

# Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health.

## Full Stop Australia Submission

Full Stop Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry on the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health (**Inquiry**).

We have not responded to each of the terms of reference to the Inquiry. Rather, drawing on our expertise as a frontline sexual and domestic violence service, we have focused on the terms of reference that relate to the impacts of pornography on attitudes about sex, consent and healthy relationships among young people.

In addition to the points below, we have had the opportunity to view an advance copy of OurWatch's submission to this Inquiry and we endorse that submission.

### About Full Stop Australia

Full Stop Australia is a nationally focused not-for-profit organisation which has been working in the field of sexual, domestic, and family violence since 1971. We started as Sydney Rape Crisis—the first service in Australia dedicated to providing support to survivors of sexual violence. Today, we perform the following functions:

- Provide expert and confidential telephone, online and face-to-face counselling to people of all genders who have experienced sexual, domestic, or family violence, and specialist help for their supporters and those experiencing vicarious trauma.
- Conduct best practice training and professional services to support frontline workers, government, and the corporate and not-for-profit sectors.
- Advocate for laws and systems better equipped to respond to, and ultimately prevent, sexual, domestic and family violence.

Our advocacy is guided by the lived expertise of over 730 survivor-advocates in our [National Survivor Advocate Program \(NSAP\)](#). The NSAP gives victim-survivors of gender-based violence a platform to share their experiences to drive positive change. Through the NSAP, survivor-advocates can access opportunities to share their stories in the media, weigh in on Full Stop Australia's submissions to Government, and engage directly with Government. We are committed to centring the voices of victim-survivors in our work and advocating for laws and systems that genuinely meet their needs.

## Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** The Inquiry should agree on a definition for 'harmful pornography,' to clarify the scope and focus of its work.
- **Recommendation 2:** The Inquiry should recognise that widespread exposure to pornography among young people creates significant opportunity for pornography to influence young people's views about sex, sexuality, gender, respectful relationships and consent.
- **Recommendation 3:** Education supporting young people to understand the impacts of, and critically engage with, pornography should form part of the respectful relationships education curriculum. Educators and other professionals who work with young people should be equipped with professional development, training and resources to deliver education on pornography effectively. Online resources should also be commissioned and distributed, to make education about pornography more accessible to young people.
- **Recommendation 4:** There should be ongoing monitoring of the efficacy of education and messaging in relation to image-based abuse, to guarantee it is effective at influencing societal attitudes towards this form of abuse, and that it keeps pace with technological advancements.
- **Recommendation 5:** The Inquiry should acknowledge that pornography depicting violent and nonconsensual sexual activity can negatively influence young people's attitudes about sex, relationships and consent.

## Scope of the terms of reference

The terms of reference to this Inquiry refer to ‘harmful pornography’ without providing a definition for that term.

Pornography captures a wide and diverse array of content. Full Stop Australia agrees with the statement in ANROWS’s submission to this inquiry that, ‘pornography is not inherently harmful; nor is it all the same. Research suggests that questions of “harm” need to consider both what pornography depicts and the nature of an individual’s interaction with it.’

We support ANROWS’s recommendation that the Inquiry should agree on a definition for ‘harmful pornography,’ to clarify the scope and focus of its work.

**Recommendation 1:** The Inquiry should agree on a definition for ‘harmful pornography,’ to clarify the scope and focus of its work.

## Response to terms of reference

### (a) Age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography

Evidence demonstrates that pornography is easily accessible, and that exposure to pornography is common among young people:

- Free pornography is widely and available on the internet,<sup>1</sup> with ‘pornography websites containing free content among the global top 10 most accessed sites.’<sup>2</sup>
- Pornography exposure and access by children and young people ‘usually occur[s] online... both unintentionally (for example, through online ‘pop-ups’ or being shown by someone else) and [through] intentionally seeking it out.’<sup>3</sup> Young people have identified unintentional encounters as ‘frequent, unavoidable and unwelcome,’ with the experience of unintentionally coming across pornography described as ‘intrusive and disempowering’ by young people.<sup>4</sup>
- Results from an OurWatch survey published in 2020, which engaged almost 2,000 young people aged 15 to 20 across Australia, found that nearly half (48%) of boys

