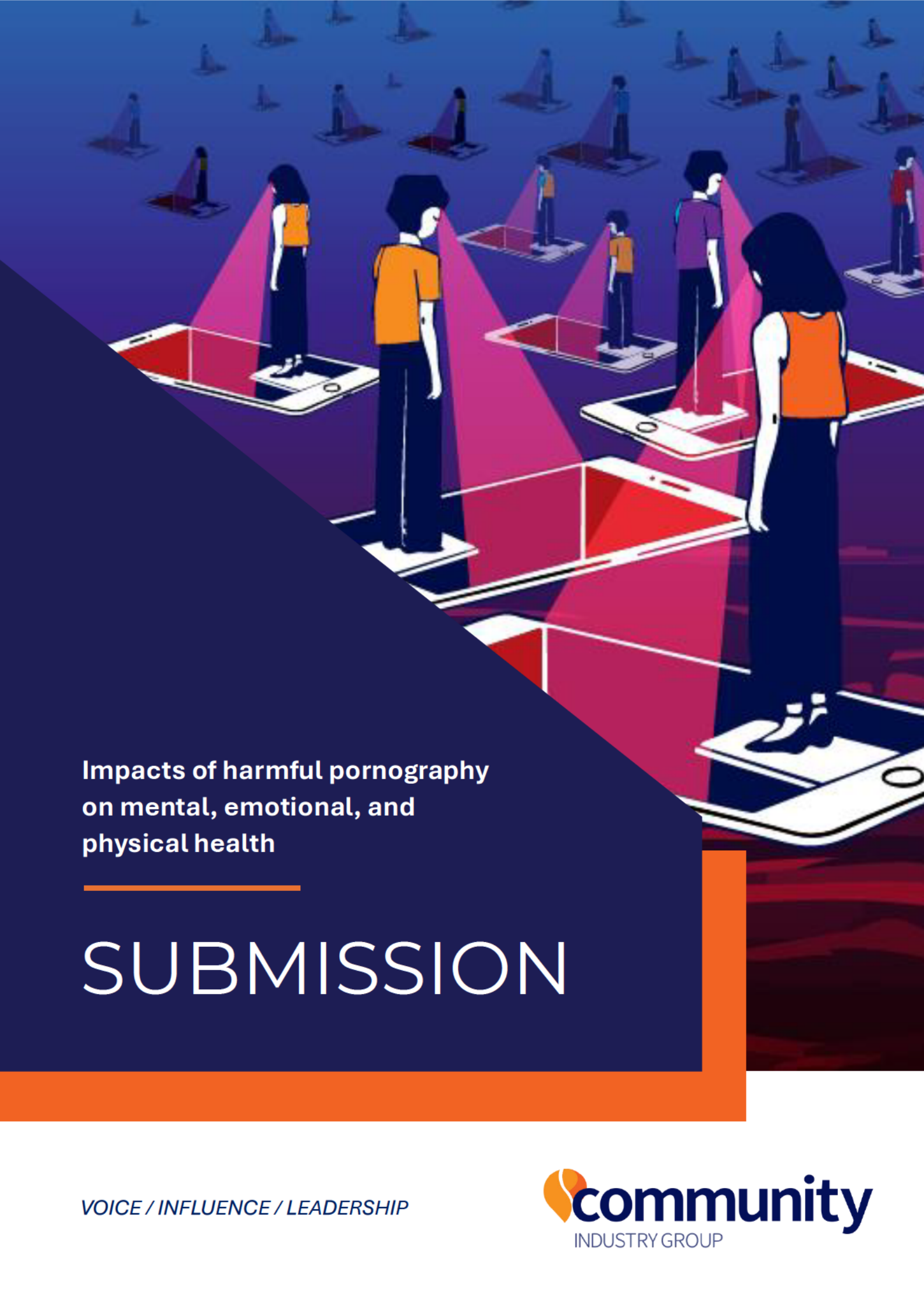


Submission
No 19

INQUIRY INTO IMPACTS OF HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY ON MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Organisation: Community Industry_Group

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An illustration on a dark blue background showing numerous stylized human figures standing on large smartphone screens. Each figure is illuminated by a bright pink beam of light that originates from their head and projects downwards. The figures are dressed in simple, solid-colored clothing. The overall scene suggests a digital landscape or a network of interconnected individuals.

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

SUBMISSION

VOICE / INFLUENCE / LEADERSHIP

 **community**
INDUSTRY GROUP



ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

Community Industry Group acknowledges the traditional custodians of this land, and their Elders past, present and future. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture, the world's oldest living culture, and the contribution they make to the life of this region and our country.

