

Submission
No 30


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

Organisation: Our Watch NSW

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Submission in response to the Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health



Our Watch

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Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Indigenous organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is not an 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander problem.' As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at a significantly higher rate than non-Indigenous women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Indigenous people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

About Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013. All Australian governments, including the NSW Government, are members of Our Watch.

Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the systems, culture, behaviours, attitudes and social structures that drive violence against women. Guided by our ground-breaking national frameworks, *Change the story* (2nd ed 2021)¹, *Changing the picture* (2018)² and *Changing the landscape* (2022),³ we work at all levels of our society to address the deeply entrenched, underlying drivers of violence against women. We work with governments, practitioners, and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work, and socialise.

Executive summary

Overview

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health.

Pornography is a powerful medium for conveying messages about sex, relationships, gender roles and masculinity and femininity. Pornography is identified as a key area of focus in Australia's National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032.⁴ This Inquiry presents an opportunity to consider the impacts of harmful pornography on individuals' attitudes, beliefs and practices that are known to drive violence against women.⁵

Young people will continue to access all kinds of material, both through pornography and in other forms of media to understand sex and relationships. Often these materials include messages and images that reinforce the drivers of violence against women and are therefore potentially harmful. Pornography is not inherently problematic; however, the way some people are represented in pornography is problematic.

As a result, this submission identifies a range of potential areas and measures to guide government action. In particular, it identifies Respectful Relationship Education (RRE) as a priority area for action, as a mechanism through which young people are taught the principles of respect and consent and supported to critically engage and analyse the societal context in which pornography is mainstreamed. The provision of information and education about pornography has the potential to help mediate the negative impacts of pornography on young people, their wellbeing and relationships. This Inquiry provides an opportunity to build on the approaches outlined in the NSW Government's newly released Pathways to Prevention: NSW Strategy for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence 2024-2028, which includes commitments to implement RRE in NSW schools.

This submission also outlines other measures, including regulatory approaches and ways to build on, and complement, the work of the eSafety Commissioner to ensure NSW communities are equipped and supported to critically engage and prevent the impacts of harmful pornography. Our Watch encourages the NSW Government to work closely with experts (including in child safety, wellbeing and development) and other stakeholders (including sex workers and people with lived expertise) in the implementation of any associated reform.

In line with Our Watch's primary prevention expertise and evidence-based frameworks, this submission addresses Terms of Reference a, d, e, f, g, h, i, j and provides a set of recommendations for the NSW Government.

Key recommendations

Our Watch recommends the NSW Government:

- Ensures, as part of its commitment to RRE across school sectors in NSW, that:

- Information on the topic of pornography is integrated in age-appropriate and sequential ways into RRE, comprehensive sexuality education and media literacy education.
- A professional learning strategy that provides ongoing professional learning on sexuality and RRE, which includes information on pornography to ensure schools are prepared to undertake this work effectively and appropriately, is developed.
- Communication materials for a range of audiences including school staff, parents and community members to support understanding of the impacts of pornography on young people's attitudes and beliefs about sex, relationships and gender roles and identity, are developed.
- Work in partnership with experts and uses co-design processes with young people to develop information and practical resources specifically for young people in relation to pornography,
- Work collaboratively with the Commonwealth Government and research organisations to collect robust nationally representative data about young people's pornography exposure and access, to inform the development of suitable responses.
- Apply an intersectional approach, which considers gender in relation to multiple forms of discrimination and oppression, to all work in this area.

Contact

Our Watch would value the opportunity to provide further advice in relation to the issues outlined in this submission. Please contact Director of Government Relations, Policy and Evidence, Amanda Alford at: amanda.alford@ourwatch.org.au

Our Watch evidence on pornography

Our Watch has made various contributions to the body of evidence on the topic of pornography. These include the development of comprehensive background papers, the collection of data via online surveys, and the evaluation of primary prevention activities in both schools and online settings.

In 2020, Our Watch published a background paper, *Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women (2020)*. The background paper brings together findings from the literature, as well as Our Watch's research with almost 2,000 young people, aged 15 to 20, from around Australia. It outlines key findings from the literature and research and how pornography reinforces each of the gendered drivers of violence against women (as outlined in *Change the story*).

