

**Submission to the
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Social Policy and Legal Affairs Inquiry into
Age Verification for Online Wagering and Online Pornography**

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I am grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the development of public policy on an issue on which I have worked full time for the past decade. I write in support of age verification for online pornography. This submission is not intended to be heavily academic or scientific – please refer to Collective Shout’s submission for more detailed research – rather I speak primarily from my personal experience in the hope that the evidence I provide will help inform committee members of the need for urgent action.

I am an author, speaker, media commentator and campaigner for women and girls. My work has focussed primarily on sexualisation of girls, objectification of women, harms of pornography, sexual exploitation, trafficking and violence against women – and the interconnections between all of these. Three of my six books are on the harms of sexualisation and the sex trade, including pornography. *Big Porn Inc.* (co-edited with Dr Abigail Bray) revealed how the pornography industry has become mainstream, popularising new kinds of hardcore and violent misogyny.¹ I am also a co-founder of Collective Shout: for a world free of sexploitation (<https://www.collectiveshout.org/>).

Every year I address thousands of children, teens and parents. Increasing numbers of young women share with me their accounts of being sexually harassed, pressured, coerced, or sexually abused. They describe multiple experiences of sexual intrusion, often endured daily. The stories are getting worse, and getting worse younger. Growing numbers of girls relate their encounters at the hands of porn-conditioned boys. I have documented these accounts in a number of places, see for example ‘Growing up in Pornland: Girls have had it with porn conditioned boys’ for the ABC.²

Children and young people are being groomed by a multi-billion-dollar pornography industry which gives them harmful ideas about bodies, relationships and sexuality. They are learning a destructive view of sexuality; depersonalised, violent, and frequently degrading. We are seeing a rise of child-on-child sexual assault at rates never seen before; girls experiencing fear and suffering injuries after boys have tried porn-inspired sex acts on them.³ I meet young men compulsively using pornography

¹ Tankard Reist M and Bray A (eds.) (2011). *Big Porn Inc: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornography Industry*. Spinifex Press, North Melbourne.

² Tankard Reist M (7th March 2016). Growing up in Pornland: Girls Have Had It with Porn Conditioned Boys. *ABC Religion and Ethics* <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/growing-up-in-pornland-girls-have-had-it-with-porn-conditioned-b/10097244>

³ Most commonly anal sex or choking, as observed for example in Herbenick D, Bartelt E, Fu TC, Paul B, Gradus R, Bauer J and Jones R (2019). Feeling Scared During Sex: Findings from a US Probability Sample of Women and Men Ages 14 to 60. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 45(5):424-439.

for hours at a time – often ending up on sites they never imagined - with little hope of forming healthy intimate relationships.

Parents and carers share with me distressing stories of how children’s ideas of sexuality are influenced by pornography. For example:

“My 10 year old granddaughter was approached by a boy while waiting for the school bus and asked, ‘do you do arse?’”

“My 8 yr old found a note in her school bag which read, ‘Ready for sex?’”

“An 8 yr old boy told my 8 yr old girl he wanted to ‘f**k you hard’.”

“10 yr old boy told my 10 yr old daughter that he was going to break in and rape her.”

Children are not born this way. This is learned behaviour. These accounts (I have many more) reflect the harm caused by porn socialisation; how it is contributing to the sexual stunting of a generation; how it erodes empathy and emotional literacy. Age verification legislation has the potential to protect at least some children from being exposed to pornography.

Children exposed to pornography can experience severe lifelong consequences

Recently I published the story of a girl – as related by her mother – who came across porn at age eight.⁴ Without telling anyone, she went on to watch more, becoming sexualised at a very early age. By twelve, she was accessing internet porn in secret, and was self-harming. At 16 she was sexually active in unsafe situations with boys she barely knew. Her parents saw that she was tired and anxious, with low self-esteem. When her parents discovered all this, at age 17, she had been lying about her sexual and online behaviour for many years. She will likely be in long term psychological care. She is desperate to stop these behaviours and to stop feeling the way she does. Her mother writes:

We are thankful that we now know what has driven her behaviour all these years, when several psychologists and counsellors were unable to determine or detect the cause of her teen issues, because she withheld information from them also. Pornography slipped insidiously into our home and raised our daughter.