We acknowledge that we live and work on Aboriginal land and recognise the strength, resilience and capacity of Aboriginal people.

About Community Industry Group

CI Group is the peak body working for community services and organisations in southern NSW. We support community organisations, promote expertise and innovation in community development, foster industry development and advocate for social justice.

For 30 years, CI Group has taken a leadership role in the local community services sector. We regularly engage with those organisations, services, and individuals who work with individuals, families, and communities experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. We also advocate on behalf of community organisations and vulnerable communities to raise awareness of the issues which are impacting service delivery and affecting the lives and outcomes of individuals, families and communities experiencing disadvantage.

Our members include not for profit (NFP) service providers who deliver:

- Homelessness Supports
- Women's and Domestic Violence Support Services
- Child and Family Services
- Youth Services
- Aged Care
- Disability Services
- Generalist Community / Neighbourhood Centres

Key Recommendations

- Create engaging programs about pornography, consent, and healthy relationships for young people.
- Start education early to build a strong foundation on respect and self-worth.
- Provide resources and workshops to help parents talk to their kids about pornography and its effects. Incorporate these discussions into community events and school orientations.
- Recognise that current restrictions on pornography are often ineffective; combine education with better regulation.
- Promote media literacy to help young people critically assess content.
- Develop tailored resources for marginalised communities facing unique pressures related to body image and sexuality.
- Ensure service providers understand the impacts of pornography and can support those affected.
- Challenge the normalisation of aggression and unhealthy relationships shown in pornography.
- Promote community discussions to raise awareness and encourage healthier attitudes.
- Create a national platform for sharing information about pornography's effects and encourage further research on its impact on mental health and social norms.
- Increase funding to existing expert organisations in these areas to deliver improved sex education to clearly teach consent and respect for boundaries.

As a peak body representing community services in Southern NSW, we recognise the urgency of understanding the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health, particularly across diverse communities.

In the heart of our community, a diverse group of professionals provide vital support across various sectors, including homelessness support, women's and domestic violence services, child and family services, youth services, aged care, disability services, and generalist community and neighbourhood centres.

In Southern NSW, the troubling effects of harmful pornography on the mental, emotional, and physical health of young people have become a focal point for discussion and concern. As members share their experiences and observations, a clearer picture emerges of the pervasive and damaging influence of explicit content in the lives of children / young people and vulnerable parties.

Early exposure via social media

Our members note that children are often first exposed to explicit material at shockingly young ages, typically between 8 and 10. This exposure frequently occurs through innocent avenues like video games, music videos, and films. As one member expressed, **"Parents often watch content they don't think is problematic, failing to recognise that children are absorbing these messages."** The implications are severe; anecdotally, early exposure promotes sexualised behaviours and confuses young people about what constitutes healthy sexual relationships.

Members voiced their concern that this environment creates pressure among young people to engage in activities they may not fully understand or wish to partake in, resulting in increased incidents of sexual risk-taking.

Access to pornography today is limitless. Our members remarked that common avenues for viewing explicit content now predominantly include the internet and social media, making it impossible for guardians to safeguard young people from harmful material.

Of particular concern were social media platforms like TikTok, Snapchat and increasingly YouTube, where members reported children had encountered pornographic material while watching children's content.

Many of our members noted this is often not the fault of parents: **"even if parents set restrictions, kids are savvy enough to bypass them."** This accessibility not only normalises explicit content but also embeds it within the fabric of everyday life, further desensitising young people to its potential harms.

Impacts on body image

The impact of pornography on body image is particularly severe among vulnerable groups, young girls, and individuals with disabilities. Members shared stories of how exposure to idealised body types leads many to feel inadequate or pressured to conform to unrealistic beauty standards. **"Clearly by the increase of plastic surgery being undertaken by young women/women to improve their body shape along with vulva surgery. Increasing belief that women should be without natural hair cover thus increased by the pressures of advertising from Laser Clinics and porn. Vulnerable groups being coerced into share intimate images and then being used to extort or humiliate"** noted one service provider.

One participant stated, **"It creates an environment where young people think they must change their bodies to be loved or accepted."** This belief can spiral into harmful behaviours, including eating disorders, self-harm, and even suicidal thoughts. The increasing trend of cosmetic procedures among young women reflects the desperation to meet these unattainable ideals.

