



Joint Submission to the UN Working Group On Discrimination Against Women and Girls on Women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights in situations of crisis

By FiLiA, Out of The Shadows and Yes Matters

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1. This submission is prepared on behalf of FiLiA, a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) advocating for women's human rights. The objects of the CIO as set out within the governing document include:
 - a) To advance the education of the public in the subject of gender equality;
 - b) The promotion of equality and diversity
 - c) To promote human rights (as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and subsequent United Nations conventions and declarations) and in particular women's rights throughout the world.
2. In working towards these objects, FiLiA's principles are sisterhood and solidarity, amplifying the voices of women, and defending women's human rights.
3. This submission is provided jointly with Yes Matters and Out of The Shadows.

Scope of this paper: the call for submissions

4. *The Working Group on discrimination against women and girls will present a thematic report on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in situations of crisis to the 47th session of the Human Rights Council in June 2021. The report will examine women's and girls' SRHR within an overarching framework of reasserting gender equality and countering roll-backs.*
5. *The Working Group will take a broad approach to crisis. In doing so, it intends not only to look at humanitarian crises, typically understood as encompassing international and non-international conflicts and occupied territories, natural disasters, man-made disasters, famine and pandemics, but it will also examine long-standing situations of crisis resulting from structural discrimination deeply embedded in histories of patriarchy, colonization, conquest and marginalization (such as in the case, for example, of indigenous women, Roma women and women of African descent), as well as other types of crisis based on the lived experiences of women, such as those induced by environmental factors, including the toxification of the planet, land grabbing, political, social and economic crises, including the impact of austerity measures, refugee and migrant crises, displacement crises, and gang-related violence, among others. The Working Group will examine how existing laws, policies, and practices can contribute to negative reproductive health outcomes for women and girls in situations of crisis and restrictions on their autonomy during their life-cycle, using an intersectional approach.*

The Crisis

6. This submission will focus on porn culture as a crisis. It is a social and public health crisis embedded in patriarchy. Women and girls are expected to perform to increasingly violent male pornographic standards, and this

particularly affects women and girls in further crises of poverty and gang related violence.

7. Research done by Culture Reframed¹ shows that
 - a) Porn sites get more visitors per month than Netflix, Amazon and Twitter combined
 - b) In an analysis of best-selling porn films, 88% contained physical aggression including gagging, strangulation, spanking and slapping
 - c) A meta-analysis of 22 studies between 1978 and 2014 from seven different countries concluded that pornography consumption is associated with an increased likelihood of committing acts of verbal or physical sexual aggression, regardless of age
 - d) A meta-analysis found “an overall significant positive association between pornography use and attitudes supporting violence against women”
 - e) In a study of U.S. college men, researchers found that 83% reported seeing mainstream pornography, and that those who did were more likely to say they would commit rape or sexual assault if they knew they wouldn’t be caught than men who hadn’t seen porn in the past 12 months
 - f) Thirty peer-reviewed studies since 2011 reveal pornography use has negative and detrimental impacts on the brain

8. The NSPCC’s research² showed that girls who were exposed to pornography between the ages of 14 and 19 were at greater risk of being victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault. It also showed that nearly half of boys exposed to pornography aged 11 - 16 said that porn gave them ideas for sexual activities they wanted to try.

9. The normalising of violence against women and girls, including sexual harassment, sexual assault, violent sex, strangulation, and the framing of that

¹<https://www.culturereframed.org/the-porn-crisis/>

²https://www.mdx.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/223266/MDX-NSPCC-OCC-pornography-report.pdf

violence as erotic, desirable and appealing both to males and females, marketed not as a niche fetish but as mainstream pleasure, creates a situation of crisis for SRHR.

10. Within a context where male violence against women and girls (VAWG) is an enduring problem, porn culture normalises, promotes and / or reinforces sexual violence. This is a social and public health crisis in which the SRHR of women and girls suffer.

Submissions

Male Violence Against Women and Girls

11. Male violence against women pre-dates porn culture by centuries. However, the reframing of violence as being an unremarkable part of sex means that it is far harder to prove that such violence was unwanted, and therefore to secure a prosecution in sexual violence cases.

“Porn is miseducating society and grooming girls and young women to become objects to male fantasy. It gives men a green light to sexually violate and abuse women and girls.”

