with other addictive behaviours such as gambling and tobacco smoking, pornographic material elicits addictive behaviour and fuels a desire for increasingly "hard core" content to satisfy its user.

We thus do not find the distinction between “harmful” and “non-harmful” pornography to be useful or accurate and consider such framing of this inquiry's Terms of Reference to undermine the important work the inquiry is meant to be doing.

We also note that nowhere in the Terms of Reference is there specific reference to the inherent harm that pornography inflicts on women involved in the creation of the materials produced by the industry. Whilst it may be read into the Terms of Reference that content that harms women and girls is implied as being addressed, specific terms should be clearly articulated to address harms specific to females and the unique impact on them of the materials created. This will be discussed further below.

Previous inquiries

We note that this is far from the first Inquiry or study of this kind to be conducted in Australia. The **Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS)** published a 62-page report in **2017** on [“The effects of pornography on children and young people”](#) and a large-scale **Federal Inquiry** on [“Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet”](#), for which it received 417 submissions. The Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications published a comprehensive report of this Inquiry on **23 November 2016**. The Senate Report recommended that the Australian government commission further research, following which an expert panel should be appointed to make recommendations. It further recommended that “state and territory governments consider the adequacy of:

- their current policies on, and responses to, allegations of sexual abuse perpetrated by children within schools; and
- the training on child protection matters provided to individuals employed in, or preparing for employment in, roles that could involve children”, and that “the Australian government consider the adequacy of the information available to parents, guardians and teachers on how to keep children safe online.”

So, the Federal Inquiry did indicate a need for further work in this area, and we note some progress in some aspects below. However, our governments, both state and federal, have access to a plethora of research, both independent and academic, on this issue, so we suggest that the time for formal inquiries has passed and it is now time for serious action.

Responses to the Terms of Reference

- a. **Age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography**
- b. **Media by which pornography is accessed and circulated**
- c. **Impacts on body image**
- d. **The relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education**

Various submissions to this inquiry have provided data on the increasingly young ages at which children are being exposed to online pornography and the effect this has on their respect for women and girls, self-esteem, attitudes to sex and sexual behaviours.

Among peer-reviewed research in public health, we would like to draw the Committee's attention to the [most comprehensive study to date on the exposure and access of young Australians to pornography](#), published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* in 2024. This report found that the median age of first exposure was 13 for boys and 16 for girls, although significant numbers of children were exposed at even younger ages. It referred to other research which found that 100% of Australian males aged 15-29 had viewed pornography, and 40% access pornography daily.

The authors summarise the findings and the concerns in the final paragraph of the article, which we cite in full here, as they align with other evidence, which is overwhelming, and with AF4WR's own concerns:

Given the extent of pornography exposure documented here, it is likely that pornography is a significant influence on Australian young people's, and particularly boys' and young men's, sexual attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, this study supports the need for public health strategies to address the potential harms associated with pornography use. Most children and young people who have encountered pornography first did so years before they had sexual interactions with another person, suggesting that critical education on pornography should be incorporated into school curricula for adolescents. Of the young people whose first encounters with pornography were accidental, most stumbled across it online via searches or pop-ups, suggesting that regulatory and technological measures should be considered to limit minors' online exposure. Finally, given that young men aged 15-19 years are the demographic most likely to perpetrate sexual violence, young women of that age group are the most likely to be victims of sexual violence, and pornography use is associated with both perpetration and victimisation, violence prevention efforts should include increased attention to reducing pornography's potential harms. Whatever measures are adopted, we must reckon with the fact that pornography is a widespread presence in young people's lives in Australia (Crabbe, Flood & Adams 2024, p. 6).

These findings echo those of the AIFS study and the Federal government Inquiry cited above. Of particular note are the facts that:

- a) *exposure to pornography shapes attitudes to sexual behaviour long before young people become sexually active, and*
- b) *boys and young men are the most likely to consume pornography, which sexually objectifies women (and some men, notably in gay pornography), and boys and men are also the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of sexual violence.*

Human brains do not fully mature until people are in their 20s, and adolescence is a time of significant structural change in the brain. Among other things, the frontal lobes, which

govern reasoning, judgement and impulse control, are the last parts of the brain to mature, and boys achieve this maturity some years later than girls. (For a clear summary of the key points, see the Queensland government's [Child Safety Practice Manual](#).) It is thus worrying that pornographic material is so easily accessible—to the extent of being almost impossible to avoid—to so many immature people, and so avidly consumed in particular by boys. Moreover, cultural and behavioural messaging conveyed through pornography contradicts any messaging on healthy relationships and the notion of consent that informs school sexual education programs. Adolescents, who are testing the boundaries of their independence and are more likely, under the influence of dopamine, to engage in risk-taking behaviours are also more likely to seek peer group reinforcement than that of adult authority figures. Most of this reinforcement is now coming to them online; social media bans are only part of this picture.

e. the production and dissemination of pornography, including deepfake or AI-generated pornography

AF4WR would like to draw the committee's attention to the harms of the production of pornography on the female participants, many of whom suffer lifelong trauma and physical impairment as a result of pornography. Women are drugged, beaten and forced to perform humiliating and degrading acts. They risk Sexually Transmitted Infections that can impact them for life, unwanted pregnancies, are harassed by users online, and have poor mental health. For a recent study into the effects of the industry, see In [This Industry, You're No Longer Human](#) as a starting point. See also the work of sociologist Meagan Tyler including her summary in [The Conversation](#).