In my book *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, contributors put the spotlight on the sexualisation and objectification of girls in the media and popular culture, the harmful results of which are borne out in girls’ bodies through eating disorders, self-harm, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and more.⁵ Pornography is exacerbating – and creating more – ill health in girls, because of what they are subjected to as a result of it.

Children exposed to pornography can go on to harm other children

Everywhere I go I hear stories of children inappropriately touching other children, using sexual language, playing ‘sex games’ in the schoolyard, requesting sexual favours, showing other children

⁴ Diana (names have been changed) (6th October 2019). “My daughter saw porn at 8. This is how her life unravelled.” *Melinda Tankard Reist blog*. <https://melindatankardreist.com/2019/10/my-daughter-saw-porn-at-8-this-is-how-her-life-unravelled/>

⁵ Tankard Reist M ed. (2008). *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*. Spinifex Press, North Melbourne.

porn on their devices. Recently a mother told me her five-year-old son was forced to view porn on a nine-year-old's phone on the school bus. He has not returned to school since.

Researchers have found that sex offences by school-aged children have quadrupled in Australia in four years, and authorities attribute this to children's exposure to porn. 75% of 7 to 11-year-old boys and 67% of 7 to 11-year-old girls in treatment for PSB reported early sexualisation through online pornography.⁶

Consider the difference between adolescent male sex offenders with their non-offending peers. A meta-analysis involving 59 studies and around 17,000 adolescents found those who offended were significantly more likely to have had early exposure to pornography, and to report higher rates of exposure to pornography.⁷

The late Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO wrote a disturbing submission to the 2016 Senate Inquiry into the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet, drawing links between pornography and child sex abuse, paedophilia and child-on-child sex abuse.⁸

The evidence cited by Briggs included a four-year-old boy requiring a chaperone to stop him assaulting other children in 'sex games' at a South Australian kindergarten, a six-year-old boy who forced oral sex on kindergarten boys in the school cubbyhouse, and a group of boys who followed a five-year-old girl into the toilets, held her down and urinated in a 'golden shower'.

The Australian Medical Association's former vice-president Stephen Parnis says the internet is exposing children to sexually explicit content that teaches that sex is about "use and abuse... There are increasing levels of aggression and the physical harm resulting from sexual acts is becoming more apparent."⁹

The Australian Psychological Association has added its voice to rising concern, describing the "impact on young people's expectations of sex, sexuality and relationships [and] increases in sexual violence amongst children and young people."¹⁰ Just one of the many findings being published is a study of 4564 young people aged 14 to 17 in five European countries; researchers found a significant

⁶ Etheredge L and Lemon J (2015). Pornography, problem sexual behaviour and sibling on sibling sexual violence. *Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence*. Victoria. SUBM.0220.001.0001
<http://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/teenage-sex-offences-increase-australian-bureau-of-statistics-figures-show/story-fndo4bst-1226504441765>

⁷ Seto MC and Lalumiere ML (2010). What is So Special about Male Adolescent Sexual Offending? A Review and Test of Explanations through Meta-Analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* 136(4): 526-575.

⁸ Professor Freda Briggs (2015) *Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry into the Harm Being Done to Australian Children Through Access to Pornography on the Internet*. March 2016.
http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/Online_access_to_porn/Submissions

⁹ Australian Medical Association (2015) *Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry into the Harm Being Done to Australian Children Through Access to Pornography on the Internet*. March 2016.
http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Environment_and_Communications/Online_access_to_porn/Submissions

¹⁰ Australian Psychological Society (2015). *Submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry into the Harm Being Done to Australian Children Through Access to Pornography on the Internet*. March 2016.
https://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/APS_Submission_on_harm_to_Australian_children_accessing_pornography.pdf

association between boys' regular viewing of pornography and perpetration of sexual abuse and coercion.¹¹

My personal experience with large numbers of young people is confirmed in such research. I am hearing from more girls being hurt as a result of being choked during sex. Boys think that girls enjoy being choked, because that is what porn teaches them. Most boys think porn is 'realistic', according to research from the UK Council for Child Internet Safety.¹² Jillian Roberts, child psychologist, says,

My phone rings with calls from parents whose kids have seen bondage and violent group sex. Young girls are frightened that this is what will soon be expected from them. ... This is not a healthy introduction to sexuality.¹³