Impact on understanding or respect and consent

The link between pornography exposure at such young ages and at critical points in childhood development and a distorted understanding of respect and consent is another crucial concern.

Members report an increase in referrals for sexual assault cases where the victim may not fully understand consent.

Many young people struggle to grasp what true consent entails, often seeing it portrayed vaguely in the media. As one member pointed out, ***"There's a significant gap in understanding consent, especially when young people witness problematic representations (of consent and coercion) in popular culture."***

Current education inadequate

Current educational initiatives frequently miss the mark, failing to engage young people effectively. Members noted that many sex education programs are outdated and do not resonate with young people's lived experiences and leave them vulnerable to misconceptions about relationships and consent.

"Education about respectful relationships and healthy, respectful sexual engagement at school is a tick the box thing. It is minimal or awkwardly delivered, leaving many young people with gaps in understanding."
Women's health centre members stated.

The consensus among CI Group members was that programs on respect, consent and healthy relationships should be continuous and age-appropriate; the proliferation of pornography meant that programs could no longer be siloed off into "one-off" or yearly education sessions but should instead form part of the educational fabric and be consistently reinforced in formal education settings.

Impacts of violent pornography

Exposure to violent and misogynistic pornography intensifies these issues, contributing to a culture where aggression is normalised. One member noted, ***"It sends a message that this behaviour is acceptable, skewing young people's understanding of relationships."***

As a result of this exposure, members report that young people have **“a clear idea what pornography is, but not what sex is... in these videos, kids see someone having power over someone else and that is now considered to be sex by young people. There is no consent, no pleasure, no reciprocal pleasure experience for both depicted – it is domination of someone else, no respect, no indication you can say “no” at any point – and there is nothing out there we can point to counter that. If pornography is the only lens we are going by (as a society, for young people) it is very dangerous.”**

Anecdotally, this is resulting in members seeing or hearing more about presentations to hospital ERs of younger girls and patients injured as a result of engagement that could be termed “porn sex”.

The desensitisation to violence can lead to troubling behaviours, such as an increased likelihood of young men feeling entitled to aggressive actions toward women. This culture fosters an environment where sexual choking and other harmful practices become normalised, creating a dangerous disconnect between fiction and reality. **Young men appear to be lacking insight and their growing view of entitlement. Young men/men have increased their rhetoric in the way they speak and joke about women and feel justified in spruiking their thoughts and comments on social media. Due to large amounts of porn being viewed and violent/aggressive behaviours involved gives them the thought process that women like to be thrown around and treated roughly - this again promotes sexual choking. Again, not getting that porn is pretend and actors are actors and being paid to behave this way”** noted one service provider.

Creating effective education is key

Women’s Health NSW¹ has created resources and protocols for their network of services, including those in Southern NSW, to effectively support women experiencing violence such as the pathways project ‘It left no marks’² focusing on enhancing service delivery, promoting collaboration among providers, and ensuring access to comprehensive care that meets the

¹ <https://whnsw.asn.au/>

² <https://www.itleftnomarks.com.au/>

unique needs of women, particularly those affected by non-fatal strangulation and other forms of violence.

A 'no wrong door' approach is essential for supporting women experiencing violence, ensuring they can access care regardless of where they enter the service system. For those disclosing non-fatal strangulation (NFS) or acquired brain injury (ABI), services must have clear referral pathways and trained staff. The Pathways Project aims to enhance understanding and local capacity to respond to sexual assault-related NFS. One key centre is Shoalhaven Women's Health Centre³, which has played a vital role in providing NFS training for service providers in our region.

Women may not report NFS immediately or may associate it with other forms of intimate partner violence. Services should also take into account the needs of children present during such incidents and be prepared to offer health promotion for women engaging in sexual choking such as 'It left no marks'⁴

The effects of harmful pornography extend deeply into minority communities, amplifying existing vulnerabilities. Members shared that individuals with disabilities face unique challenges, often feeling pressured to conform to physical expectations that are unattainable given their circumstances. One member stated, **"It can be seriously depressing to feel inadequate when porn depicts a narrow standard of sexual desirability."** For First Nations, CALD, LGBTIQ+, and other marginalised groups, the intersection of cultural expectations and the pressure from pornography creates a complex landscape of harm, where patriarchal ideals can reinforce damaging stereotypes.