<sup>1</sup> E.A. Marshall, H.A. Miller. ‘Consistently inconsistent: a systematic review of the measurement of pornography use.’ *Aggress Violent Behav*, 48 (2019), pp. 169-179. See also M.A. Horvath, L. Alys, K. Massey, A. Pina, M. Scally, J.R. Adler. “*Basically...porn is everywhere*”: a rapid evidence assessment on the effects that access and exposure to pornography have on children and young people. Office of the Children’s Commissioner, UK, London (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Crabbe, M, Flood, M and Adams, K. ‘Pornography exposure and access among young Australians: a cross-sectional study.’ *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*. 2024. Volume 48, Issue 3. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anzjph.2024.100135>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> eSafety Commissioner. (2023). *Accidental, unsolicited, and in your face: Understanding the risks of digital communication*. Australian Government. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/Accidental-unsolicited-and-in-your-face.pdf>.

have seen pornography by the age of 13 and nearly half (48%) of girls by the age of 15.<sup>5</sup>

- A 2023 eSafety Commission study that surveyed 1,004 young people aged 16 to 18, and conducted focus groups with 32 young people in this age range, similarly found extensive pornography exposure among young people. The Commission’s online survey found that 75% had seen online pornography, with 13 being the average age of first exposure to pornography.<sup>6</sup> The survey also found that over one third (39%) of those who had viewed pornography encountered it before the age of 13.<sup>7</sup>
- A study from Macquarie University found more than half of boys reported their first exposure to porn between the ages of 12 and 14 and more than one quarter between the ages of 9 and 11.<sup>8</sup>
- The eSafety Commission study referred to above found that regular pornography use was common among participants, with three in five (63%) young people who had seen online pornography encountering it at least once a month.<sup>9</sup>
- Finally, the OurWatch research referred to above found frequent or regular pornography use among a bare majority of young men. According to the OurWatch study, ‘56% of young men surveyed indicated that they viewed pornography at least once per week and 17% of young men used it daily.’<sup>10</sup>

All media, including pornography, has the power to ‘both reproduce and help shape broader social norms,’ including norms about sex, sexuality, gender, respectful relationships and consent.<sup>11</sup>

Widespread exposure to pornography among young people suggests ‘there is a significant opportunity for pornography to influence young people’s views and attitudes at a time in their lives when they are developing an understanding about sex and sexual relationships.’<sup>12</sup> This is particularly the case, given young people ‘are accessing pornography often years before they start having sexual relationships.’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Our Watch. (2020). *Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women*. <https://assets.ourwatch.org.au/assets/Pornography-young-people-preventing-violence.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> eSafety Commissioner, above n 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Bernstein, S., Warburton, W., Bussey, K., & Sweller, N. (2023). Mind the gap: internet pornography exposure, influence and problematic viewing amongst emerging adults. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 20(2), 599-613. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00698-8>.

<sup>9</sup> OurWatch, above n 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Our Watch. (2015). *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*. <https://assets.ourwatch.org.au/assets/Key-frameworks/Change-the-story-Our-Watch-AA.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The significant influence pornography has on young people’s attitudes about sex, sexuality and consent has been recognised by young people. As noted in It’s Time We Talked’s submission to this Inquiry, ‘in research from around the world, young people report that pornography has impacted on their and others’ sexual attitudes and behaviours.’<sup>14</sup>

**Recommendation 2:** The Inquiry should recognise that widespread exposure to pornography among young people creates significant opportunity for pornography to influence young people’s views about sex, sexuality, gender, respectful relationships and consent.

#### **(d) The relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education**

We support comments in response to this term of reference in OurWatch and It’s Time We Talked’s submissions to this Inquiry.

In particular:

- We support integrating the topic of pornography into respectful relationships education in NSW, noting that delivery of respectful relationships education is a focus of the NSW Government’s *Pathways to Prevention: NSW Strategy for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence*. We agree with It’s Time We Talked that respectful relationships education ‘must address the real-world influences that shape young people’s sexual understandings and experiences, including pornography... social media, and their partners and peers. We cannot expect young people to evaluate pornography’s depictions and influence critically if we do not support them to develop the relevant skills.’
- We consider respectful relationships education presents an opportunity to support young people to build critical literacy skills on pornography, to reflect on the potential impact of pornography on their lives and relationships, and to increase awareness about gendered representations of sex, power and control in pornography.
- We note that young people support receiving education that helps them understand and critically engage with pornography. The 2023 eSafety Commission study of young people’s attitudes to pornography referred to above found that:

*‘Education is seen by young people as the most helpful way to mitigate the potential harmful impacts of online pornography. Almost all the young people surveyed thought there were ways that young people could be helped to manage the negative impacts of online*

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<sup>14</sup> NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues Inquiry into Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health. Submission 20 (It’s Time We Talked). Citing Tydén and Rogala 2004, Häggström-Nordin, Tydén et al. 2009, Mattebo, Larsson et al. 2012, Martellozzo, Monaghan et al. 2016, Doornwaard, den Boer et al. 2017, Office of Film and Literature Classification 2018, Our Watch 2020, de Souza 2023, Robb and Mann 2023.