Especially disturbing is the testimony of women working at the frontline of domestic violence services. Di MacLeod, director of a domestic violence centre on the Gold Coast, wrote to me about the increase in porn-related injuries to girls aged 14 and up, including torture:

In the past few years we have had a huge increase in intimate partner rape of women from 14 to 80+. The biggest common denominator is consumption of porn by the offender. With offenders not able to differentiate between fantasy and reality, believing women are 'up for it' 24/7, ascribing to the myth that 'no means yes and yes means anal', oblivious to injuries caused and never ever considering consent. We have seen a huge increase in deprivation of liberty, physical injuries, torture, drugging, filming and sharing footage without consent.¹⁴

Researchers in the field of harmful and problem sexual behaviours in children are very clear about the role of pornography. For example, in this Australian qualitative study of children with harmful sexual behaviour:

Workers also agreed that pornography was a factor in the harmful sexual behavior exhibited by these, and other, youth. One worker said: "So from a young age they've accessed pornography . . . and they're exposed to this idea that sex and aggression is linked and they're exposed to these ideas that you don't necessarily need consent, and that 'no' might mean 'try harder.'

The study suggested that the issue of pornography is spiralling out of the ability of individuals and families to control and that there is "merit in government taking an active role in holding industry to account for the harms of pornography against children and young

¹¹ Stanley N, Barter C, Wood M, Aghtaie N, Larkins C, Lanau A and Overlien C (2016). Pornography, sexual coercion and abuse and sexting in young people's intimate relationships: A European study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* March 6, 33(19).

¹² UK Council for Child Internet Safety (2017). *The impact of online pornography on children and young people*. Middlesex University, London.
<https://d1afx9quaogywf.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/UKCCIS%20Evidence%20Group/UKCCIS%20RH114%20Online%20Pornography%20Research.pdf>

¹³ Richards, Victoria (27th September 2019). I had to talk to my 7-year-old daughter about porn. This is what I learned. *HuffPost* https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/i-had-to-talk-to-my-7-year-old-daughter-about-porn-heres-how-i-did-it_uk_5d837792e4b0957256b23943?guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly90LmNvL082Y2FTzNBmIA&guce_referrer_si_g=AQAAAMnODZKq22Yoe_rdjmdZRYcMNx04zbSBYAoGW3LKMsoMq864BzZynllewhvvy-ZCJdGe823Noe7qV5CDobx_Ho1_h9ixoDLZU2Ualz-S5CpBylvhyEdw9GOGibDirTi_UV7ktMNB_v_e61Bmu-AtdJpuW5Ac8ceZ1PPlqm44zcc&guccounter=2

¹⁴ Tankard Reist M (3rd July 2019). Never Again? Addressing Sexual Violence Must Include Pornography. *ABC Religion and Ethics*. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/never-again-addressing-sexual-violence-must-include-pornography/10094568>

people.” Specifically, the researchers recommended government regulation of pornography and telecommunication industries, as well as an adjustment of sexually abusive treatment models to take pornography into account.¹⁵

Pornography’s impact on sexual expectations and behaviours

It is painfully clear that children are frequently seeing violent depictions of sex, torture, rape and incest porn online. It is imperative that we understand how this impacts children developmentally: boys are having their sexual arousal conditioned by depictions of extreme cruelty, seeing women being assaulted in every orifice by groups of men. And all this before their first sexual experience – even their first kiss.

I wrote in 2016 about the epidemic of sexual bullying and harassment online, and the real-life experiences of girls dealing with boyfriends who have been conditioned by pornography:¹⁶

Girls and young women describe boys pressuring them to provide acts inspired by the porn they consume routinely. Girls tell of being expected to put up with things they don't enjoy.

Some see sex only in terms of performance, where what counts most is the boy enjoying it. I asked a 15-year-old about her first sexual experience. She replied: "I think my body looked OK. He seemed to enjoy it." Many girls seem cut off from their own sense of pleasure or intimacy. That he enjoyed it is the main thing. Girls and young women are under a lot of pressure to give boys and men what they want, to adopt pornified roles and behaviours, with their bodies being merely sex aids. Growing up in a pornified landscape, girls learn that they are service stations for male gratification and pleasure.

