

Submission  
No 21

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

**Organisation:** ACON  
**Date Received:** 1 November 2024

---

**ACON SUBMISSION TO STANDING  
COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES:  
INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACTS OF  
HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY ON MENTAL,  
EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH**

November 2024





## About ACON

ACON is NSW's leading health organisation specialising in community health, inclusion and HIV responses for people of diverse sexualities and genders. Established in 1985, ACON works to create opportunities for people in our communities to live their healthiest lives.

We are a fiercely proud community organisation, unique in our connection to our community and in our role as an authentic and respected voice.

Members of Australia's sexuality and gender diverse communities experience health disparities when compared to health and wellbeing outcomes experienced by the general population.

We recognise that members of our communities share their sexual and gender identity with other intersecting identities and experiences, and we work to ensure that this is reflected in our work. These can include people who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; people from culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse migrant and refugee backgrounds; people who use drugs; mature aged people; young adults; and people with disability.

## Contact

**Michael Woodhouse**  
**Chief Executive Officer**

*ACON acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work. We pay respect to Aboriginal Elders past and present.*

## Introduction

ACON welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Standing Committee on Social Issue's Inquiry into the Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health.

ACON is NSW's leading health organisation specialising in community health, inclusion and HIV responses for people of diverse sexualities and genders. We provide a range of services to trans and gender diverse people and have been building a rapidly growing suite of programs to improve their health and wellbeing.

ACON makes the following recommendations to this Inquiry:

1. There is a need for clearer definitions of what is considered harmful pornography and for those definitions to reflect the agreed evidence on harm.
2. Universal access to evidence based, age-appropriate sexuality education, including LGBTQ+ material, is preferable to people learning around sexuality through pornography.
3. Ensure the voices of workers employed in the industry are heard throughout the Inquiry process

## What is 'harmful pornography'?

As ACON's partners note, there is little consensus on what constitutes pornography, much less what might constitute harmful pornography.<sup>1</sup> As the Inquiry does not define what it means by 'harmful pornography', it is difficult to draw conclusions or extract information from available evidence that may not define the harms in the same way as the Committee intends.

The impacts of pornography, harmful or otherwise, have been notoriously hard to determine.

Despite commonly held beliefs, there is little concrete evidence to suggest causation between pornography and gendered violence.<sup>2,3</sup> This is typically because while this kind of research may demonstrate an association, it is impossible to establish whether violent pornography causes violence, or whether perpetrators of violence are more likely to consume violent pornography. There is evidence that shows in countries where pornography use has significantly increased, rates of sexual violence have significantly decreased, but again, it is impossible to establish if there is any correlation between the two.<sup>4</sup>

ACON would recommend that any definition of 'harmful pornography' be drawn from clear evidence of the impact of consuming pornography on people's emotional and sexual development, including capacity to engage in healthy, consensual relationships. A definition of harmful pornography should avoid being driven by moral judgements about sex and sexuality.

In the absence of a clear consensus of what constitutes 'harmful pornography' in the Inquiry or in research, this submission refers to the impacts of pornography more broadly.

## Pornography's impact on LGBTQ+ people

There is a growing body of literature describing the role pornography plays in sexuality education, especially for LGBTQ+ people, who tend to be excluded from more formal types of sexuality education.<sup>5,6,7,8,9</sup> In some instances, pornography offers LGBTQ people an opportunity to better understand their gender and sexuality as well as safe sex practices, including condom use for HIV and STI prevention that is not available elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

As with other forms of fictional media content, LGBTQ+ people have demonstrated an adept understanding of discerning authenticity in pornography, and use it primarily for pleasure, as well as identity formation, and education in the absence of, or as well as, more formalised education.<sup>11</sup>

Numerous studies have shown that the sex education needs of young people are not being met in schools, with many participants in these studies reporting a centring of cisgender and heteronormative sexual practices, pregnancy and risk. Many reported a lack of (but preference for) positive and supportive LGBTQ inclusive material that includes education around broader issues such as intimacy, trust and consent.<sup>12,13,14</sup>

It is essential that LGBTQ+ people have access to comprehensive sexuality education, so that pornography is not relied upon as an educational tool. ACON supports the view of Family Planning NSW, that 'all people should have access to age-appropriate, evidence-based and targeted comprehensive sexuality education that empowers individuals with knowledge and skills to encourage healthy and informed choices concerning their sexuality and wellbeing throughout their life'.<sup>15</sup>

It is also important to note that in NSW, LGBTQ+ people both consume, and produce, pornography. For some LGBTQ+ people, pornography is their source of income.