*pornography. Education was an area highlighted by most (88%) young people in our survey as a helpful response pathway to manage the potential negative effects of online pornography. This was echoed in the focus groups, with most participants indicating that education was a means to equip young people with the skills needed to navigate encounters with pornography online.'*

- It is important educators are well equipped to teach young people about pornography. We support OurWatch’s calls for a ‘professional learning strategy that supports teaching staff to develop their knowledge of and confidence in the delivery of [pornography education]’ as well as resources and training on the topic of pornography for teachers and other professionals who work with young people.
- We support the development and dissemination of online resources that support young people to understand and critically engage with pornography, noting that this is a more accessible way to access information about pornography for some young people.

**Recommendation 3:** Education supporting young people to understand the impacts of, and critically engage with, pornography should form part of the respectful relationships education curriculum. Educators and other professionals who work with young people should be equipped with professional development, training and resources to deliver education on pornography effectively. Online resources should also be commissioned and distributed, to make education about pornography more accessible to young people.

### **(e) The production and dissemination of pornography, including deepfake or AI-generated pornography**

The production and dissemination of deepfake or AI-generated pornography is a form of sexualised abuse.

This form of abuse is on the rise,<sup>15</sup> with the rapid rate of technological advancements making it relatively easy to perpetrate even by people without deep technological expertise. It is one of many forms of technology-facilitated abuse that present a new frontier for harassing, intimidating or seeking to maintain control over victim-survivors.

Evidence shows that women and girls, young people, LGBTQ+ people and people with disability are disproportionately victimised by this form of abuse.<sup>16</sup> Research has also found

<sup>15</sup> Powell, A., Scott, A. J., Flynn, A., & Henry, N. (2020). *Image-based sexual abuse: An international study of victims and perpetrators – A Summary Report*. Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

<sup>16</sup> Flynn, A., Powell, A., Scott, A. J., & Cama, E. (2021). *Deepfakes and Digitally Altered Imagery Abuse: A Cross-Country Exploration of an Emerging form of Image-Based Sexual Abuse*. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(6). See also eSafety Commissioner. (2017). *Image-based abuse national survey summary report*. Australian Government. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-07/Image-based-abuse-national-survey-summary-report-2017.pdf?v=1738303946338>.



that the creation of AI-generated pornography is a gendered form of abuse, with ‘women experienc[ing] higher levels of harm from the abuse, including being more than twice as likely as men to report being fearful for their safety from the perpetrator,’ and ‘men more likely than women to be perpetrators.’<sup>17</sup>

Image-based abuse can have serious impacts on victims. A national survey of over 4,000 Australians conducted by the eSafety Commission found broad-reaching negative impacts among those who had experienced image-based abuse:

*‘The most common negative impacts of the most recent experience of image-based abuse related to self-esteem (42%) and mental health (41%). One-third said it had impacted their physical wellbeing (33%) and relationships with friends (33%), while one-quarter said it had impacted their intimate/sexual relationships (28%), relationships with family (27%) and performance at work or study (28%).’<sup>18</sup>*

The production and dissemination of AI-generated pornography can also intersect with other forms of gender-based violence—for example, when it is perpetrated by an intimate partner as part of a broader pattern of coercive, controlling or intimidating behaviour. A study released in 2020 by the Victorian Sentencing Advisory Council found that 58% of image-based abuse cases heard in Victorian Courts over a four-year period were committed in the context of family violence.<sup>19</sup>

Although NSW law prohibits the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, including images digitally altered using AI,<sup>20</sup> victim-survivors of image-based abuse can still face challenges accessing support and justice, including because of victim-blaming and minimising attitudes and the ‘misconception that digital forms of abuse are less serious than physical abuse.’<sup>21</sup> Research conducted by Asher Flynn at Monash University in 2022 found that the impact of these barriers include ‘reduced support or help-seeking rates among victims, increased blame towards victims, removal of blame and responsibility from the perpetrator, and enhancing the harms experienced by victims.’<sup>22</sup>

Shifting these attitudes is an important part of primary prevention and ensuring an adequate response to sexual violence.

