Attention: Reem Al Salem, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences

Thank you for your call to input on prostitution and violence against women and girls. We especially appreciate the opportunity of answering some of your questions related to the pornography industry. I am sending this article hoping it will illustrate you on the matter. Your interest in the framework of international human rights is of great importance, in order to eliminate violence against women and girls worldwide.

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**Porn is an un-recognized Link in the Harm Chain of the Commercial Sex Industry**

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There has been a highly successful public relations campaign by the porn industry to dissociate itself from other aspects of the commercial sex industry, especially trafficking and prostitution. The goal of creating this (false) distinction is to legitimize the pornography industry as a law-abiding enterprise that is not only respectable but even glamorous and empowering for women. This disguises what it really is: filmed prostitution that is often coercive and abusive for the female performers, and closely linked to other parts of the sex industry in its practices and cultural impacts.

At [Culture Reframed](https://www.culturereframed.org/), the non-profit organization I founded, we see pornography, first and foremost, as a public health issue that requires a public health solution. This means that it is crucial for those organizations fighting commercial sexual exploitation to acknowledge that the porn industry does *not*stand outside the nexus of the other arms of the sex industry. In fact, it should be understood as a key driver. Studies show that men and boys who consume porn on a regular basis are more likely to believe rape myths (such as they deserved it), sexually aggress against women and children, become sex buyers, pay for sex camming, and visit strip clubs on a more frequent basis. In this way, pornography both drives men and boys to all the varied arms of the commercial sex industry even as it recently tries to cloak itself in an aura of respectability that makes our work at Culture Reframed more difficult because it normalizes the buying and selling of women.

Given the history of the online porn industry, the current effort to carve off porn from the other sectors of the industry has been an extremely successful marketing ploy. A series of podcasts by the [Financial Times](https://www.ft.com/stream/a067cd68-b8cd-4853-8188-92199619d4a6) reveals that in early 2000, Fabian Thylmann, an IT specialist, reshaped the online porn industry by developing and collating the free porn tube sites. He received over $300 million in start-up costs from major investment banks such as JPMorgan Chase, Goldman Sachs, and well-respected institutions such as Cornell University. With this money, Thylmann built MindGeek (formerly called Manwin), into the largest porn conglomerate in the world. It is inconceivable to think that a trafficker, no matter how innovative his business plan, or how large his projected profit-margin, could set up an appointment with a major investment bank, let alone walk out with over $300m in start-up capital. But that is exactly what happened.

The commercial sex industry – arguably made up of sub-industries – would, by most economists, be analyzed as a ‘value chain.’ Value chains refer to the whole range of activities involved in making and selling a product or service, from sourcing components to production, distribution, and consumption. The idea of the value chain is that ‘value’ is added at each stage, though the term ‘harm chain’ is more appropriate for the commercial sex industry because each stage causes harm to women and children – the sex industry’s ‘product.’ Only the company owners and pimps involved make a profit.

A chain, of course, is made up of links. So what are the links in the harm chain of the commercial sex trade? Typically, those links are thought of as prostitution, trafficking, stripping, and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation, and the relationships between them. But there is one link that is often overlooked: pornography.

My own research, and that of many other scholars, shows that women – the ‘product’ – tend to be moved from one of these activities or links to another, along with cash profits, investments, and infrastructure. The consumers of one link – mainly men – tend to frequent business in the other links. We also know that there is sometimes consolidation or often cooperation between the owners – again, mainly men – of the local and increasingly global enterprises that comprise each link. But there is one link that is often overlooked, in large measure due to its successful marketing campaigns: pornography.

And here is what the harm chain looks like:

The first link in the harm chain is recruitment. [Studies](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol6/iss3/1/) show that the recruitment of women into the sex industry, whether it be stripping, pornography, or prostitution,  relies on the same dynamics. On a macro-level, the most powerful recruiter is a hyper-sexualized porn culture that socializes girls and women to self-objectify and self-sexualize. Yes – it is the *culture* that grooms girls and women to be pimped into the commercial sex industry. But don’t just take my word for it. As Joanna Angel, a hardcore pornography producer and performer told Details magazine, ‘the girls these days, just seem to come to the set porn-ready.’ In a similar vein, an incarcerated child rapist told me in an interview that grooming his ten-year-old step-daughter, whom he later went on to rape, was not difficult because ‘the culture did lot of the grooming for me.’

Both the pornographer and the rapist, working from the same ‘playbook,’ recognize and harvest the power of advertising, music videos, online gaming, and all the other elements of the pornified visual landscape in which we live nowadays to indoctrinate girls and women into a patriarchal mindset that the only way to be visible – in fact valuable – is to be sexually desired, ‘hot,’ and pornified.

