



Pornography coalition: Regulating online pornographic content

The pornography coalition is a collection of charities, organisations and individuals who are concerned about the impact of online pornography, including how it affects children and women. In addition to the logos above, Dr Elly Hanson, clinical psychologist and researcher, also supports this briefing.

Summary

- The pornography coalition are concerned that the lack of regulation of online pornographic content has resulted in harmful and violent pornographic content being prolific online, impacting users' online and offline behaviour.
- Content that depicts and promotes violent sexual behaviour – most often towards women and girls – and sexualises children is prevalent online, but offline would be prohibited. The law has never been extended to cover online pornographic content.
- We are concerned that the prevalence and normalisation of this content means that users 'spiral', viewing more extreme and even illegal content, such as child sexual abuse material.
- There is evidence that online pornographic content is contributing to violence against women and girls, and child sexual abuse. This includes the normalisation of violent and abusive sexual behaviours and misogynistic views.
- We are calling on the Government to **regulate online pornographic content the same way it is regulated offline.**

The regulation of pornographic content

The Video Recordings Act 1984 gave the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) the power to regulate 'offline' pornographic content – so for video, DVD and Blu-Ray.¹ Explicit pornography is classified as 'R18', meaning it can only be supplied in a licensed sex shop. The BBFC refuses to classify any pornographic content that is **illegal**, or any material that is **potentially harmful**. This includes content that depicts and/ or promotes **child sexual abuse, incest, trafficking, torture, and harmful sexual acts.**² By refusing to classify this content, the BBFC prohibit it for sale and supply in the UK.

In real terms, this means that pornographic content which displays the following is illegal offline:

- Content that shows violent sexual activity – including breath restriction (strangulation);

¹ [Video Recordings Act 1984](#)

² [BBFC Classification Guidelines, 2024](#)

- Content that shows real or apparent lack of consent;
- Content that depicts sexual activity with adult actors made to look like children;
- Content which depicts sexual activity between family members – such as between fathers and daughters, and brothers and sisters;
- Content which shows penetration of any object likely to cause physical harm.³

This regulation was also extended to cover UK-based Video on Demand Services in the Communications Act 2003.⁴ Such services may not carry any pornographic content that the BBFC would refuse to classify as ‘R18’. However, **the regulations have never been properly extended to cover online pornographic content.** The definition of illegal material or ‘extreme’ pornography under the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008,⁵ is extremely narrow and does not capture a vast amount of the violent content outlined.

Left unregulated, this harmful and violent pornographic content has become prolific online. Online pornographic content should be regulated the same way as it is offline, by applying the BBFC Classification Guidelines. These guidelines should be kept under review, and updated where necessary to prohibit harmful content.

Violence against women and girls

The coalition are deeply concerned about the impact that violent and harmful pornographic content has on violence against women and girls, and child sexual abuse. Ultimately, we are concerned that the availability of harmful and pornographic content online can lower the threshold of what is ‘acceptable’, allowing a user to ‘spiral’ and **seek out more extreme content** to fulfil them – including illegal content.⁶ The presence of harmful content can also **legitimise violent and abusive sexual behaviours.**

There is considerable evidence that shows a connection between viewing harmful and violent pornographic content and violence against women and girls. For example, a report by the Government Equalities Office found that “pornography, alongside a number of other factors, contributes to a conducive context for sexual harm towards women”.⁷ Research by Clare McGlynn and Fiona Vera-Gray also found that mainstream pornography positions sexual violence as a ‘normative sexual script’, with one in eight titles shown to first-time users on the first page of mainstream pornography sites describing sexual activity that constitutes sexual violence.⁸

Evidence suggests that online pornographic content is impacting the normalisation of violent and abusive sexual behaviours, including non-fatal strangulation during sex. A national probability study in the US found that 21% of women reported having been choked during sex, and 20% of men reported that they had choked their partner during sex.⁹ Further, research for BBC Radio 5 Live in 2019 found that a third of UK women under the age of 40 had experienced slapping, choking, gagging or spitting during consensual sex.¹⁰ Research has found that strangulation during sex can increase the risk of stroke and brain injuries, even if the person

³ [BBFC Classification Guidelines, 2024](#)

⁴ [Communications Act 2003](#)

⁵ [Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008](#)

⁶ All Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023. [Pornography regulation: the case for parliamentary reform](#)

⁷ Government Equalities Office, 2020. [The relationship between pornography use and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours](#)

⁸ <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/61/5/1243/6208896>

⁹ The Guardian, 2022. [Sexual choking is now so common that many young people don’t think it even requires consent. That’s a problem](#)

¹⁰ BBC, 2019. [‘A man tried to choke me during sex without warning’](#)

does not lose consciousness.¹¹ Of course, strangulation during sex can also result in death, and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 removed ‘consent’ as a defence if someone is seriously harmed or killed by strangulation.¹²

Data from the Devon and Cornwall Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) reported a total of 172 referrals being made to the service over a five-month period in 2023. Of these, 31% (53) were victims who had suffered non-fatal strangulation as part of the sexual violence, averaging at least two to three per week.