- Gendered driver 1: Condoning of violence against women.
- Gendered driver 2: Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life.

- Gendered driver 3: Rigid stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity.
- Gendered driver 4: Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

Page 11 applies harmful pornography across each of the gendered drivers.

Our Watch's forthcoming report (2024), Impacts of pornography on young people survey report summary also includes new data from research Quantum Market Research conducted via an online survey.⁶ The survey captured the views of 832 young people aged 16 to 20 on the topics of gender roles, sex, dating and relationships, including their attitudes towards pornography.⁷ The survey offers key insights regarding young people's experiences and attitudes regarding pornography.⁸

Additionally, there are a range of key organisations and academics who have published comprehensive research and analysis around the topic of pornography, including for example:

- *Responding to the new normal: exploring the impacts of pornography* (Sexual Assault Services Victoria)
- *Pornography exposure and access among young Australians: a cross-sectional study* (Maree Crabbe, Michael Flood and Kelsey Adams).

In addition to these key pieces of research, Our Watch has also built a strong evidence base in relation to educational and setting-based approaches to building critical gender literacy.

Our Watch has built a strong evidence-base in RRE as one of the most promising strategies to comprehensively address the drivers of gender-based violence. RRE uses the education system as a catalyst for generational and cultural change by engaging schools, as both education institutions and workplaces. The issue and impact of pornography should form part of a comprehensive approach to RRE and sexuality education as opposed to a stand-alone topic, as the skills and knowledge required to support young people to critically engage and reflect upon pornography are foundational to an evidence-based approach to RRE.

Our Watch also continues to build a strong evidence base in educational approaches by delivering and evaluating the online campaign, *The Line*. *The Line* is an award-winning primary prevention, social marketing, behavioural change campaign that helps young people aged 14 to 20 to negotiate healthy, respectful and consensual relationships. The campaign has hundreds of articles, quizzes, clips and interviews with and for young people. It also includes a range resources and activities for educators and practitioners on topics such as masculinity, pornography, gender, power and privilege and sexting.

Responses to Terms of Reference

(a) age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography

The Australian eSafety Commissioner collected data in 2022 about young people's encounters with online pornography.⁹ It found that online pornography was prevalent in the lives of young people, with 13 being the average age when they first encountered it. First encounters with online pornography were found to be most commonly unintentional and for around one in three (30%) this occurred before the age of 13. The study also found that:

- Young people are more likely to actively seek out online pornography as they progress through their teenage years.
- Online pornography is highly present in young people's online worlds.
- Young men encounter more online pornography than young women, and are likely to search for online pornography, to encounter it more frequently and to see it on pornography sites.
- Young women also encounter online pornography but are more likely to have unintentional encounters and to see content via social media.¹⁰

While some research acknowledges the positive impact pornography has on young people's sexual socialisation and experiences, the large majority emphasises that early exposure to pornography can have a significant negative impact on the development of young people's attitudes and practices about gender roles, identities and relationships.¹¹ Young people are particularly impacted given that adolescence is a time where ideas about these topics are being developed.

Our Watch's survey through Quantum Market Research found that for participants aged 16-20 years:

- 84% agree that porn pushes stereotypes of what is expected of men and women in sex (male: 79%, female: 88%).
- 79% agree that porn impacts how women are viewed in real life (male: 72%, female: 85%).
- 73% agree that porn is degrading to women (male: 65%, female: 80%) and 69% agree it is harmful (male: 64%, female: 73%).
- 72% agree that porn often shows aggression and violence against women (male: 67%, female: 76%).
- 60% agree that porn is degrading to people of certain races (male: 52%, female: 67%).¹²

Our Watch research showed that both young men and young women are accessing pornography years before their first sexual relationships, which means that pornography can be highly influential in shaping their perceptions of sex and sexual relationships.¹³ For

example, in the Quantum Market Research survey, the younger cohort (16 to 17 years) were more likely to see porn as realistic (25%) than their older peers (15%).¹⁴

d) the relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education

In 2024, the NSW Government released Pathways to Prevention: NSW Strategy for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence 2024-2028. The Strategy includes a commitment to implement RRE. There is a significant opportunity under this commitment for the NSW Government to address the harmful impacts of pornography.