One of the most visited pornography sites, PornHub, has a well-documented and appalling track record for the volume of content it contains in which men participate in and enjoy violent and degrading acts against women. Yet it operates unchecked in Australia and elsewhere, disseminating free and increasingly harmful content.

There have been increasing numbers of complaints against the site by women who report having been raped, with footage of their rape being uploaded to the site and requests to remove it being repeatedly ignored. There are also examples of child sexual abuse footage being readily available on the site and again, requests to remove it being ignored. The story of [Laila Mickewait's](#) four-year battle to have videos of her abuse removed is a particularly grim one.

There are strong links between the pornography industry and the crime of sex trafficking. [Fight the New Drug](#), a US-based anti-porn group, has conducted extensive research into the prevalence of sex trafficking and slavery in the US porn industry. Similar research is needed in Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 1: The NSW Parliament undertake measures to understand criminal practices linked to the pornography industry, whether current monitoring, enforcement and penalties are sufficient to prevent them and what further measures are required to respond to the practices effectively.

RECOMMENDATION 2: The NSW Parliament considers whether current support services for women exiting the pornography industry are sufficient to respond to the impacts of their involvement in the industry on their physical and mental health.

f. the impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults

Issues relating to this ToR have been raised above and also in substantial submissions from other groups and individuals. However, we point out that there are many other groups in society affected by the rapid and widespread proliferation of pornography.

The organisation [Collective Shout](#) has conducted extensive research into the impact of pornography and sexualised behaviours on the teaching profession. We urge the committee to read this research in full, however some key points are:

- 80% of teachers surveyed reported a rise in harmful sexual behaviour in their school
- Teachers reported students as young as Year 2 sharing sexually explicit material with their peers
- Sexual noises mimicking the sounds of pornography are a real and growing problem in classrooms across Australia, perpetrated mainly by boys.

There is also the impact on adults of all ages, usually women, whose partners become addicted to pornography, as well as the impact on the partner. The committee has received various submissions addressing this concern. Of particular note is the submission from Suicide Prevention Australia which states that there is an increased risk of suicide among people who engage in harmful pornography use. Pornography use is an increasingly significant factor in relationship breakdown with all the resultant individual and family trauma.

The “porn-soaked” society we now live in affects us all. From sexualised advertising at children’s eye level in shopping centres (eg Honey Birdette) to increases in reports of choking and rough sex among teenager and young adults, and increases in girls presenting with serious injuries after being coerced into anal sex – the impact is felt across all ages, sexes and demographics. We are almost at the point of no return unless urgent action is taken.

g. impacts on minority groups including but not limited to First Nations, CALD or LGBTIQ+ people and people living with disability

Pornography impacts ALL women. While we are not a minority group, we are an oppressed group with particular harms created by exposure to our hyper-sexualised capitalist patriarchy. If women as a class were afforded the same respect and status of men, harmful pornography would simply not exist.

h. the effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved

AFWR is not aware of any NSW government initiatives targeting adults that raise awareness of the use and misuse of pornography.

i. the effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these

AF4WR supports the age verification trial proposed by the eSafety Commissioner. We note the submission from the Age Verification Providers Association which confirms there are no technological barriers for introducing age-verification for online pornography.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The NSW Parliament lobbies the Federal Government to introduce an age verification trial process for access to online pornography, and a long-term roll out process for permanent measures.

j. the resources and support currently available to parents and carers to educate children about pornography, and how these might be improved

AF4WR notes and supports the submissions from other organisations which outline the need for new, comprehensive resources, beginning in late primary school and delivered by trained educators. We note Interrelate reports that 35% of children surveyed said they had not received any education about pornography at school.

Any new resources developed must be honest and accurate about the damage pornography inflicts on consumers, participants and society as a whole. There is no such thing as harmless pornography and children and young people should not be encouraged to explore and consume it under the misapprehension that there is a “safe” way for them to do so.

RECOMMENDATION 4: The NSW Parliament endorses the development of new, comprehensive educational resources that accurately address the damage pornography causes and lobby the Federal government to roll such resources out on a national level.

k. any other related matters.

Not addressed in these ToRs is the fact that we need social and political leadership to change attitudes among boys and men about pornography. This requires men in leading positions to make public stances, as we know males rarely listen to or are influenced by female voices.

A public campaign featuring sports stars, actors, musicians, and online influencers such as YouTubers, to send a clear message about the danger and damage porn poses to boys, will have more impact than any classroom lesson or chat with a parent. We urgently call on Australian men to stand up for the women and girls in their lives and say no to porn.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The NSW Parliament endorses a new public awareness campaign aimed at changing social attitudes towards the acceptability of pornography.

A final observation

In 1983 in the US, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin proposed a policy and legal framing of pornography as a violation of the civil rights of women and girls, through their Anti-pornography Civil Rights Ordinance. The Ordinance was a departure from traditional “obscenity” law approaches and other restraining or criminal penalties. It was meant to allow women harmed by pornography to seek damages through lawsuits in civil courts. Although a number of local governments did pass such Ordinances in the 1980s, they were all struck down by courts, who found that it violated the First Amendment to the US Constitution on Freedom of Speech.

Although requiring women to engage in lawsuits creates other sorts of problems, not the least of which is financial, the Mackinnon-Dworkin Ordinance did have the advantage of reframing the debate around pornography as a question of women’s and girls’ *rights*. In a society that claims to take violence against women seriously, such approaches can be helpful in addressing the harms of pornography.