

Submission
No 45

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

Organisation: Young Labor Left NSW

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Young Labor Left Submission to the Inquiry on Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health

Introduction

The effects of harmful pornography (HP) represent stark and pervasive effects on the social and mental well-being of those who consume it. Pornography is in essence an addictive substance and as such, discussions around it should be informed within the framework of addictions and those who suffer from it.

The Our Watch Impact of Pornography on Young People report revealed young people often turn to pornography, to learn about sex and relationships, but pornographic content often reinforces harmful gender norms, is misogynistic, and contributes to the drivers of violence against women. Additionally, Chanel Contos, founder of Teach Us Consent and a prominent sexual consent activist, has warned that the reliance on pornography for sexual education is contributing to the rise of sexual violence in Australia.

Shying away from the discussion has been proven over time to not be helpful, as it does not inform and prepare young people for the reality of a world with access to pornography and the side effects of compulsive consumption. We wish to present a progressive approach to this subject matter so that better, health-informed outcomes can be achieved for our society.

Defining Harmful Pornography

Defining harmful pornography is difficult, with varying definitions. Broadly, harmful pornography can be considered as pornography that:

1. depicts unsafe sexual health practices including not wearing condoms/dental dams;
2. has the effect of building unrealistic expectations around intimacy and intercourse;
3. depicts violent acts in a sexual context where consent is not shown or given;
4. depicts minorities and women with bias and prejudice;
5. and/or encourages continual consumption of content and addiction.



The Limitations of a Complete Ban on Pornography

Historically, the immediate go-to policy of most governing bodies has been to enact wide-spread bans on pornographic material. However, this is no longer a viable option with the ease of access provided by the internet. While token age-restrictions are in place on sites, they are by no means any kind of effective deterrent. Countries that have attempted bans of internet content have been in a losing race against VPNs and the use of circumvention strategies until the efforts of lawmakers on this issue are quietly abandoned. It is a reality that most people have unfettered access to different kinds of pornographic material.

One of the hurdles to addressing the impact of harmful pornography is the stigmatisation surrounding the topic. The reluctance to have frank discussions on what is and is not harmful and acts to obfuscates the issue. This ensures that it is harder to collaborate on effective, sustainable solutions. As such, policy makers run into the same issue that always appears whenever prohibition is established; ill-regulated black markets. The lack of informed regulation leaves gaps open for exploitation, especially for sex workers who will be at the forefront of dealing with the consequences of an uninformed and uneducated public.

Another consequence of this lack of education is the little capacity for regulating against emergent forms of HP. The use of AI 'Deep Fakes' (The imposing of individual's faces on pornographic videos) have been seen in harassment and intimidation cases.

The Need to Reform Consent and Sex Education

The lack of display of consent is one of the major harmful factors of mainstream pornography. This combined with non-comprehensive sex and consent education which avoids the topic of porn consumption and its potential harmful effects, ultimately leads to an environment where sexual violence and rape culture thrives. There have been efforts by universities and this current Labor government to provide more fundamental consent education; YLL supports the updated mandatory consent education that was announced last year. However, pornography continues to play a major role in how young people learn about sex and consent. It is therefore vital that discussions about ethical and healthy consumption and the negative effects of pornography are included to provide truly comprehensive consent and sex education.



Further Recommendations

We recommend that all online platforms be held accountable for the content that is distributed on them. Platforms that host pornography must be held to a standard that explicitly does not allow harmful content to be shared and platformed. This includes applying empowerment features and informative viewer discretionary warnings as would be done in traditional media. Platforms that do not allow pornography, such as social media platforms, must actively enforce the prevention of unintentional access to explicit content to minors and adults alike.

Further, YLL requests that the inquiry prioritises listening to a diverse range of voices who are the most directly impacted by this industry, including but not limited to sex workers, victims of domestic violence and young people. Additionally we ask the inquiry note that pornography often extensively dehumanises people from minority backgrounds, including the LGBTQ+ community, people of colour, people of faith, and people with disabilities.

In Solidarity,
Young Labor Left