A whole-of-school approach to RRE enables schools to not only teach the important principles of respect and consent using age-appropriate, evidence-based resources, but also to challenge and critically engage with the societal context in which pornography is mainstreamed.

RRE is characterised by a critical analysis of gender inequality and power in order to prevent gender-based violence. RRE recognises and supports the creation of actions to directly address these drivers across all areas of the school environment. Schools can actively role model and promote gender equality, inclusivity and respect in everything they do – from their leadership structures, uniform policies, teacher roles and responsibilities, behavioural expectations and procedures. These components all have an impact on how the school operates and ultimately, the culture it promotes. Due to the comprehensive nature of RRE, a sustained commitment, vision and investment by leaders is crucial to support an evidence-based approach.

In the context of the relationship between pornography and respectful relationships education, RRE provides opportunities for young people to:

- Build critical literacy and media skills to support them understand and reflect on content they may come across in pornography.
- Engage in a safe and supportive environment to reflect upon and critically engage in discussions about issues including pornography, and the potential impact of pornography on their lives and relationships, and those of their peers.
- Increase awareness about the impact of gendered representations of sex, power and control in pornography.
- Engage in critical discussion about the use of pornography for entertainment and sexual gratification.
- Explore the connection between pornography and violence against women.¹⁵

Fundamental to the successful implementation of RRE, including content on pornography, is developing a professional learning strategy that supports teaching staff to develop their knowledge of and confidence in the delivery of relevant curriculums. This should be situated within the broader professional learning strategies on RRE and primary prevention of violence against women.

Embedding an understanding of the drivers of violence against women and actions to address them across the curriculum supports the development of deeper understandings among students and enhances the potential for transformation. It will support teachers to better understand and teach the skills and knowledge required for students to develop safe, equal and respectful relationships, and contribute to preventing gender-based violence. Age-appropriate teaching of respectful relationships education that has a gendered lens that can support students to understand and critically analyse gender roles, stereotypes, norms and relations.¹⁶

Under the [Pathways to Prevention: NSW Strategy for the Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence 2024-2028](#), there is a significant opportunity to address the harmful impacts of pornography, by:

- Including the topic of pornography, in an integrated, age-appropriate and sequential way, into RRE, comprehensive sexuality education and media literacy education. This will enable young people to be more critical about the harmful messages conveyed in pornography.
- In partnership with violence prevention experts and other key stakeholders, including young people, producing and providing information, practical resources which support that help equip parents, carers and guardians to have conversations about pornography with the young people in their lives and support them to build critical thinking skills.
- Providing professional education and development opportunities for teachers on the topic of pornography, to ensure schools are prepared to undertake this work effectively.

To compliment this work and ensure children and young people are supported by a network of professionals that are reinforcing discussions at school, it is important that the NSW Government also:

- Provide resources and training for other professionals who work with young people (including youth workers, health promotion workers and others) to develop their understanding of the issue of pornography and support them to integrate appropriate actions to address its impacts on young people into their work.

Additionally, there is an opportunity for the NSW Government to develop and share accessible information, practical tools and resources for young people in online channels and forums. This is critical given not every young person will have access to RRE or feel comfortable or safe to engage in school-based education. Online resources also provide an opportunity for young people to engage with content in their own time and in a medium that is accessible and relevant to them. This approach is supported by the 2022 eSafety Commissioner's study, which found that young people favoured online sources such as social media, websites, and their peers when seeking information and advice about pornography.¹⁷ Our Watch's campaign, *The Line*, is an evidence-based example of an online resource designed for young people aged 14 to 20 to negotiate topics such as healthy relationships, pornography and consent.

The view that more information and education is needed about these topics also comes from young people themselves. In the 2022 national study of young people's encounters with online pornography by the e-Safety Commissioner, education was perceived by most (88%) as the best way to reduce the negative impacts of online pornography, though two in five (42%) felt that current education about sexuality and relationships didn't meet their needs.