- Fiona Broadfoot, Founder & CEO, Build A Girl Project

12. According to a recent article in the Times³, 38% of British women under 40 report being choked, hit or spat on in otherwise ordinary sexual encounters.
13. Choking is a particularly disturbing element of porn culture which affects the SRHR of women and girls. Not just because it is violent and dangerous, but because the extraordinarily rapid rise of choking as a “normal” part of sex has gone hand in hand with the deaths of 60 British women whose killers claimed that they had consented to strangulation in sex. This enabled them to put forward the defence that they had not intended to kill, and therefore the killing

³<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/women-must-fight-back-against-porn-soaked-culture-gpr8wnr8w>

was manslaughter and not murder. That a jury would entertain the possibility that a woman consented to strangulation to this extent - and, in some cases, to even more graphic violence - is testimony to the effect of the porn crisis on social attitudes.

“Porn tells lies about consent, hardwires those lies into people's brains and reflects back in the decisions those people make about sexual offending. No legal direction, however careful, is going to be able to counter the toxic education that pornography gives men about women, and women about themselves.”

- Criminal defence barrister specialising in sexual offences, Legal Feminist Group

14. These cases led to the formation of the group We Can't Consent To This, who campaigned for an end to the “rough sex defence.” This was successful in that the most recent Domestic Violence Bill includes a section clarifying that it is not a defence to Actual Bodily Harm or Grievous Bodily Harm for the victim to have consented for the purposes of obtaining sexual gratification. While on paper a victory, this changes nothing; the 1990s case of R v Brown clarified that a victim cannot consent to ABH or GBH. The “rough sex” defence to murder is that the person did not intend to kill or to cause GBH, so this clause will not prevent a killer from arguing that he had no intention to kill when he strangled his partner in supposedly consensual choking during sex.

15. It is not just the risk to physical safety which presents a risk to the SRHR of women and girls in porn culture. There is also a risk of injury and of psychological harm. The trend towards physically aggressive anal sex in porn for example has led to a rise in women and girls experiencing anal prolapse, or “rosebudding” as it is euphemistically termed in porn.

16. The suggestion from some doctors⁴ that porn should be shown to children as part of education further normalises the view that porn is educational or beneficial, rather than creating a SRHR crisis for women and girls.

Consent in SRHR

17. Gemma Aitchison of Yes Matters argues in this section that consent is central to SRHR, and that porn culture negatively affects understandings of consent.

Women and girls are at risk due to corporate grooming by pornography. Pornography reinforces damaging gender stereotypes including dominance, entitlement and control in men and sexual objectification in women. We find these same ingredients in the historical high domestic homicides in the UK.

Pornography is increasing in violence, grooming consumers to believe that assault including strangulation is sexy. Terms like “love bruises” are being used increasingly by vulnerable young people who are seeing pornography as sex education. Where puberty and sexuality encourage young people to seek out images of naked people - and yet instead of healthy sexuality, they are coming across increasingly violent, racist and sexist material and learning this is how they are supposed to be. This is positively reinforced by orgasm and cognitive development at this time means risk assessment isn't something they are capable of. 68 women last year were murdered in the UK with the excuse of rough sex learned from pornography. The more violent it becomes, the more abuse is not only normalised but pressure to accept abuse and assault as part of your sex life. This is then translated into the justice system where now even if rape is violent it can still be dismissed. Currently in the UK rape conviction is at a historical low.

Finally, pornography's link to child sexual abuse and exploitation. The majority of those convicted of child sexual offenses claim an addiction to pornography. In pornography the highest consumed is teen porn. Even when

⁴<https://www.pressreader.com/uk/daily-mail/20180501/282003263043396>

not searching for that category the women in pornography, always referred to as girls and always without public hair like girls, are always very young looking. Categories include incest, daddy's little girl etc and include language about reluctant, ruined, destroyed. There is currently a petition for MindGeek to stop profiting from videos of actual child rape and abuse with victims and police trying to get them removed from PornHub that advertises and profits from them.

To summarise pornography at the very least needs regulation. If a person acted as this industry does they would face prosecution for mass child grooming, distribution of indecent images of children and of sexual offenses. Pornography is the theory and the crime stats we see are the practice.

Abuse is not sexy.