Education and messaging on image-based abuse is delivered through various avenues, including consent education in schools. Full Stop Australia recommends ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of education and messaging efforts, to guarantee they are having the intended impact of societal attitudes towards image-based abuse, as well as keeping pace with technological advancements.

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<sup>17</sup> Powell et al, above n 15.

<sup>18</sup> eSafety Commissioner, above n 16.

<sup>19</sup> Sentencing Advisory Council. (2020). *Sentencing image-based sexual abuse offences in Victoria*. Victorian Government. [https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-10/Sentencing\\_Image-Based\\_Sexual\\_Abuse\\_Offences\\_in\\_Victoria.pdf](https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-10/Sentencing_Image-Based_Sexual_Abuse_Offences_in_Victoria.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> *Crimes Act 1900* (NSW) s 91Q.

<sup>21</sup> Flynn, A., Cama, E., Powell, A., & Scott, A. J. (2023). Victim-blaming and image-based sexual abuse. *Journal of Criminology*, 56(1), 7-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26338076221135327>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Those who may receive disclosures, or handle incidents, of image-based abuse should also be equipped to refer victim-survivors to support and handle cases sensitively and appropriately. Survivor-advocate Libby Payne from Full Stop Australia’s National Survivor Advocate Program, who has experienced image-based abuse and is now a consent educator, has identified this as a gap. According to Libby, ‘technology is moving so fast that often teachers are not even aware of deepfake technology, or they shy away from it... which means that young people don’t want to turn to the adults in their life because they don’t think they know how to deal with it.’<sup>23</sup>

**Recommendation 4:** There should be ongoing monitoring of the efficacy of education and messaging in relation to image-based abuse, to guarantee it is effective at influencing societal attitudes towards this form of abuse, and that it keeps pace with technological advancements.

### (f) The impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults

Analysis shows that much of the pornographic content available for free online contains ‘frequent depictions of violence and typically stereotypical representations of men and women... For example, studies have highlighted the high frequency of specific violent behaviours, largely directed at women, including gagging and verbally abusive language, and the more generally prevalent portrayal of male dominance and female submission.’<sup>24</sup>

Research shows that exposure to pornography of this kind negatively influences young people’s attitudes about sex and relationships, at a time in their lives when they are developing an understanding of these matters:

- An Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) study on the influence of pornography found that ‘viewing pornographic material that showcases violence can have negative impacts on a young person’s development with regard to their well-being and relationships and it can influence their attitudes and beliefs about sex, intimacy and consent.’<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Burgess, Annika. ‘AI is creating a new frontier in ‘revenge porn’, and experts say online misogyny is fuelling the problem.’ ABC. 15 June 2024. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-15/ai-cyberbullying-revenge-porn-deepfake-nude-images-in-schools/103972244>

<sup>24</sup> OurWatch, above n 5. Citing Marleen J.E Klaassen and Jochen Peter. (2015). ‘Gender (In)equality in Internet Pornography: A Content Analysis of Popular Pornographic Internet Videos.’ *Journal of Sex Research*, 52(7), 721-735. Ana Bridges, Robert Wosnitzer, Erica Scharrer, Chyng Sun and Rachael Liberman. (2010). ‘Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update.’ *Violence Against Women*, 16 (10), 1065-1085. Gorman, Monk-Turner and Fish. (2010). ‘Free adult internet web sites: How prevalent are degrading acts?’ *Gender Issues*, 27, 131-145.

<sup>25</sup> A Quadara, A El Murr and J Latham. *The effects of pornography on children and young people: An evidence scan, Research report.* AIFS. (2017).



- The AIFS Longitudinal Study of Australian Children found ‘the more often young men consume pornography, the more likely they are to enact sexual behaviour that the other person does not want.’<sup>26</sup>
- Studies have similarly found that young people’s consumption of pornography depicting violent and non-consensual acts ‘is associated with a range of harmful attitudes, behaviours, and experiences, including risky sexual behaviours, more sexually objectifying and stereotypic gender views of women, rape myth acceptance, sexual coercion and aggression, and sexual and dating violence victimisation.’<sup>27</sup>
- Young people have recognised that online pornography of the kind that is widely and freely available online ‘can negatively affect their ideas about gender, relationships and sex,’ with most respondents in the 1,004-participant eSafety Commission study referred to above saying online pornography negatively impacts ‘young people’s understanding of consent (74%), ideas about intimate relationships (76%), expectations of sex (76%) and views on gender stereotypes (64%).’<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, half (51%) of young people in this study also noted that pornography has positive aspects, ‘including helping [young people] learn about sex and explore their sexuality’ and as ‘a source of pleasure, entertainment and self-gratification.’<sup>29</sup>

The way that pornography depicting violence and nonconsensual sexual activity can act as a driver of violence is set out more comprehensively in OurWatch’s submission to this Inquiry.