(e) the production and dissemination of pornography, including deepfake or AI-generated pornography

The production and dissemination of deepfake or artificial intelligence (AI) generated pornography present new avenues for image-based abuse.¹⁸ With the arrival of these technologies, fabricating convincing images requires minimal effort, and numerous tools have been developed to facilitate their creation.¹⁹ These technologies are readily accessible to perpetrators of violence, enabling them to digitally insert the faces of those they are abusing into pornographic content.²⁰

Consistent with broader patterns of perpetration of sexual abuse, perpetrators of deep fake image abuse are often individuals known to the victim-survivor, such as partners or ex-partners, friends, family or acquaintances.²¹ Being subjected to this type of abuse is highly distressing, and rates of mental health problems and psychological trauma are high amongst victim-survivors.²²

Research conducted across the UK, New Zealand, and Australia on AI-generated and deepfake pornography found that young people, LGB+ individuals, and people with disabilities, especially those with mobility or communication needs, are more likely to be victimised by this form of abuse.²³

The study also gathered data on perpetration, revealing that younger respondents were more likely to engage in such abuse. Key predictors of self-reported perpetration included being male (10.1% vs. 5.3% for females), LGB+ (14.9% vs. 6.7% for heterosexuals), and having a disability (26.6% vs. 2.2% for people without disabilities).²⁴ This research demonstrates the complexity of victimisation and perpetration patterns in the production and dissemination of deepfake or AI-generated pornography and emphasises the need for comprehensive intersectional approaches to prevention. Prevention approaches should be developed alongside more responsive legal and regulatory frameworks, or the rapid evolution of deepfake and AI-generated pornography perpetration will continue to outpace existing protections.

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

The impact of exposure to violence and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young people is twofold; it impacts people at an individual and relationship level and at a broader societal level.

At an individual and relationship level, there is a significant body of research that shows violent and/or misogynistic pornography contributes to the development of harmful attitudes and behaviours. In the 2022 study by the eSafety Commissioner, young people shared their views about the positive and negative impacts of pornography. One in two (51%) thought that online pornography had some positive aspects in regard to learning about sex and exploring their sexuality.²⁵ LGB+ young people were more likely than their heterosexual peers to hold this view (60% versus 48%). Focus group participants also thought that online pornography can be a source of pleasure, entertainment and self-gratification.

However, respondents also recognised that pornography could have negative impacts, including on; understanding of consent (74%); ideas about intimate relationships (76%); expectations of sex (76%); and views on gender stereotypes (64%).²⁶ These responses highlight the degree to which pornography, at a broader societal level, can contribute to attitudes and beliefs that are known to drive violence against women.²⁷ Our Watch's background paper collates evidence of this broader impact and maps it across four expressions of gender inequality which consistently predict higher rates of violence against women – expressions referred to as the gendered drivers of violence.

The paper identifies the following examples and how they related to pornography under each gendered driver:

Gendered driver 1: Condoning of violence against women

- Violence against women is condoned through justifying, excusing, trivialising or downplaying it. These representations occur frequently in pornography, in which portrayals of violence are highly gendered – that is, violence is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men and directed towards women.
- Most of the evidence identifies frequent depictions of violence in pornography.²⁸ Significantly, both the physical aggression in pornography (such as hitting, slapping, strangulation and gagging) and the verbal aggression (such as name-calling) are almost always directed towards women. Female characters are often depicted as enjoying being subject to aggression—which can make the violence in pornography difficult for viewers to recognise. The frequency and eroticisation of these depictions may normalise and condone violence against women, in sexual relationships and more generally.
- Pornography consumption has been found to be associated with both verbal and physical sexual aggression.²⁹ Some research has found that men who are very frequent pornography users have sexual aggression levels that are much higher than their counterparts who do not consume pornography very frequently.³⁰

Gendered driver 2: Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life

- Our Watch's research shows young people who watch pornography on a more regular basis are more likely to believe that women should learn to obey men, and that things tend to be better when men are in charge.³¹

- Sexually explicit material that prioritises or exclusively depicts the preferences of male characters, and repeatedly shows men dominating women, expresses and reinforces this harmful social norm. This can send a message that women have limited sexual agency and are less worthy of respect—messages that can contribute to the belief that women are legitimate targets for violence.