Young Women's SRHR in porn culture

18. Those who are perhaps most affected by the porn culture crisis are young women who are navigating sexuality and consent in porn culture.
19. An extensive review of 40,000 papers concerning the effect of pornography on adolescents conducted by Middlesex University⁵ concluded that
20. *"Pornography has been linked to unrealistic attitudes about sex, beliefs that women are sex objects, more frequent thoughts about sex, and children and young people who view pornography tend to hold less progressive gender role attitudes."*
21. The study noted that it is not possible to establish causation from correlation, so it is not possible to be certain as to whether porn causes these regressive beliefs or whether it simply reinforces them. We would argue that it is not

⁵<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22987051>

relevant: a society which promotes women and girls' SRHR cannot exist in porn culture either way.

22. Young women who are at risk of childhood sexual exploitation (CSE) including exploitation by older adults and by their peers within gangs are particularly vulnerable in terms of SRHR.
23. Kendra Houseman of Out of the Shadows provides a case study from her work with children at risk of CSE.

I work in a secondary school setting and am the safeguarding director as well as the sexual health practitioner for the school, and over the past 8 years I have seen a change in the sexual behaviour of young people. To examine this, I will use the case study of Child T. Child T had a safeguarding history and was known to services. Over an 8 month period there was a significant change in Child T's appearance and behaviour. Child T, initially, became louder and more boisterous. She started to wear excessive makeup and would come to school with her skirt rolled very short. There were rumours she had a boyfriend. I would often speak to Child T about what was going on, but she would not disclose anything. There was then another sudden shift in her appearance and behaviour. She became quiet and withdrawn. She would often miss school, especially on a Monday. She would often be found crying but would not say why.

In 2019 the police contacted the school to say that Child T and another male student had been seen on CCTV in the stairwell of a carpark engaged in a sexual act. Child T had a belt around her neck and was seen being "choked" by the male whilst they engaged in the sexual act.

Child T disclosed that she had been engaging in violent sexual acts for some time including strangulation and anal sex. When the conversation of consent arose, even though Child T had received 1:1 support around understanding consent, she didn't seem to understand. Child T said she did not like to be strangled and didn't like anal sex, but that it was "what people do". Child T

explain that her boyfriend, who we will call Child S, watched Porn Hub and they would watch it together “to learn about sex”. Child T said that they would watch violent Porn and then act out what they had seen. Child T seemed to believe that once in a sexual act, violence and harm was part of that.

Child S said that he had been watching porn from a young age and that violence against women was in almost all the porn that he watched. Child S said that most of the porn he accessed involved a male choking/ strangulation of a female. Child S said that violence against females during sex was normal and “Everyone does it, miss... You see how long you can strangle them without cumming”. Child S did not see a criminal element in harming a female during sex. Rostad et al.,(2019) raise that there are concerns that exposure to sexually explicit material with violent themes may not be perceived as fantasy, particularly among those with limited sexual experience, which could potentially have negative impacts on behavior and expectations for sexual interactions and relationships in real life.

This is not the only case study I could present. Violent acts against females by males has been normalised for many of our children and young people due to porn culture. They are able to access places like Porn hub easily and often without parents knowing. The availability and the violence that is now entrenched in porn means that some young peoples views on sex are harmful both to themselves and others.

This case study, and many others like it, show that online porn now operates and exists within a sociocultural context that is applying and promoting harm against girls and women and promoting stereotypes about gender, sexual objectification. Online porn is “playing out” scenes such as strangulation and rape and making this a normalised world for the developing brain of adolescents and show women as victims and helpless in many scenarios. The recent Domestic Abuse bill that was passed during Covid 19, where millions of pounds and resources have been dedicated to support those who are victims of domestic abuse, are operating in the same social field as a porn industry

that allows videos of violence against women within sexual acts to be accessed by millions.

In terms of safeguarding and child abuse, it is clear that children are at risk and are suffering significant harm due to the porn industry promotion of violence against women and they are creating perpetrators and victims of sexual assaults with the normalization of such acts.

References:

Rostad, W., Gittins-Stone, D., Huntington, C., Rizzo, C., Pearlman, D. and Orchowski, L., 2019. The Association Between Exposure to Violent Pornography and Teen Dating Violence in Grade 10 High School Students. Archives of Sexual Behavior, 48(7), pp.2137-2147.

Conclusions

24. Women's and girls' SRHR are at risk in the crisis created by porn culture. The environment created within this crisis is associated with disregard for consent, risks to physical safety, risk of physical injury and risk to sexual health. Whether porn culture causes these negative effects or whether it simply reflects existing problems, a society which promotes positive SRHR for women and girls is one in which porn culture is recognised as a social and public health crisis and in which steps are taken to counter this.