LGBTQ+ people are also victims of image-based abuse. ACON wishes to emphasise that image-based abuse (including deepfake and AI-generated content) is abuse, and is not pornography.

### [The need for sensible regulation with regard to pornography](#)

ACON supports the need for sensible regulation when it comes to online media environments, including pornography. There needs to be a balance between protecting young people and unintended viewers of adult content, alongside privacy protections, adequate copyright protection, and the sensible use of existing online regulations to target image-based abuse.

SWOP and the Scarlett Alliance have raised concerns with current policy approaches, especially around age verification and online safety. ACON also supports adding sex work as a protected attribute in the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1977*. This is relevant to this Inquiry because negative impacts of adult content, especially in the hands of unintended viewers, can include discrimination against those featured in the content, as outlined in SWOP and the Scarlet Alliance's preliminary submissions to the NSW Law Reform Commission's Review of the Anti-Discrimination Act.<sup>16,17</sup>

- 
- <sup>1</sup> McKee, A., Litsou, K., Byron, P., Ingham, R. (2022.). *What Do We Know About the Effects of Pornography After Fifty Years of Academic Research?*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.
- <sup>2</sup> McKee et al (2022).
- <sup>3</sup> Lim, M. S., Carrotte, E. R., & Hellard, M. E. (2016). The impact of pornography on gender-based violence, sexual health and well-being: what do we know?. *J Epidemiol Community Health*, 70(1), 3-5.
- <sup>4</sup> Lim et al (2016)
- <sup>5</sup> Sharkey, G. A. (2018). *Seeing Yourself On Screen: Queer Pornography, Queer Theory* (Doctoral dissertation): University of Sydney.
- <sup>6</sup> Sill, J. M. (2023). 'I wouldn't have ever known, if it wasn't for porn'—LGBT+ university students' experiences of sex and relationships education, a retrospective exploration. *Sex Education*, 23(4), 379-392.
- <sup>7</sup> Flory, I. M., & Shor, E. (2024). "Porn is blunt [...] I had way more LGBTQ+ friendly education through porn": The experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals with online pornography. *Sexualities*, 13634607241274526.
- <sup>8</sup> Goldstein, A. (2020). Beyond porn literacy: Drawing on young people's pornography narratives to expand sex education pedagogies. *Sex Education*, 20(1), 59-74.
- <sup>9</sup> Byron, P., McKee, A., Watson, A., Litsou, K., & Ingham, R. (2021). Reading for realness: Porn literacies, digital media, and young people. *Sexuality & Culture*, 25, 786-805.
- <sup>10</sup> Flory et al (2024).
- <sup>11</sup> Byron et al (2021).
- <sup>12</sup> Pound, P. et al. (2016). What do young people think about their school-based sex and relationship education? A qualitative synthesis of young people's views and experiences. *BMJ Open*, 6(9), 1-14.
- <sup>13</sup> Waling, A. (2020). 'It's kinda bad, honestly': Australian students' experiences of relationships and sexuality education. *Health Education Research*, 35(6), 538-552.
- <sup>14</sup> Ezer, P. et al. (2019). Australian students' experiences of sexuality education at school. *Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 19(5), 597-613.
- <sup>15</sup> Family Planning NSW (2020). Comprehensive Sexuality Education Policy 2020. Available at: [https://www.fpnsw.org.au/sites/default/files/assets/CSE-Policy\\_2020.pdf](https://www.fpnsw.org.au/sites/default/files/assets/CSE-Policy_2020.pdf)
- <sup>16</sup> Scarlet Alliance (2023): Preliminary Submission to the review of the Anti-Discrimination Act. [https://lawreform.nsw.gov.au/documents/Current-projects/ada/preliminary\\_submissions/PAD74.pdf](https://lawreform.nsw.gov.au/documents/Current-projects/ada/preliminary_submissions/PAD74.pdf)
- <sup>17</sup> SWOP (2023). Preliminary Submission to the review of the Anti-Discrimination Act. [https://lawreform.nsw.gov.au/documents/Current-projects/ada/preliminary\\_submissions/PAD77.pdf](https://lawreform.nsw.gov.au/documents/Current-projects/ada/preliminary_submissions/PAD77.pdf)