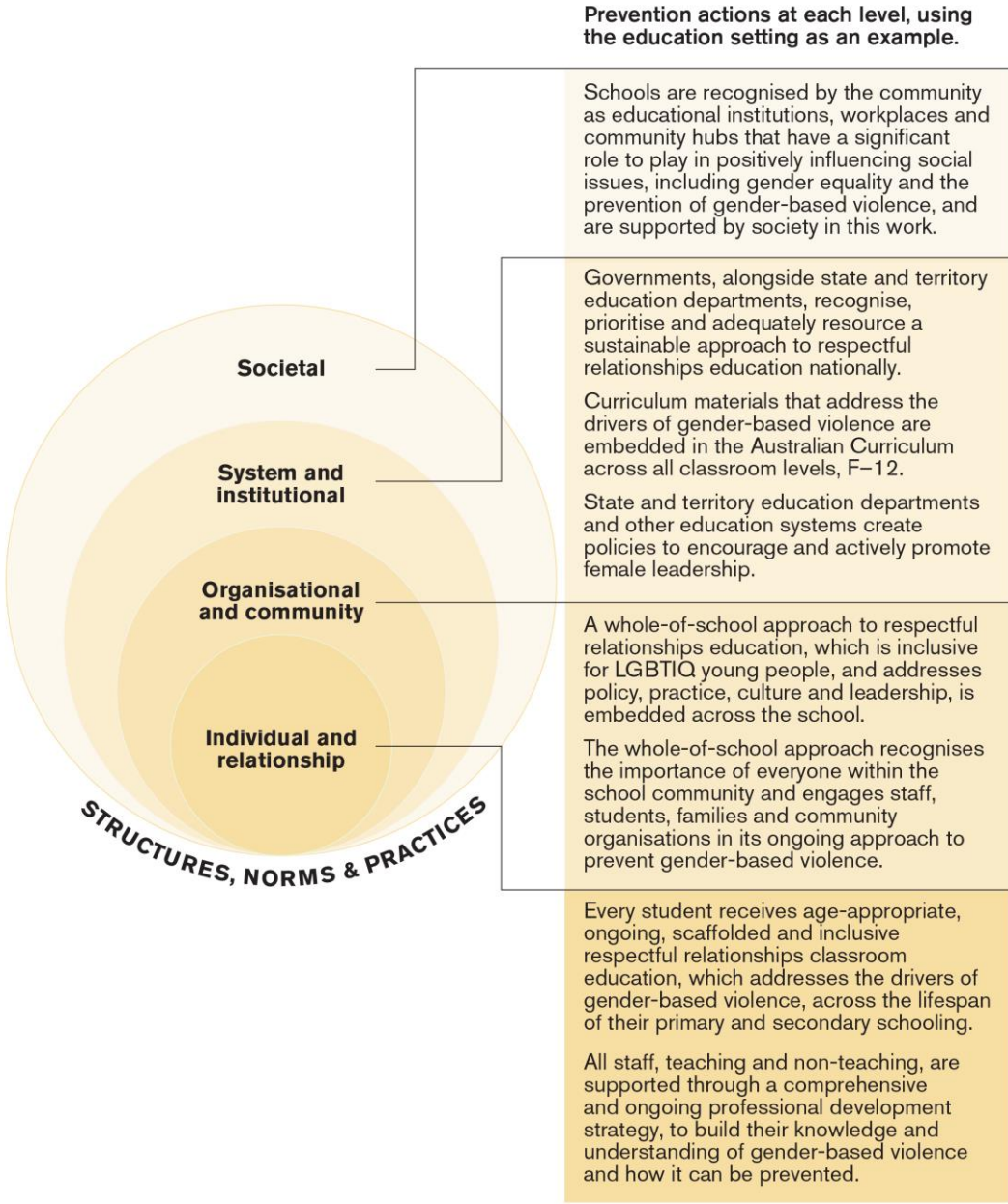
Gendered driver 3: Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity

- Pornography can depict stereotypical representations of men and women. Men are often portrayed as aggressive, dominant and controlling and women are often portrayed as submissive, eager and willing to comply with the wants and demands of men.³² Research indicates that women are routinely objectified in pornography and are not portrayed as important or valuable in their own right.³³
- Pornography can suggest that women deserve to be treated as subservient, and as objects for male sexual gratification—this can cast women as targets for exploitation. Research has found links between the use of pornography and support for rigid gender roles—including male dominance³⁴ and female sexual objectification.³⁵