As a result, young women lose their agency and ownership over their own sexuality. In this way, pornography and the sex industry are not pro-sex but anti-sex, since they operate by theft – taking away the autonomy of individuals to shape their own private lives and instead forcing them into a single mould that is not of their own creation.

Women and girls are enticed into the sex industry by pimps, pornographers, and strip club owners, with promises of becoming a celebrity, with the attendant wealth and visibility this affords. They point to the sex tapes of celebrities such as Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian that jump-started both women’s climb to fame. What they fail to point out is that because these women are extremely wealthy celebrities, leaking a sex tape actually *amplifies* their fame and fortune. If these women were poor and unknown, they’d be saddled with the term ‘slut’ and their lives, as studies have shown, would be upended. And women of colour suffer even greater social humiliation and degradation.

The promise of wealth is a powerful form of enticement because the majority of women in the sex industry are poor, and in an ever-growing world of income inequality, have few choices to move up the socio-economic ladder. Due to systemic racism, women of colour are especially at risk of poverty.

It may be that one of the most powerful factors that drive women into the sex industry is, as [Donevan](https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol6/iss3/1/" \t "_blank) argues, childhood sexual abuse. Donevan found this to be ‘the most common precursor to prostitution, with studies finding that between 60-90 per cent of prostituted persons have been subject to sexualized abuse in childhood.’ Donevan points to a study by [Grudzen](https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/ps.62.6.pss6206_0639" \t "_blank) et al., that found that women in porn were three times more likely to have been victims of childhood sexual abuse compared to women who were not in porn. [Studies](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429494345-7/outcomes-child-abuse-angela-hattery-earl-smith) have also found that women who were sexually abused as children are more likely to be targeted by owners of strip clubs than those who were not. The sex industry is nothing if not predatory, which gives lie to the idea that commercial sex work is like any other job, just a choice.

The ‘product’ of the sex industry is the sexual exploitation of women. The only other industry where the product is the buying and selling of human bodies is slavery, which is why survivors and their allies call the sex industry sexual slavery, not ‘sex work.’  Men pay for the experience of sexually degrading and debasing a woman, turning her, in their minds, into a ‘whore’ who is deserving of sexual violence. The consumers simultaneously construct, cement, and bolster their power, as they reduce women to an oppressed class.

The chain of harms women suffer in the sex industry have been well [documented](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277539511001348). Moreover, these harms are not unfortunate ‘byproducts,’ but are central to the value (sexual pleasure) to the user. The more brutal, cruel, and violent the ‘sex’ act, the more the users feel as though they got their money’s worth. Once in the revolving door of the commercial sex-industry, the women often end up even poorer than when they started.

Lack of health care benefits means that women have to pay out of pocket for treating STIs, bodily injury, and PTSD. The former *Adult Industry Medical Health Care Association*, which was the Los Angeles-based voluntary organization in charge of testing porn performers, had a list on their website of possible injuries and diseases to which porn performers were prone. These included HIV; rectal and throat gonorrhea; tearing of the throat, vagina, and anus; and chlamydia of the eye. Not your everyday workplace ailments, unless, of course, you are being prostituted, on or off camera.

The distribution end of the harm chain for pornography used to look very different from prostitution and stripping. Pornography requires an ecosystem of websites, producers, directors, filmmakers, webmasters, web-based payment systems, and distribution networks. Prostitution and stripping, on the other hand, were typically a more low-tech and leaner harm chain, in which production and consumption were two aspects of the same sexual act— the buying and selling of women.

Today, pornography, prostitution, and stripping are becoming even more inseparable with the growing popularity of [sex camming](https://nordicmodelnow.org/2020/10/24/3-dangerous-myths-about-webcamming-debunked/), where (mostly) women livestream sex acts for men who pay for private shows. One of the most popular sex-camming sites is Chaturbate, with an estimated 18.5 million unique visitors just in the US. Chaturbate, like the other sex-camming platforms, plays the role of pimp by taking 50 per cent of the women’s earnings. It also has a ‘referral’ system where affiliates receive $50 per ‘model’ who signs up via the affiliate site, thus using multi-level marketing techniques to expand the chain of pimps. Another popular camming site is OnlyFans, where ‘content creators’ earn on average, according to one [statistic](https://earthweb.com/onlyfans-statistics/), only $151 a month.

The concept of harm chains is generally used to suggest how harms from making and distributing products such as clothes and coffee can be reduced or minimized. None of these suggestions on how to reduce harm apply to the commercial sex industry. The very nature of this industry is to create harm on the micro level – to the women’s and girls’ bodies – and on the macro level, the normalization, glorification, and monetization of sexual violence. The sex industry inherently and irredeemably reinforces a culture and economy that victimizes and subordinates women and girls. The only way to stop the harm chain is to regulate the sex industry out of existence. Only this will enable women and girls to live a full life in which their civil and human rights are fully valued.

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