Cultural challenges in discussing pornography and consent in CALD communities were acknowledged: **"Cultural barriers are a real barrier – how do we do have these conversations and educate parents and kids in a respectful way? We must start by engaging community leaders in CALD communities in religious settings, schools and open consultation up as widely as possible about how we do this and work with them. Yes, it's a tough slog but we need to do the work and hear from each group as a community."**

Another member added in addition to formal consultation and culturally sensitive education programs: **"Even having a discussion (about exposure**

³ <https://shoalhavenwomenshealthcentre.org.au/>

⁴ <https://www.itleftnomarks.com.au/>

to violent pornography and the problems it creates) and that community of parents and kids hearing other people's stories (about that exposure) and how they dealt with is very helpful and that might be useful in those communities."

Despite the urgency surrounding these issues, many members expressed frustration with existing education programs. ***"What programs? I can honestly say I have never heard of anything that explains pornography to children or even young adults,"*** one member stated.

There is a clear call for more funding and the development of programs that genuinely engage young audiences while also being culturally sensitive ***"We attend disability services and undertake workshops on consent, coercive control, healthy relationships, social media/safety"*** noted one member service. Members emphasised that education should start early before children are exposed to explicit content creating a framework for understanding healthy relationships, consent, and self-worth.

One Women's Health Service stated they had started working with a small number of local high schools to deliver sessions on ***DETAIL NEEDED*** domestic and gendered violence. ***"We are called in because schools don't have a space to talk about DV (in the curriculum) or to talk about boundaries and consent and self-esteem and respect, we do these sessions with rotating groups of young women and body awareness because there is just not that information in schools, and it feeds on their vulnerability in the school setting."***

The service stated they would like to do more of this work, and to develop modules for young men as well, but there currently was little funding for them to develop or deliver these types of programs, due to a dearth of grants and opportunities to get in front of young people.

Parents and carers often feel ill-equipped to discuss these topics with their children. Many lack the resources and knowledge to provide effective education about pornography and its implications. One member observed, ***"Parents often hope someone else will take on this responsibility, leading to a gap in education at home."***

The need for accessible resources and workshops that empower parents to have open conversations is vital. Making these opportunities accessible, built-in to education and community events, whilst a captive audience is present (i.e., high school orientation processes, coaching workshops etc) will help destigmatise discussions around sexuality and consent and will foster the skills and space for families to engage with these topics.

Many members expressed scepticism regarding the effectiveness of current restrictions on accessing pornography. **"Most people seem to find a way to obtain it if they really want it,"** one noted, highlighting the limitations of existing measures.

The feeling from members was that education on these matters needed to start much earlier too – noting that education about boundaries and consent needed to start with parents and kids in preschool years. ***The it needs to be consolidated in primary school to have an effect, yet there was a general feeling among primary schools that these conversations are too sensitive, even high schools balk at us handing out our Reclaim the Night flyers!***

The conversation turned towards the need for an approach that combines education with effective regulation. While some members advocated for stringent restrictions, others emphasised that simply removing access will not address the underlying issues; education must accompany any regulatory measures to ensure that young people and those with added vulnerabilities are equipped to navigate their experiences with pornography responsibly.

The insights from our members paint a concerning picture of the complex impacts of harmful pornography. From the confusion and pressure stemming from early exposure to the damaging effects on body image and the normalisation of violence, the consequences are profound.

There is an urgency for comprehensive education, better support systems for parents, and more effective restrictions on access to explicit content.

The future of our children, young and vulnerable people's mental, emotional, and physical health depends on efforts to confront these challenges head-on. Only through open and honest dialogue, informed education, and community support can we create healthier environment for the next generation.

Shoalhaven Women's Health Centre Inc

As a non-profit incorporated Community Association, the Shoalhaven Women's Health Centre provides information on a wide range of issues, including health, medical, legal, and financial matters.

Concerns have been raised about the impact of early exposure to online content on young children. As one expert notes, **"some can be very young as parents watch and don't think children understand."** By the ages of 10 to 11, children—especially boys—are at risk of developing sexualised behaviours and misconceptions about normal sexual interactions. They often fail to recognise that the behaviours depicted online are **"pretend"** and not reflective of healthy relationships. This can lead to peer pressure and an increase in harmful behaviours, including sexual choking, without understanding the associated risks.

The prevalence of cosmetic procedures among young women is also alarming, with many feeling pressured to alter their bodies, influenced by advertising and pornography. This has resulted in a troubling belief that women should conform to unrealistic beauty standards, including undergoing vulva surgeries and removing natural hair. Vulnerable groups are particularly at risk, facing coercion to share intimate images that can be used for extortion or humiliation.