Gendered driver 4: Male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women

- Pornography can reinforce aggressive and disrespectful male peer relations in two key ways. Watching pornography—including aggressive and degrading pornography—in a group can be a form of bonding between young men.³⁶ Pornography can depict disrespectful and aggressive male peer relations, for example, in scenes where groups of men are having sex with one woman and treat her aggressively, or as an object for their shared pleasure.
- Our Watch research indicates that young men who more frequently consumed pornography were more likely to believe there is no harm in men making jokes about women in front of their friends.³⁷

The whole-of-setting approach to RRE, which works across all levels of the socio-ecological model, provides an opportunity address these drivers of violence against women.



(g) impacts on minority groups including but not limited to First Nations, CALD or LGBTIQ+ people and people living with disability

The impacts of pornography on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culturally and racially marginalised people, LGBTIQ+ people and people with disabilities are different for each group and/or community. It remains an area significantly under studied and under theorised, particularly in Australia.

The Quantum Market Research survey referred to earlier in this submission, found that 60% of young people agreed that pornography is degrading to people of certain races (male: 52%, female: 67%).³⁸

While there has been limited research focused on the relationship between race, gender and pornography, the existing research, mainly from the United States and Canada, identifies a strong correlation between engaging with pornography, the upholding of colonial notions of gender and the perpetration of racism, against people of all genders.³⁹ In these ways, pornography reflects and reinforces broader social stereotypes about different groups of women and men, stereotypes that frequently involve the complex intersection of both sexist and racist ideas.

There is also a growing body of evidence in relation to pornography and demand for sexual exploitation or sex trafficking – a specific type of violence experience by particular communities of women and girls.⁴⁰ There is a need to ensure all work to prevent violence against women takes an intersectional approach and considers intersecting forms of discrimination and oppression, specifically in relation to gender, racism and colonialism.

For people with disabilities, the impacts of pornography are varied. The first impact relates to the omission of people with disabilities from mainstream pornography. This exclusion has been viewed as yet another way in which people with disabilities, particularly women, are unfairly portrayed as asexual or incapable of engaging in sexual relationships, reinforcing the idea that they do not need RRE.⁴¹ Both points underscore the importance of challenging ableist and sexist stereotypes within society and the need to ensure that people with disabilities have equitable access to all forms of education, including through RRE in schools, as well as more targeted educational resources. [Porn Is Not The Norm](#), who support autistic young people and their communities to safely navigate pornography's influence, is an example of targeted educational resources that can make a positive difference. Secondly, women with disabilities, specifically those with mobility and/or communication assistance, are more impacted by AI-generated pornography.⁴² It highlights the need to ensure all work to prevent violence against women takes an intersectional approach and considers the specific experiences of women and girls with disabilities.⁴³

For LGBTIQ+ people and communities, the impacts are also varied. On the one hand, evidence suggests that pornography has contributed to the hyper-sexualisation and fetishisation of some LGBTIAQ+ groups and as a result, the development of harmful attitudes and beliefs, particularly for young people who are struggling with their sexual or gender identity.⁴⁴ On the other hand, some research suggests that pornography, particularly queer pornography, has made a positive contribution to the evolution and self-affirmation of LGBTIQA+ communities. Advocates and researchers have emphasised that pornography is not inherently problematic; rather, it is the way some people are represented in pornography that raises concerns.⁴⁵

Given the available research highlights the shortcomings of available pornography, and the average age that pornography is accessed, there are opportunities to develop specific resources for young people and ensure an intersectional approach is applied.

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

Respectful relationships education (RRE)

Evidence-based RRE, which is a commitment in the newly announced Pathways to Prevention: NSW Prevention of Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Strategy, offers a significant opportunity to implement and embed pornography literacy throughout NSW schools.