Research also shows that pornography is ‘helping to drive increased awareness and willingness to engage in strangulation,’<sup>30</sup> which carries inherent medical risk,<sup>31</sup> as well as ‘young people’s belief that it is a safe practice... that [does] not require consent.’<sup>32</sup> A confidential, cross-sectional online survey of 4,702 Australians aged 18-35 found that strangulation as a sexual practice is widespread among this age group—with more than half (56.9%) of participants reporting ever being choked, and 50.5% reporting ever choking a partner. The study found that pornography was the most common avenue by which

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<sup>26</sup> D Warren and D Swami. ‘Teenagers and sex’ in AIFS, LSAC Annual Statistical Report 2018. AIFS. Australian Government. (2018), 47–56.

<sup>27</sup> Crabbe et al, above n 2. Citing G.M. Hald, N.M. Malamuth, C. Yuen. Pornography and attitudes supporting violence against women: revisiting the relationship in nonexperimental studies. *Aggress Behav*, 36 (1) (2010), pp. 14-20, M.L. Ybarra, K.J. Mitchell, M. Hamburger, M. Diener-West, P.J. Leaf. X-rated material and perpetration of sexually aggressive behavior among children and adolescents: is there a link? *Aggress Behav*, 37 (1) (2011), pp. 1-18, and others.

<sup>28</sup> eSafety Commissioner, above n 4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Sharman, L.S., Fitzgerald, R. & Douglas, H. Prevalence of Sexual Strangulation/Choking Among Australian 18–35 Year-Olds. *Arch Sex Behav* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-024-02937-y>. Citing Herbenick, D., Fu, T.-C., Wright, P., Paul, B., Gradus, R., Bauer, J., & Jones, R. (2020). Diverse sexual behaviors and pornography use: Findings from a nationally representative probability survey of Americans aged 18 to 60 years. *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 17(4), 623–633. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsxm.2020.01.013>, Wright, P. J., Herbenick, D., & Tokunaga, R. S. (2023a). Pornography consumption and sexual choking: An evaluation of theoretical mechanisms. *Health Communication*, 38(6), 1099–1110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2021.1991641>.

<sup>31</sup> See medical experts talking about the physical impacts of strangulation at <https://www.breathlesscampaign.com/faqs>.

<sup>32</sup> Sharman et al, above n 30.

people reported first hearing about strangulation during sex—with 34.8% of participants saying they learned about strangulation as a sexual practice from pornography. A separate

**Recommendation 5:** The Inquiry should acknowledge that pornography depicting violent and nonconsensual sexual activity can negatively influence young people’s attitudes about sex, relationships and consent.

interview study of women who had been strangled during sex found that strangulation often happened without explicit consent or where their partners assumed their consent.<sup>33</sup>

### **(h) The effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved**

Full Stop Australia supports the recommendations in OurWatch’s submission in relation to this term of reference.

### **(i) The effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these**

As set out above in response to term of reference (a), exposure to online pornography is widespread among young people—suggesting existing restrictions on young people’s pornography access are limited.

We acknowledge that an age verification pilot is underway in Australia, and that the Australian eSafety Commissioner is currently consulting on Industry Codes and Standards designed to protect Australians from illegal and restricted online content. We have not commented extensively on these matters, as they relate to work that is ongoing at the Federal level.

Broadly, we reiterate our commitment to ensuring young people are safe online and equipped to critically engage with online content, recognise the challenges inherent in limiting access to online content (including technological difficulties, and privacy and data security concerns), and agree with OurWatch that the Federal Government’s pilot of age assurance technology ‘will contribute to a growing evidence base on age assurance technologies and provide valuable insight into their efficacy.’

We also support the recommendation of the Primary Prevention Rapid Review in relation to the age verification pilot—that it should ‘test both the technology, and how age verification assurance systems will be implemented, including the participation of the major technology platforms used by Australian children.’<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Elena Campbell, Dr Todd Fernando, Dr Leigh Gassner APM, Jess Hill, Dr Zac Seidler & Dr Anne Summers AO. *Unlocking the Prevention Potential: Accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence*. (Report). 2024. Available at: <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-the-prevention-potential>.