A deep dive into 44 of these cases, by Louise Barraclough Interim Head of Safeguarding and MCA, and the DASV Lead, found that in 41 of the cases the victims were female, with three being male. 41 reported difficulty breathing, 22 had visible signs of injury, including bruising, redness to neck, petechiae and abrasions, and three were sent to the Emergency Department due to the severity of their symptoms. Methods of strangulation included hands, elbows, legs and belts. In 26 cases the perpetrator was a friend or acquaintance of the victim, in ten cases the perpetrator was a partner, with seven involving a stranger.

Additional violence perpetrated included headlocks, being tied up, hair pulling, slapping, insertion of objects and threats with weapons. All are common acts of violence found within online pornography. In the cases examined, in addition to the injuries related to non-fatal strangulation there was an average of 11 other injuries reported, and in some cases as many as 46. In all the cases of non-fatal strangulation, it was reported that the victim never gave consent. In six cases, initial consent was given for some sexual acts but not for the subsequent non-consensual sexual acts that the victim was reporting.¹³

Despite the offence of strangulation during sexual activity being included in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, pornographic content which depicts breath restriction still has not been regulated online, and is prevalent.¹⁴

The sexualisation of children

We are also concerned that online pornographic content that depicts sexual activity with adult actors made to look like children and content which depicts sexual activity between family members, sexualises children. We are concerned that pornography users can become bombarded, through images and words, with content that legitimises and condones sexual desire for children and deems them an ‘acceptable’ object of desire.¹⁵

Evidence shows that the excessive consumption of this type of content can result in users seeking out and viewing illegal child sexual abuse material and potentially offending against children online and offline.¹⁶

¹¹ The Independent, 2020. [Strangulation in sex can increase risk of stroke and brain injuries, distressing study finds](#)

¹² [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#)

¹³ Unpublished research by Louise Barraclough, Interim Head of Safeguarding and MCA, and the DASV Lead, Devon and Cornwall Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)

¹⁴ [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#)

¹⁵ CEASE, 2024. [Profits before people: How the pornography industry is normalising and monetising sexual violence](#)

¹⁶ https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/15/how-extreme-porn-has-become-a-gateway-drug-into-child-abuse?fbclid=IwAR0JjqKIZxs6xyvV8ZzYyPmoYKZTpiIF8d_cdDGdHww1IaVqxWTLmZTu5wU%3e

A 2016 study found that 49% of subjects who used pornographic content reported seeking material that was not previously interesting to them, or that they had considered disgusting, demonstrating how viewing pornographic content can result in a user's behaviour escalating.¹⁷

Further, nine out of ten offenders stated they initially found CSAM through online pop-ups and linked material while looking at pornographic material.¹⁸ Respondents to the study described their initial engagement with CSAM as "incidental" rather than "purposive" and the step was neither difficult nor complex to take. Recent research from Finland also suggests a link between the habitual use of adult pornography as a possible pathway to CSAM offending.¹⁹ The researchers surveyed offenders who had viewed CSAM and found that 65% reported habitually viewing adult pornography before starting to search for CSAM. Within this group, 51% reported consuming pornography every day, and 24% said they viewed it most days a week. Further, in response to a question inquiring about the reasons the offender searched for CSAM, 20% of respondents reporting having become desensitised to adult pornography, leading them to seek out more extreme or violent material.

It has also been reported that gateways into CSAM, as reported by CSAM users, include legal materials such as 'barely legal' pornography. Through watching this pornography, becoming desensitized and child sexual abuse being normalised it creates a drive for actual CSAM.²⁰

Actions to take

- Urge the Government to introduce legislation to ensure that online pornographic content is regulated the same way as it is offline, ending the 'grey area' of pornographic content that is harmful and violent.
- Table a parliamentary question regarding the need to act to tackle online pornography. You can find suggested questions below:
 - To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, when his Department will act to tackle harmful and violent online pornographic content which would be prohibited offline.
 - To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what consideration he has given to ensure that pornographic sites remove content that promote a sexual interest in children.
 - To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, what consideration he has given to the role that online pornographic content plays in perpetuating violence against women and girls.
 - To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, how he will regulate pornography both online and offline to meet the Government's target of halving violence against women and girls within a decade.
 - To ask the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, how he will monitor the impact of online and offline pornography on violence against women and girls.

¹⁷ Wery and Billieux, 2016. [Online sexual activities: An exploratory study of problematic and non-problematic usage patterns in a sample of men](#)

¹⁸ IWF, 2013. [New research shows action needed to stop people seeing indecent images of children for the first time](#)

¹⁹ 2Know, 2024. [Preliminary Findings Report: Knowledge to prevent online sexual violence against children: insights from a survey of child sexual abuse material offenders](#)

²⁰ Morgan et. al., 2021. [Understanding the men who access sexualised images of children: exploratory interviews with offenders](#)

For more information, or to set up a briefing meeting, please contact:

Jess Edwards, Senior Policy Adviser – Childhood Harms, Barnardo's,
jessica.edwards@barnardos.org.uk and Gemma Kelly, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, CEASE,
gemma.kelly@cease.org.uk.