Evidence-based RRE in schools, which includes education to address pornography's influence, has been identified as the most comprehensive and effective method to developing critical literacy skills in topics such as respect, consent and pornography, as part of shifting harmful attitudes, beliefs, and practices in relation to violence against women.⁴⁶

School-based initiatives that address the drivers of gendered based violence have been found to contribute to an increase in students' ability to identify rigid gender roles and violent behaviour, as well as a decrease in students' intention to use violence in relationships. This work must begin early, as children and young people become aware of differences in gendered roles at a young age and are deeply affected by the gendered limits children place on themselves and others.⁴⁷

However, approaches to RRE vary in their alignment to the evidence base across Australian states and territories. This means it has been challenging, in the Australian context, to effectively monitor and evaluate the long-term impact of RRE in addressing the harmful influences of pornography. Where states and territories implement certain aspects of RRE in isolation—such as changes to curriculum without accompanying professional development for teachers—the inconsistency increases the risk of backlash and resistance within school communities but also creates significant gaps in effective monitoring and evaluation.⁴⁸

Classroom instruction that enables students to identify, question and challenge the drivers of gender-based violence is a major facet of respectful relationships education and research continues that programs which centre the aims of identifying, questioning and challenging the drivers of gender-based violence are more effective than those that do not, in preventing gender-based violence. As previously noted, the gendered drivers of violence are often depicted in pornography and as such work to address the impacts of pornography should be centred around the gendered drivers.

The following examples highlight how pornography education has been addressed in some countries:

- A longitudinal study from the Netherlands, with 1,947 young people who had received varying degrees of 'porn literacy education' as part of their formal sexuality education, at various educational institutions, found that the more individuals used pornography, the more likely they were to hold attitudes of women as sex objects.⁴⁹ However, this association was weaker for those who reported that they had received porn literacy education, suggesting that young

people are able to use the tools from porn literacy education to interpret the content shown in pornography.⁵⁰

- A UK study of 1001 young people aged 11 to 16 found that students who had viewed pornography but had also critically engaged with the concept of pornography in open discussions with a teacher, were more likely to believe that sexual activities should be enjoyable for everyone involved than those students who had viewed pornography but had not engaged in these discussions.⁵¹
- A study conducted in the United States evaluated the delivery of a five-session porn-literacy program in a non-school setting to young people aged 15 to 24 from a range of genders and sexualities.⁵² The study found a number of shifts in attitudes and beliefs post-program, including that young people no longer held the beliefs that: pornography is a positive way for young people to learn about sex; pornography is harmless; calling girls derogatory terms during sex is normal behaviour; slapping, hair pulling and spanking are practices enjoyed by most people; strangulation, gagging, or crying during sex is sexy.⁵³ Further, this study found that the participants were more likely, post-program, to agree with the statement 'that pornography promotes unhealthy expectations on male and female sexuality.'⁵⁴

Online resources

Online programs or campaigns about pornography are most effective when they are evidence-based, non-judgmental, include diverse rather than didactic perspectives and are embedded within broader information about sexuality and relationships, rather than as isolated content about pornography.⁵⁵

Evidence from Our Watch's *The Line* campaign, which includes evidence-based content discussing pornography, consent and healthy relationships, shows that young people are conscious of, and engaged with, online pornography education. Metrics measuring engagement show that young people are twice as likely to engage with content on pornography than they are other content. Because of this engagement, posts on the topic are viewed on average by 48% more young people and seen generally 45% more than on all topics covered by *The Line*.

The young adults participating in an Australian-based study 'Not My Child' offered suggestions for improving future resources on the topic of pornography. Participants suggested that online resource could be made more effective by targeting content to specific ages or development stages, minimising text, using expandable headlines to avoid 'overexposing' users to information before they are developmentally ready, highlighting key points, and increasing the use of videos.⁵⁶ The study concluded that, when creating information content on sensitive issues like 'sexting' and pornography, co-design methods can help centre young people's needs and wants in the development process and ensure that research is translated into practice in a youth-friendly way.⁵⁷

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

Regulating pornography is a complex and sensitive area of public policy. In part, because the space is constantly evolving with technological advancements, shifts in pornography consumption patterns and a complex and ambiguous governance system.