Asked "How do you know a guy likes you?" a Year 8 replied: "He still wants to talk to you after you suck him off." A male high school student said to a girl: "If you suck my dick I'll give you a kiss." Girls are expected to provide sex acts for tokens of affection. A 15-year-old told me she didn't enjoy sex at all, but that getting it out of the way quickly was the only way her boyfriend would settle down and watch a movie with her.

I'm increasingly seeing Year 7 girls who seek help on what to do about requests for naked images. Being asked "send me a picture of your tits" is an almost daily occurrence for many. "How do I say 'no' without hurting his feelings"? girls ask.

Year 7 girls ask me questions about bondage and S&M. Many of them had seen 50 Shades of Grey (which was released on Valentine's Day). They ask, if he wants to hit me, tie me up and stalk me, does that mean he loves me? Girls are putting up with demeaning and disrespectful behaviours, and thereby internalizing pornography's messages about their submissive role.

¹⁵ Gemma McKibbin, Cathy Humphreys, and Bridget Hamilton (2019). 'Talking About Child Sexual Abuse Would Have Helped Me': Young People Who Sexually Abused Reflect on Preventing Harmful Sexual Behavior. *Child Abuse and Neglect* 70:210-221. Cited in National Center on Sexual Exploitation (2019). Out of the Shadows: Confronting the rise of child-on-child harmful sexual behaviour. Research Summary. https://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/COCSA_Research-Summary_FINAL_3-12-19-1.pdf

¹⁶ Tankard Reist, Melinda (7th March 2016). Growing up in Pornland: Girls Have Had It with Porn Conditioned Boys. *ABC Religion and Ethics* <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/growing-up-in-pornland-girls-have-had-it-with-porn-conditioned-b/10097244>

A number of academics are now expressing concern about the impact of pornography on sexual expectations and behaviours. Using data from the 2016 National Survey of Porn Use, Relationships, and Sexual Socialization, Herbenick and colleagues analysed the common experience of feeling scared during sex:¹⁷

The following thematic categories emerged: rape/sexual assault, incest, lack of consent and asking to stop, and sexual behaviours...choking, multiple people, sex toys and BDSM, being held down, threats, aggression...

Aside from sexual assault and rape, some of the most common descriptions of sexual situations that respondents found scary involved anal sex or choking... Choking and other aggressive behaviours (such as hitting and forceful hair pulling) were also often described among the scary sexual experiences. Like anal sex, choking appears to have become more commonly portrayed in sexually explicit media and sexual choking behaviours (and interest in choking) are associated with pornography use. In recent years, choking and various forms of breath restriction/breath play have also become a part of nonsexual games that some adolescents engage in... However, choking and breath play are associated with serious risks – including accidental death – and thus it is not surprising to see choking often described as scary.

Writer Alison Pearson relays a conversation with a GP who described anal tearing from porn-inspired anal sex, increasingly happening to adolescent girls:

A GP, let's call her Sue, said: "I'm afraid things are much worse than people suspect." In recent years, Sue had treated growing numbers of teenage girls with internal injuries caused by frequent anal sex; not, as Sue found out, because they wanted to, or because they enjoyed it, but because a boy expected them to. "I'll spare you the gruesome details," said Sue, "but these girls are very young and slight and their bodies are simply not designed for that."

Her patients were deeply ashamed at presenting with such injuries. They had lied to their mums about it and felt they couldn't confide in anyone else, which only added to their distress. When Sue questioned them further, they said they were humiliated by the experience but they had simply not felt they could say no. Anal sex was standard among teenagers now, even though the girls knew it hurt.

There was stunned silence around that table, although I think some of us may have let out involuntary cries of dismay and disbelief. Sue's surgery isn't in the brutalised inner-city but in a leafy suburb. The girls presenting with incontinence were often under the age of consent and from loving, stable homes. Just the sort of kids who, two generations ago, would have been enjoying riding and ballet lessons, and still looking forward to their first kiss, not being coerced into violent sex by some kid who picked up his ideas about physical intimacy from a dogging video on his mobile.¹⁸

¹⁷ Herbenick D, Bartelt E, Fu TC, Paul B, Gradus R, Bauer J and Jones R (2019). Feeling Scared During Sex: Findings from a US Probability Sample of Women and Men Ages 14 to 60. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 45(5):424-439