There is a significant gap in education surrounding respect and consent. As highlighted, **"the lack of education and understanding around what is respectful"** leads to distorted views of consent, particularly concerning different sexual acts. Young people are often pressured into practices like anal sex without fully understanding the risks, including health consequences from unprotected sex.

The attitudes of young men contribute to the problem. Many exhibit a sense of entitlement and a troubling normalisation of aggressive behaviour towards women, often fuelled by their consumption of pornography. This creates a misconception that women enjoy being treated roughly, promoting harmful practices like sexual choking. The distinction that **"porn is pretend"** and involves actors being paid to perform is often lost.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities and those from patriarchal backgrounds may experience additional confusion and reinforcement of harmful beliefs about dominance and control over women.

To address these issues, there is an urgent need for increased funding for educational programs in schools and communities. Many parents hope **"someone else will educate their children,"** neglecting their own role in these discussions. Programs should aim to equip parents with the tools to communicate effectively with their children about these topics, starting at an early age to counteract early exposure to pornography.

Some advocates even propose drastic measures, such as restricting pornography online, comparing it to age restrictions on alcohol and smoking. However, the reality is that **"porn has become a norm in the home."**

The Centre actively engages with disability services to provide workshops on consent, coercive control, and healthy relationships, emphasising the need for education focused on young women and women.

Wollongong West Street Centre

This community-based child sexual assault service supports children, young people, and their families, as well as women with dependent children who have experienced childhood sexual abuse.

The impact of sexual assault is profound; as noted, **“from the age of 8 onwards, the effects of sexual assault are overwhelming and traumatising.”** These experiences contribute to the shaping of toxic masculinity and demeaning views of femininity, normalising violence and unsafe sexual practices. Young people often grapple with **“poor body image and unrealistic expectations around bodies and sex,”** leading to a troubling lack of consent in sexual negotiations and conflating women’s enjoyment with the absence of consent.

Societal pressures impose **“unrealistic expectations of bodies to be ‘perfect’** and promote notions that individuals should always be ready for sex, fostering shame around natural body diversity. This lack of education fails to instil a healthy respect for women’s bodies or guidance on seeking and negotiating consent, perpetuating harmful attitudes like **“always being up for it”** and overlooking the importance of consent in women’s enjoyment.

Practices such as **“sexual choking and anal sex”** are increasingly seen as normative, often informed by pornography, which creates stigma for young women who resist these pressures. The fetishisation of **“others”** reinforces stigma and narrows perceptions of what is considered sexy, illustrating the **“pornification of society”** that sets harmful standards of sexual acceptance.

Despite these challenges, there is a call for improvement in sexual education, particularly regarding pornography: **“to be honest, I don’t feel there are any real education programs on porn.”**

The Centre actively addresses these issues in its counselling practice, emphasising discussions around sex, consent, and respect. A national resource-sharing platform could greatly enhance efforts to educate about pornography and its impacts.

Women Illawarra

Women Illawarra discussed the impacts of pornography on young people, noting that exposure can happen both intentionally and unintentionally.

Such exposure, when not openly addressed, can become normalised among very young children, leading to "secret" drawings or reenactments.

In their experience, the spread of explicit content among older kids, in particular boys, had been facilitated during screen time with minimal parental supervision, often without adult awareness or intervention.

Members also observed that many young people learn about sex through pornography, which often emphasizes dominance rather than mutual pleasure and respect, resulting in skewed perceptions of sexual relationships.

An increase in referrals for sexual assault cases was noted, with victims often not fully understanding consent. This lack of education on consent leads to misunderstandings, preventing young people from feeling empowered to refuse or stop a sexual encounter.

They noted with regret that in previous generations, traditional media, through magazines such as Cleo, Dolly, and Cosmo, once provided somewhat educational content on positive body image, relationships and healthy, normal sex but the shift to online content dominated by pornography has heavily influenced the "external" education young people now receive.

A key point they wanted to highlight for the Inquiry was the need to increase funding for accessible resources and support programs for young people and parents- these are essential to address these challenges comprehensively.

Another key point was that conversations about sex, respect, consent, body image and self-esteem needed to start early, be repeated, and be integrated across all age groups and social settings. This approach aims to foster a deeper understanding of consent, boundaries, and healthy relationships.

In summary, the impact of pornography on young people is profound and multifaceted, affecting their perceptions of body image, self-esteem, and sexual relationships. Addressing these issues requires early and ongoing conversations, better education on consent, and support for both young people and their parents.

For More Information:

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