The research is clear that most young people think that age assurance tools for accessing online pornography are likely to be of limited efficacy and pose significant risks in relation to privacy and data security.⁵⁸ However, young people also hold the view that there should be age-based restrictions for people under the age of 16 and that pornography sites, social media services and dating sites should use age assurance tools to restrict underage access.⁵⁹

In 2020, the [Inquiry into age verification for online wagering and online pornography](#) made several recommendations in regards to pornography. One of the key recommendations was for the eSafety Commissioner to develop and publish a roadmap for implementing a regime of mandatory age verification for online pornography material.⁶⁰ In 2023, the e-Safety Commissioner delivered the [Roadmap for Age Verification](#) (the Roadmap) to the Australian Government.⁶¹ The Roadmap outlines a range of measures in relation to age verification but also reflects the multifaceted response needed to address the harms associated with children and young people accessing pornography. As part of the 2024-25 Budget, the Australian Government announced \$6.5 million of funding to conduct a pilot of age assurance technology to protect children from accessing harmful online content, including pornography.⁶² This trial will contribute to a growing evidence base on age assurance technologies and provide valuable insight into their efficacy.

Our Watch is aligned with the eSafety Commissioner in our commitment to preventing the harmful impacts of violent and/or misogynistic pornography. However, approaches that seek to simply ban or discourage young people from watching pornography are unlikely to be effective.⁶³ It is crucial, as noted in the Roadmap, that regulation is considered alongside educational approaches such as RRE and online resources and not viewed as the only measure. Implementation of any age verification changes should be carefully undertaken with input and consultation from experts (including in child safety, wellbeing and development) and other stakeholders (including sex workers and people with lived expertise).

(j) the resources and support currently available to parents and carers to educate children about pornography, and how these might be improved; and

Parents, carers and families all have an important role and responsibility to play in supporting young people to navigate pornography's influence and equipping them with the skills to critically engage with its content. However, Our Watch's research found that:

- 72% of young people do not feel at all comfortable discussing porn with a parent or carer.
- Parents themselves are currently ill-equipped and unprepared to talk to young people about pornography.⁶⁴

Parents acknowledge the likelihood of their children being exposed to pornography but tend to avoid discussing pornography with their child, unless triggered by 'catching' their child watching pornography.

As a result, it is critical that parents, carers, and guardians are provided with resources to build their own knowledge and confidence around the issue of pornography. This can be done through the production and dissemination of information, practical tools, resources and other forms of support.

The current resources for parents, carers and guardians available include:

- The Line – [Parents and carers](#)
- eSafety Commissioner – [The hard-to-have conversations](#)
- The Lucy Faithful Foundation – [What's the problem? A guide for parents of children and young people who have got in trouble online](#)

However, many of these resources are designed as being reactive to a crisis or provide tips to parents on how to initiate conversations around pornography. For example, 'Have you heard the word pornography? What do you know about it?' They are often only available to parents, carers and guardians online and are not offered through school-based settings.

There is a significant opportunity for the NSW Government to develop a set of more comprehensive resources that support parents to have critical and preventative discussions about pornography and its various depictions of consent, relationships, and gender-dynamics. For example, 'Did you know that a lot of the sex in pornography is not a realistic portrayal of sex? How does it make you feel seeing men being violent to women in porn?'

The effectiveness of these resources is largely contingent on the successful implementation of evidence-based RRE, where teaching, learning, and role modelling in schools works to complement and reinforce discussions at home.

(k) any other related matters

A note on research

In 2024, Maree Crabb, Michael Flood and Kelsey Adams, published the first nationally representative data on pornography exposure among young Australians aged 14 to 20 years using data provided by Our Watch.⁶⁵ The study contributes to a growing body of scholarship, provides the possibility of comparing findings from similar research in other countries and can inform the development of suitable national and state-based public

health responses. Our Watch encourages the Committee to engage with these academics as part of this Inquiry.

Ongoing research is essential, particularly when considering the rapid evolution of production, distribution and consumption methods, emerging technologies and progress in other substantive primary prevention efforts, shifts in consumption methods and progress in primary prevention efforts.

Our Watch recommends the NSW Government partner with the Commonwealth Government and research organisations to collect robust nationally representative data about young people's pornography exposure and access, to inform the development of suitable responses. Further disaggregated analysis on the influence of pornography for different audiences is also critical for the prevention of violence against all women.

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