¹⁸ Pearson A (25th April 2015). How online porn is warping the behaviour of boys with girls. *Sydney Morning Herald* <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/how-online-porn-is-warping-the-behaviour-of-boys-with-girls-20150424-1ms7jw.html>

Harmful and unsatisfactory sexual relationships are becoming the norm. Psychology Professor Lucia O'Sullivan publishes research on sexual dysfunction among adolescents and young adults, her work inspired by disclosures from physician colleagues that many students were presenting with vulvar fissures. While the women were not reporting rapes, they were clearly having sex they did not want, unaroused. Most doctors would hand these women some lubricant and send them off. Professor O'Sullivan decided to investigate. "In my interviews with young women," she says, "I heard too many iterations to count of "he did something I didn't like that I later learned is a staple in porn," choking being one widely cited example."¹⁹

Pornography is also a contributor to the development of cultural norms and is implicated in workplace sexual harassment, as Collective Shout demonstrated in our submission to the recent Australian Human Right Commission inquiry.²⁰ We drew the connections between pornography, objectification of women, and sexualised imagery, contending that there are strong links between porn culture and sexual harassment in the workplace.

A range of measures needed

Of course, some children will find a way around systems designed to protect them. Age verification is not the only approach. Education, digital controls, and other strategies also have a place. Age verification does not replace these but is an essential complementary strategy. The pornography industry should bear the responsibility for verifying the age of porn consumers.

Those selling access to pornography will always oppose legislation that in any way limits access, because this is their business. Researchers Keen, France and Kramer have interviewed extensively among Australian stakeholders and conclude that "existing neoliberal individualising policies that favour the interests of corporate players may be too optimistic, if not naïve." They have succeeded in dominating the policy debate by deliberately "exploiting the ambiguity of agency in adolescence."

Ultimately, Australian and UK ISPs were reticent about regulatory practices and discourses that aimed to discourage families and children from using the Internet as this conflicted with corporate objectives where the priority was to 'sell access.' Thus, while supporting the idea that individuals, families and children should know of and manage online risks, they did not wish to encourage interventionist and restrictive policies that limit children's Internet use, which would ultimately affect their bottom line.²¹

Corporations and businesses will always favour 'education' and 'parental empowerment' instead of regulation, because it suits their business to believe that:

... children and adolescents were largely self-governing and resilient when it came to pornographic media. They constructed children as sexual beings who were naturally curious about sex. Notably, they also obfuscated the issue of age by referring to children as 'kids',

¹⁹ Julian K (December 2018). Why are young people having so little sex? *The Atlantic*
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-sex-recession/573949/>

²⁰ Collective Shout (February 2019). *Submission to The Australian Human Rights Commission National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in the Australian Workplace*, February 2019.
https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-05/submission_289_-_collective_shout.pdf

²¹ Keen C, France A and Kramer R (2019). Exposing children to pornography: How competing constructions of childhood shape state regulation of online pornographic material. *New Media and Society* September 3.

‘young people’ or ‘people in the 20s’ which had the effect of challenging whether developmental ideals could be strictly applied in the liminal zone of adolescence.²²

We have to ask how serious we are about the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children when we allow unrestricted and unregulated access to pornography of every kind. Jess Hill writes, in the recently launched *See What You Made Me Do: Power, Control and Domestic Abuse*:

If we can agree that seeing uncritical portrayals of violence, racism and sexism have an impact on our cultural norms— and should therefore be closely monitored, perhaps regulated – then surely there is something to be said about what happens to men and boys who frequently masturbate to the sight of women being aggressively fuc*ed, sometimes to the point of tears and vomiting – when all the while those women are portrayed as liking it. If the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children sees increasing respect for women as a key strategy to end domestic abuse, the endless wave of misogynistic porn is a heavy tide to swim against.”²³

Conclusion and Recommendation

I urge the Committee to recommend the enacting of legislation to require age verification prior to accessing pornographic websites. It may not be a complete or perfect solution. But it may protect many children from inadvertently accessing pornography. My work with thousands of young Australians has revealed the devastation that pornography is causing in their lives. I urge members to act to protect them.

Melinda Tankard Reist

25 October 2019

²² *ibid.*

²³ Hill, Jess (2019). *See What You Made Me Do: Power, Control and Domestic Abuse*. Black Inc, Carlton, Victoria, p148.